

What Makes Klezmer so Special?

Geraldine Auerbach ponders the world wide popularity of klezmer

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Picture this: Camden Town's Jazz Café on 12 August 2009 with queues round the block including Lords of the realm, hippies, skull-capped portly gents, and trendy young men and women. What brought them all together? They were all coming to a concert of music called Klezmer!

So what exactly is klezmer, and how, in the twenty-first century, does it still manage to resonate with and thrill the young and the old, the hip and the nostalgic, alike?

In the 18th and 19th centuries, in the Jewish towns and villages of Eastern Europe the Yiddish term 'klezmer' referred to Jewish musicians themselves. They belonged to professional guilds and competed for work at weddings and parties for the Jewish community – as well as the local gentry. Their repertory included specific Jewish tunes as well as local hit songs played on the instruments popular in the locality. Performance was influenced by the ornamented vocal style of the synagogue cantor.

When life became intolerable for Jews in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, and opportunity came for moving to newer worlds – musicians brought this music to the west, adapting all the while to immigrant tastes and the new recording scene. During the mid-twentieth century, this type of music fell from favour as the sons and daughters of Jewish immigrants turned to American and British popular styles.

But just a few decades later, klezmer was back! A new generation of American musicians reclaimed the music of their predecessors. 'Why should we play Bluegrass and Cuban when we have such a rich heritage of our own?' they asked, and the 'Klezmer Revival' was born and quickly spread throughout the world.

JMI KlezFest London

International klezmer star, Frank London (a founder member of the Klezmatics and other seminal klezmer revival bands) was the leader of the dynamic 15-strong ensemble performing at the Jazz Café. They were all teachers at KlezFest, the Jewish Music Institute's 9th annual week-long klezmer training programme where over 130 instrumentalists, singers and dancers from all over the UK and Europe come together to hone their skills. This was Klezmer Klimax! – the annual faculty concert.

What makes klezmer special for Frank, who is also a feted New York trumpeter, is its rootedness in the Jewish religious tradition. His colleague Christian Dawid, brilliant clarinettist from Berlin, says: 'this music expresses a vitality that is a blend of earthly zest for life with a deep spirituality - a musical wedding of heaven and earth'.

The Jazz Café audience also heard visiting bands – *Klezmer 4* from Brazil, *Mamalor* from Czech Republic and *Kavona* from London. A special treat was hearing the renowned classical clarinettist Emma Johnson who coped 'like a seasoned veteran' and greatly enjoyed her first foray into Klezmer in such company.

Kavona's clarinettist, BBC Radio 3 presenter Jill Anderson, says: 'When I'm playing klezmer, it conjures up feelings of happiness tinged with sadness and longing. There seems to be a subconscious memory of the music. I can't explain this, and I'm sure it sounds crazy, but that's what happens.'

Adrian Dobson, a founder member of a Manchester klezmer band *Klatsh* and a regular at KlezFest, sums it up: 'Klezmer is special because it links the present with the past, the young with the old, the spiritual with the secular. It draws on many cultures without losing a sense of itself. Klezmer is special because it has survived, despite all odds, as part of a living tradition. Klezmer lifts us to places beyond ourselves and helps us become the people we want to be.'

And Lord Janner, the Vice President of JMI's International Forum for Yiddish Culture, who takes every opportunity of attending klezmer concerts says klezmer music is 'hugely uplifting and unique' and thanks JMI for enabling us all participate in and enjoy it!'

***JMI KlezFest London 2010**, led again by Frank London, takes place from Sunday 6 – Friday 13 August. it follows on from the JMI annual **Ot Azoy!** the one-week programme to learn to speak, read and write Yiddish in a week. **Klezmer Klimax! 2010** will take place on Wednesday 11 August. Venue to be announced. For more details as they become available watch the JMI Website www.jmi.org.uk or Tel 020 8909 2445 or e-mail jewishmusic@jmi.org.uk*

'Klezmer in the Park'

Jewish music resounds in Regent's Park

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On Sunday 6 September, seven of Britain leading klezmer bands **each with a special take on klezmer** came together for the first time to perform on one afternoon. This was made possible by the Mayor of London who funded a free Festival in Regent's Park for the whole Jewish community and all Londoners. It was estimated that nearly 5000 people attended.

There was no need to enquire the whereabouts of the bandstand - as people drove around the inner circle park they were stopped short by a tidal wave of humanity crossing the road from the restaurant - every conceivable age-group from babes-in-arms to nonagenarians.

Then the sounds of Klezmer were borne on the breeze pulling them irresistibly along. Below the bandstand a series of concentric circles of festive public with deckchairs and picnics was spread out around a ring of dancers. It did the heart good to survey so convivial and colourful a scene, set against the blue of the water and drenched in sunshine, which would need a Seurat to do it justice.

The marquee with exhibitions and displays from the Jewish Culture Providers was buzzing all day. A history of British Jewry from the Jewish Museum attracted studied attention and free copies of the Jewish News (Jewish media sponsors of the event) were eagerly snapped up.

Vera Litvin, from the London Jewish Cultural Centre, wrote to JMI: 'We thought it was a fantastic event! Thank you so much for putting it on. We received a lot of interest from an enthusiastic crowd. We particularly liked how the event drew people from all sections of the Jewish community and beyond, many of whom had not heard of us before.'

She echoed the views of colleagues at Jewish Renaissance, Limmud, JEECS, the Bnai Brith days of Jewish culture and heritage and the Jewish Museum in saying that there was a real feeling of energy and positivity at the event. (And that they all thought this Regent's Park is a much friendlier and more cohesive venue for such an event than Trafalgar Square).

The crowd were treated to the fiery Russian spirit from Gregory Schechter's klezmer band. Gregory, with JMI, created the first UK klezmer band debuting at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1991. The jazzy riffs from Stewart Curtis' *K-Groove* and Scottish Scotchnas from Phil Alexander's band, *Moishe's Bagel*, grew from the time these players first learned their klezmer playing in Gregory's band. It was a happy re-union for all these players who usually play in splendid isolation.

Lucie Skeaping's troupe brought exotic instruments; Maurice Chernick's *Shir* mixed klezmer with Yiddish and Israeli songs. Merlin Shepherd and his quartet wowed the audience with their exploration of Greek and Turkish influenced klezmer. *She'Koyokh Klezmer Ensemble* rounded off the event with sensational Balkan infusions.

A visitor from South London said 'What a fantastic afternoon! Brilliant line-up of bands, Dave Schneider was an excellent MC (we loved all his Jewish jokes!). There was such friendly family atmosphere, beautiful location and perfect weather.'

A world music fan commented 'It's the most generationally mixed event I have been to. Womad does attract different generations but I've never seen so many grannies with toddlers.'

An Israeli woman who just happened to be in the park said: 'I am very impressed. I was amazed to find this in London. In Israel we have a klezmer Festival in Safed – but I think only religious people go there.'

VIPs included Vivian Wineman the new President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and Lord Janner – not missing a chance to enjoy klezmer. From City Hall we had Head of events Kim Richmond-Bailey and the Mayors Marketing and Press Officer, Dan Ritterband –as well as leaders of the community and the culture providers including our own Chairman Jonathan Metliss.

Director of JMI Geraldine Auerbach who organised the event with Noa Lachman on behalf of colleagues in the forum of Jewish culture providers, said: it was everything we could have wished for, and more – great music, outstanding setting, lots of people and warm sunshine. I feel that we are really privileged to be given money and patronage by the Mayor of London and the Royal Parks, as well as help from the Shoresh Foundation, to make a Jewish music Festival in such a stunning, iconic and beautiful location at Regent's Park. I am glad that our partners in JCUK were really pleased with the event.

Jim Marcovitch Klezmer, accordionist dies at 34

The klezmer fraternity mourns the loss of inspirational klezmer musician

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Jim Marcovitch first heard the strains of klezmer and gypsy music in Rumania where he was caring for orphans. His klezmer career began in earnest at the first JMI KlezFest in 2001 where he learned from a group of seminal teachers who were part of the klezmer revival in the USA.

Jim was then chosen by Louise Taylor to be part of the ensemble she was creating for her MMus degree at SOAS. They had, thanks to a JMI Millennium Award, the most superb grounding in weekly sessions with the legendary clarinettist Merlin Shepherd – and in 2002 were the first klezmer band ever to play at SOAS Graduation'. And so the *She'koyokh Klezmer Ensemble* was born, and Jim remained a key player – until his lymphoma sadly overcame him in October 2008.

When Louise left to work in Newcastle, violinist, Meg Hamilton joined the band and things snowballed. Their main and continued activity has been connecting directly with people – busking at iconic London locations – from where they receive numerous invitations to perform at parties, swanky Barmitzvas and at such diverse venues as **Glastonbury**, the **Royal Academy of Music** and the **Queen Elizabeth Hall**. But Jim's compassionate nature made sure they also played in hospitals, schools for autistic children and even in prisons.

JMI Jim fund

The Jewish Music Institute has set up a memorial fund in Jim's name to enable other young musicians to study klezmer at JMI KlezFest and to be inspired to give pleasure to others in the way that Jim did. It was launched at KlezFest 2009 in a dance party for Jim by She'koyokh Klezmer Ensemble, attended by his family and friends – including his mum and his wife Jenny whom he married 6 weeks before he died.

To contribute to the Jim Marcovitch Klezmer fund send a cheque made out to 'JMI Jim Fund' to JMI P O Box 232, Harrow, Middlesex, HA1 2NN or telephone 020 8909 2445 or go to the JMI Website www.jmi.org.uk and follow the klezmer pages to Jim's page.

Jim Diffused a stand off with Klezmer

Rachel Lasserson, Editor of the Jewish Quarterly remembers how

Thank you JMI for setting up a Klezmer fund in Jim's name. For the world of British Klezmer his loss is so huge that I can think of nothing better than a fund to nurture Klezmerim to continue along the trail he blazed with such humour and ruach (spirit).

I specially remember one evening in the SOAS precinct during KlezFest 2004, when an angry mob of British National Party supporters was being jostled by SOAS students. The KlezFest participants, tired after a full day of music workshops, watched this potentially explosive face-off in nervous silence until Jim picked up his accordion, walked into the middle of the fray and started playing a freylekhs. In a heartbeat, instruments were seized and the precinct erupted into a spontaneous musical declaration of freedom and joy. The SOAS students started dancing and the BNP mob was drowned out in the giddy freylekhs rhythm and improvised freyghish harmonising.

We spilled out into leafy Russell Square itself, gathering up passers by in an orgy of bulgars, horas and doinas. Long into the night we played and danced, Jim alternately leading and accompanying the music, removing his accordion only to dance with his beloved Jenny – they made a jaw-droppingly beautiful couple.

I shall cherish always this memory of Jim. In defusing the BNP with Klezmer he somehow sparked my first and greatest ever klezmer jam (which I then spent many years trying and failing to recreate). Jim's gift for spontaneity created possibilities where none existed and music where there was silence. The world is poorer for his passing.

Thank you for your work in keeping Jim's spirit alive to inspire others. I hope many people will be moved to donate to JMI's fund. ([Click here to download the donation form](#)).

JMI Outreach

Francesca Ter-Berg is taking klezmer forward into the community

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After 25 years of concerts, lectures, archiving and Jewish Music Summer schools the Jewish Music Institute is launching a new focus into 'Outreach'. London is a melting pot of music from cultures all over the world and Klezmer and other Jewish music is included in this. There are some great exponents of this musical tradition right on our doorstep.

'World' and 'Folk' music has become widely popular across the globe today with people celebrating the music of their own cultures and other peoples every day. This can be seen in the UK at festivals such as WOMAD, or the hugely prestigious 'Fiddles on Fire' run by the Sage Gateshead and Kings Place, an event which happens annually celebrating the different folk fiddle traditions.

This can also be seen by the fact you can now do a degree in ethnomusicology at SOAS, and indeed a Masters in klezmer. Klezmer sits up at the top with other musical traditions and we want to bring it out to your communities and institutions to help you learn more about this rich and vibrant musical culture.

JMI will be working with some of the Klezmer greats both in the UK and internationally to bring workshops and education programmes to schools, community centres, synagogues, music colleges anywhere in the UK - wherever you can gather a group of musicians together.

You might be wondering who is suitable to learn Klezmer music. A traditional klezmer ensemble is usually made up of the fiddle, clarinet, accordion, bass and drums and more recently has extended to brass and other woodwind. However Klezmer music is accessible to any instrument from cellos to xylophones. This is an opportunity to learn no matter what your age or ability, all we ask is that you have a basic proficiency on your instrument.

What do we have to offer for our outreach program? The program is very flexible to cater to individual needs. Workshops can vary from very hands-on learning to more lecture or performances based sessions. Previous workshops have featured one-off sessions of up to 2 hours to programs stretching out over a whole term as well as 'Hopkele's', Yiddish dance calling with live klezmer.

Through learning klezmer we hope you will gain the ability not only to discover this exciting folk tradition but also: Learn how to pick up and play melodies by ear, learn to improvise, play in an ensemble with others, join in with jams and explore the music, dance, rhythms and style of a traditional and rich musical culture which has migrated across Europe.

If you are interested in getting involved - either by organising something for your community or you would like to learn Klezmer yourself either on a 1-2-1 basis or with a group then please get in touch with us.

And if you are not an instrumentalist? Klezmer is not just about playing the music – fundamental to this tradition is its roots in song and dance. If this music doesn't make you want to dance then it isn't klezmer. Considering this, learning the dances is just as important as learning the music. Under the instruction from dance leaders extraordinaire you can learn the steps to a Bulgar, Freylekhs, Hora and dance the night away. Why not book a klezmer dance party for your and your friends for that special birthday? Or hold an end of term 'Hopkele' klezmer barn dance.'

Spread the word. Contact Francesca Ter-Berg at francesca@jmi.org.uk or ring me on 07962 251601