

Klezmer in the Cities

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“So you must play klezmer, right?”

I get this reaction often when people find out that yes, I am Jewish and yes, I play the clarinet. In fact, to top that off, my mother is Israeli (which has almost nothing to do with klezmer, but is assumed as such). My answer always disappoints, as if I'm letting down not only my own culture, but also the asker's pristine views of it. This isn't a foreign feeling to me; I've heard “So you don't eat pork?” and “So you celebrate Chanukah or something?” countless times. I don't resent these efforts to categorize being Jewish, even if it does get a little tiresome to explain ancient dietary laws that don't really apply to my life or anyone's that I know. Obviously, being Jewish is difficult to classify, and these inquisitors are merely trying to match me up with their preconceptions. But with klezmer, they're off the mark. Or are they?

When I think about it, klezmer does provoke a strong response in me. Somehow, I *do* feel a claim to this music, even if I grew up singing Israeli nationalistic songs in Hebrew rather than *freylachs* from Ukraine. Where did this connection come from, and is it truly unique? Is it because I grew up hearing an old world-style cantor in my synagogue? Or does it have more to do with my seventh-grade production of *Fiddler on the Roof* than anything else? I wanted to be objective and critical about this perceived relationship. Maybe non-Jews felt the same connection as I did but were drawn solely by the emotional depth of klezmer. Did they experience it any less fully?

To find out, I attended the klezmer class at the MacPhail Center for Music. I found the classes on a windy Thursday night in the MacPhail annex building, in a basement underneath a spa, restaurant, and other businesses. Waiting in the cramped hallway before seven p.m., I tried to figure out who else was here to learn klezmer. Nobody looked Jewish. At seven, a door opened and out came Judith Eisener, the brain behind this experiment. Judith requires some description: she was dressed in purple pants, purple shirt, purple hair clip in her graying hair, and a black vest festooned with rainbow cats in various postures. She gleefully introduced herself to me, telling me she was very excited that someone had come to research klezmer, “the love of my life.” A dark-haired woman handed her a to-go cup as we shuffled into the large studio, saying, “It's a vegan shake from the Wedge. I know you don't have time to eat on Thursdays.” Vegans and klezmer; of course.

In the studio, about eight students—adults of all ages, and two older teenagers—draped their coats over chairs and unpacked their violins on the floor. I dragged a chair into the corner and tried to look unobtrusive. Judith was having none of that: “C'mon, get into the circle. Hey, is that your clarinet with you? We've never had a clarinet before!” Before long, I was the newest member of class, bidding objective, non-intrusive research farewell.

Judith began today's class by playing a recording from KlezKamp Canada, where she developed her klezmer passion. The camp and its methods provide the basis for Judith's teaching style, which is all by ear and has many communal elements. After giving us background on what we were to learn, which was a *bulgar*, we listened to her play the melody. Students tapped their feet, plucked along, and started to pick out fingerings. Then we were exhorted to sing, using the Yiddish vocable *bai*. Singing was integral at KlezKamp as a way of getting the melodies into your head, Judith explained. I found it helpful myself, and had great expectations for the moment when we finally picked up instruments to attempt to play for the first time.

What I learned immediately was that everyone in the class was at very different points in their musicianship. My interviews after class revealed that some students have been playing for only a couple of years, whereas others—notably, the young adults—were clearly leading the group sound. Judith used this discrepancy to everyone's advantage as much as possible, trying to make it a cooperative environment. The struggling musicians were encouraged to watch the fingers of the advanced players to pick up on fingerings. Occasionally Judith would yell out note names or fingerings herself, as we repeated the tune over and over. Learning by ear demands a larger in-class time commitment than learning from printed music, since it is the repetition that helps build muscle memory, and I wondered how successful this experience would be in a class that met for an hour every other week. As we continued repeating sections of the melody, and started building on new sections, I thought about the task of learning by ear on a piece of wood that you haven't been playing every day for almost twenty years, as I have. Add to that the fact that most of these violinists were learning in a foreign tonality, and in a group setting rather than in private lessons. I stopped patting myself on the back for picking up on the melody quickly.

Clearly, I needed to adjust my preconceptions of the goals of Judith's klezmer class. I had been expecting a glorious outpouring of Eastern European soul music, in full orchestration. I had anticipated a complete repertoire, wedding-ready. But what I found was a group of mostly older adults who had made klezmer the way they were going to learn music. It was unexpected and fascinating, and my interviews produced more evidence to support this fact. One woman, a typical Minnesota Norweigan, had played violin as a child, and after getting a gift certificate for lessons at MacPhail, decided to use it towards klezmer class. A blond girl in her late teens told me she had studied classical guitar and classical violin for eight and three years respectively, and had begun learning Irish fiddle. From that, she was drawn to klezmer. The move from Irish fiddle to klezmer turned out to be a running theme; Judith's partner Doug is a fiddler active in the live-music scene in Minneapolis, and several others in the class had also come from an Irish music background. Maybe once these musicians entered one folk idiom, they found it easy to move to others. Certainly the move within folk musics seems easier than the move from classical to folk, as the latter involves a major switch in learning styles.

An older woman in the class had picked up the violin after taking thirty years off, and instead of returning to the Bach suites of her youth, had chosen

klezmer as the way she would reintroduce herself to music. Part of this was because she enjoyed its tonalities; she also liked how klezmer encouraged her to *play*, to fool around on the instrument and not be afraid of making mistakes. *Playing*—in the childish sense of the word—had never entered into the realm of the Suzuki violin lessons that I had endured as a child. I wonder how many more adults would be interested in learning a musical instrument if they knew there were non-traditional ways to go about it. For that matter, kids should be presented with a larger range of options in musical education. I'm sure there are budding young musicians out there who would take more naturally to rote instruction than to traditional; Suzuki is a start, but the less structured communal learning style of klez class could also be explored in classical music.

The last person I talked to referred to her St. Paul, Irish Catholic background, telling me that she had grown up with many Jewish friends. She was still new to violin, and had taken three years of Irish fiddle lessons. Klezmer to her was more soulful than Irish fiddling, and told more of a story; she liked the variation of the different melodies, which she claimed Irish music lacked. She highly approved of the teaching style of both klezmer and Irish fiddle, and knew that learning by ear worked well for her.

Judith herself, although Jewish, had grown up agnostic with parents who had no use for religion. They did, however, know Yiddish, and Judith attributes some of her klezmer passion to this fact: "The sound of it [klezmer] was already in my ears." Years later, after a classical violin education, Judith was asked by two friends to play klezmer at their commitment ceremony; in a panic, she called a member of the first Twin Cities klezmer band, Prairie Heym Klezmorim, for a crash course. She said she "faked" her way through the performance, but her interest had been piqued by the instruction, and by the listening she had done to prepare. Soon enough, she was signed up for KlezKamp and had started the Tsatskelahs, an all-female klez band, in rebuttal of the male history of the genre.

All this led me to my next question: how do people use klezmer to shape their identities? I found many correlations among the answers in my interviews. Above all, this particular class is made up of people who chose klezmer as their inroad into being a musician. Many used the form as a way to return to music without the drudgery they remembered from childhood music lessons. Others, who were new to their instruments, saw the class as a way to continue learning violin without being judged; when I asked Judith if there would be a performance at the end of the class session, she replied strongly in the negative. As their teacher, she was sensitive to the particular needs of this class, and felt a public performance—an "end"—was not why these students were there; the "means," the klezmer journey, was the attraction. It was also the freedom from classical music and all its trappings that made Judith's klez class the perfect home for these musicians.

I learned that there were certain qualities to the learning of klezmer that drew people to it. However, I also saw that many students were interested in the connection to the past that klezmer provides. It was true that only two of the participants were Jewish—including Judith—but nonetheless, many students

liked the sense of history involved, even if it wasn't *their* history. Klezmer—and Yiddish—*feels* old, and deep-rooted sounds and languages give everyone a meaningful awareness of the past.

The unique development, decline, and revival of klezmer perhaps made it more accessible than it would seem as a “Jewish” music; made it open to anyone who loved the music enough to embrace and learn it. Certainly, this was true in Judith's class. Not only was the class mainly non-Jewish; it didn't even occur to any of those that I interviewed and observed to ask me if I was Jewish myself. And certainly Judith was not concerned with teaching the class “how to be Jewish.” The complexity of Judaism would make this impossible: is it a religion, a race, a culture, a nation? None of these issues even remotely surfaced in klez class; it was much more about the music than I had imagined. However, when the subject of a class party came up, the students suggested it be a Chanukah party. They had obviously formed some connection to Judaism through klezmer, perhaps through the history that Judith imparted here and there as we learned the tunes. Did the students feel that they needed to experience Chanukah in order to play klezmer more authentically? Or did they just want to learn about the holiday for its own sake?

As I looked at klezmer and talked with Judith and others, I found it interesting how many times Yiddish came up. One of the students, while packing up at the end of class, got into a very involved discussion with Judith about Yiddish. Many students had a wider knowledge of the language than I did; obviously, having grandparents fluent in Yiddish didn't help me much, as those grandparents lived halfway across the world. Judith herself is well versed in Yiddish, and seems to link her Jewishness to it, and to klezmer. It seems that Yiddish, like klezmer, is a way for non-religious Jews and non-Jews alike to access Judaism without the complicated political and religious overtones of Israeli music and Hebrew. The two have many similarities: both faded out of Jewish life in the 20th-century, in part because of their negative connotations. Many in the old communities considered *klezmerim* low-class and dirty, and the Zionist founders of Israel abandoned Yiddish in a conscious attempt to break from their *shtetl* pasts. Perhaps it was this neglect that allowed klezmer and Yiddish to move into the mainstream in the late 20th-century. The mainstream, after all, didn't have these same associations; without baggage, culture at large could explore at will. I'm not sure if the revival of klezmer and Yiddish has more to do with that, or with the general increased acceptance of Jews into the mainstream.

Coming to the end of my recollections, I asked myself: did Judith's class work? Did her teaching methods of listening, singing, and playing by ear produce *klezmerim*? My answer is, it depends on what one means by “work.” From the classical music viewpoint, perhaps the answer is no. Classical music lessons seek to perfect tone, technique, and intonation—three issues that came up not once in klez class. To judge from the reactions of my own Ethnomusicology peers when they listened to my recordings, some of them would agree with the classical music standpoint. And here an interesting experience took place for me. By the time I got to that moment of playing the recording out loud in my presentation, I couldn't hear the pitch problems, the note mistakes, and the scratchy beginner-violin sounds. Or rather, I could hear them, but at the same

level that I can hear my mother's foreign accent: I know it's there, but I'm not at all aware of it unless it's pointed out to me. The grimaces of my classmates actually came as a surprise, because I had forgotten how an outsider could perceive the sounds. Doubtless, I would have had the same reaction, sitting in their seats.

But through this project I was allowed a different perspective; one that is very rare and precious to me in the light of my career as a highly structured orchestral clarinetist bent on producing perfect sounds and rhythms. I know, when I hear that recording, that those students "get" klezmer more than I do, in spite of my pedigree. So for myself, I have determined that klez class *did* indeed "work." The soulful-ness that one of my interviewees spoke of—that was there. The communal "jam session" mentality that Judith brought from her KlezKamp experiences—that was there. The love of the form and its history—that was also there. Everything that Judith had set out to do was being accomplished, and the beauty of it was that you didn't have to be a Yitzhak Perlman to get there. I'm hard pressed to think of any other settings where a novice musician can access music on the same level as an advanced one. That may be this class's greatest contribution. Klezmer provides a road that any of its admirers can travel, and the traveling—like that of the itinerant *klezmerim* of days gone by—is all that really matters.