Episode 16 – Klezmer music and Romania

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of the Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 16 where we discuss Klezmer music and its connection to the Romanian lands.
You just listened to some Klezmer music; the episode notes contain links to a variety of melodies.

What is Klezmer music?
Klezmer music has its roots in the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition as a musical genre played at weddings and other festive events. The musical genre derives from Eastern European music of Jewish tradition and was built on it. The essential elements of the tradition include dance tunes, ritual melodies and virtuosic artistic improvisations performed for the listeners.
This traditional music draws inspiration from synagogue music, Roma music, European folk music and even classical music. It also incorporated elements from many other musical genres, including Ottoman music, Romanian folk music, Baroque music, German and Slavic folk dances.
Klezmer music emerged from a broader Eastern European Jewish musical culture that also included Jewish psaltic music, hasidic nigunim - songs without words serving Hasidic Jews and, later, Yiddish theatre music.

The Yiddish word 'klezmer' derives from two Hebrew roots: 'klei' (vessel or instrument) and 'zemer' (song). Originally, klezmer did not designate the genre of music but rather the musician who plays the music. A klezmer (plural: 'klezmorim' in Yiddish or 'klezmers' in English) was a professional male instrumental musician, usually Jewish, who played in a band hired for special occasions in Eastern European communities. It was not until the late 20th century that the word 'klezmer' became a known term in English.
Over time the usage of "*klezmer*" in a Yiddish context evolved to describe musicians instead of their instruments, first in Bohemia in the second half of the 16th century and then in Poland, possibly as a response to the new status of the musicians who were at that time forming professional guilds. After the term *klezmer* became the preferred term for these professional musicians in the Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe, other types of musicians were more commonly known as *muziker* or *muzikant*.
Early 20th-century recording industry materials and other writings referred to it as Jewish dance music, Jewish or Yiddish, or sometimes using the Yiddish term 'Freilach music' (merry music).

Early Klezmer bands consisted of four to eight musicians, sometimes with two or more violins as the main instruments. The accompaniment ensemble or kapelye usually included one or more sekunda violins (playing rhythmic chords), a tsimbl (hammered dulcimer), flute and bass.
A group of klezmer musicians is called klezmorim.
The band's repertoire included instrumental versions of popular Yiddish folk songs, theatre songs and hasidic and semi-liturgical music. They were also required to know the music of the local non-Jewish and Gypsy people, traditional folk dances and even some classical pieces to perform for the aristocracy.

Klezmer Music History

The Bible has several descriptions of orchestras and Levites making music, but after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, many rabbis discouraged musical instruments. Therefore, while there may have been Jewish musicians in different times and places since then, the "Klezmer" arose much more recently. The earliest written record of the use of the word was identified by Isaac Rivkind as being in a Jewish council meeting from Kraków in 1595. They may have existed even earlier in Prague, as references to them have been found as early as 1511 and 1533. It was in the 1600s that the situation of Jewish musicians in Poland improved, as they gained the right to form Guilds (*Khevre*), and therefore to set their own fees, hire Christians, and so on. Klezmer became colloquially attached to Jewish folk musicians sometime in the Middle Ages. For a long time, the term had pejorative connotations because of the bohemian lifestyle of these musicians and the perceived inferior quality of their music. Christian towns regulated all musicians' activities, specifying acceptable times and places of performance. However, they found a niche in rapidly growing towns, playing for celebrations (most often weddings) as well as community events such as holidays, and in private homes for Jewish or non-Jewish patrons. In order not to disturb their Christian neighbors, the Jews were required to avoid brass and percussion instruments. The main instruments were those with strings, which were easy to transport: the violin, cello and double bass, as well as wind instruments such as the flute and clarinet. Other instruments used included the tsimbl and accordion.
By the 19th century, the ensemble had expanded to include the brass instruments played by Jewish recruits in Tsarist army troops, but was still led by the first violin. Indeed, the band was often known by the name of its first violinist who was paid extra for the privilege. Few of the musicians had received formal musical training, but many were virtuoso performers with well-established reputations. The klezmer calling was hereditary and male-specific; a boy generally studied with his father, although some boys apprenticed to musicians in other cities.

Although klezmer music was not accepted by traditional religious authorities, it was given new life in the 18th-19th centuries by the religious movement of Hasidism, from which it borrowed its mystical fervor for music and dance.

Much of the musical and choreographic history of the Ashkenazim is embodied in the klezmer repertoire, which functioned as a kind of non-verbal community memory. The complex of speech, dance and musical gestures is deeply rooted in Jewish expressive culture and has reached its greatest development in Eastern Europe.

Since the 16th century, due to functional needs, lyrics have been added to Klezmer music. Thus, social functions, celebrations, events took on a new dimension. The story in song emerged. This step was necessary for the emergence of a new socio-cultural artistic function, that of the Yiddish Theatre.

Since the mid-19th century, klezmorim music has spread from the former Romanian principalities, to the northern and western areas. Like folk songs, instrumental music moved along Jewish transmission networks, regardless of the changing borders of the period. Thus, for example, the *doina*, a sometimes-rhapsodic instrumental piece adapted from a genre of Romanian shepherd song, travelled far from its roots from southeastern Europe to Lithuania.

The klezmer piece ‘Rumania Rumania’, whose melodic line is inspired by a Romanian hora, became part of the cultural heritage of the European Jewish diaspora and was ‘adopted’ even by Jewish musicians without ties to Romania. The song became famous in the performance of Aron Lebedeff, a Jewish musician of Ukrainian origin who emigrated to the USA.

In the early 20th century, both Yiddish theatre and klezmer music became popular in the U.S. following the massive emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe. Those early generations of klezmers are much more poorly documented than those working in the 1910s and 1920s; many never recorded or published music, although some are remembered through family or community history, such as the Lemish klezmer family of Iași, Romania, who arrived in Philadelphia in the 1880s and established a klezmer dynasty there. Among the European-born klezmers who popularized the genre in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s were also Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein; they were followed by American-born musicians such as Max Epstein, Sid Beckerman and Ray Musiker.[
As with Yiddish theatre and other aspects of Ashkenazi culture, the popularity of klezmer faded with the end of the mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe and the increasing assimilation of Jews in North America.
Klezmer musicians borrowed from the jazz genre and other styles adapting Jewish melodies to the diverse market of North American cultural ideas.

By the middle of the 20th century, when the Holocaust took place, the original Eastern European tradition of Ashkenazi folk music had practically come to an end. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, its revival began in the USA and Canada. By the late 1970s, klezmer music had become a widespread genre in North America, popular not only among Jews. It should be noted that this was the period when world music in general became fashionable. Drawing on preserved musical notes and, above all, sound recordings, the post-war generation of klezmer musicians, as part of this wave, strove to reproduce as authentically as possible the original folk style of the 19th century. The first postwar recordings to use the term "klezmer" to refer to the music were The Klezmorim's *East Side Wedding* and *Streets of Gold* in 1978, followed by Andy Statman and Zev Feldman's *Jewish Klezmer Music* in 1979.
In the 1980s, klezmer music became again fashionable in North America, Western Europe and post-Soviet countries. Ethnic music festivals in Western Europe usually included klezmer performances. At the same time, a tradition of Klezfest festivals emerged, dedicated specifically to Jewish folk music. In both North America and Europe, such events attracted Jews and non-Jews alike in the audience as well as performers.

The development of klezmer music in Israel followed a different path. The old musical tradition of this country has not been completely broken, but local klezmer music has mainly dissolved into what is known in Israel as “Hasidic music”, performed at weddings and other crowded religious festivities. After klezmer went out of fashion for a while, there was a desire in Israel to unite Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardim, Mizrahim, Ethiopians, Jews from all over the world. They wanted to have a universal musical language for Israel. Israeli music is its own kind of Jewish music and has many Arab or Middle Eastern influences.

A separate klezmer tradition had developed in Israel in the 20th century. Clarinetists Moshe Berlin and Avrum Leib Burstein are known exponents of the klezmer style in Israel. To preserve and promote klezmer music in Israel, Burstein founded the Jerusalem Klezmer Association, which has become a center for learning and performance of klezmer music in the country.[105] Since the late 1980s, an annual klezmer festival is held every summer in Safed, in the north of Israel.
Musa Berlin, born in Tel Aviv in 1938, made a great contribution to popularizing klezmer music in Israel. Notably, he was the first to draw attention to the unique musical tradition of Palestinian klezmer, which developed among the descendants of Ashkenazi Jews who settled in the historic Land of Israel in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A characteristic feature of Palestinian klezmer music is a visible Eastern influence, which comes from Arabs and non-Ashkenazi Jews.

An interesting fact is that in 1881, when the first Zionist congress was held in Focșani, Hatikvah, Hope in Hebrew, the future Israel's national anthem, was sung for the first time, its music being based on a Romanian folk tune. Hatikvah' text was composed by Naphtali Herz Imber, a Jewish poet who was born in 1855 in Galicia. Before his death in New York in 1909, he managed to travel through Europe, Palestine, Great Britain and the United States. Wherever he went, he wrote poetry, recited his poems to anyone who would listen, and remained devoted to the nascent cause of Zionism. The verses were first written in Iași, Romania. In 1882, Imber emigrated to Ottoman-ruled Palestine and read his poem to the pioneers of the first Jewish villages – Rishon LeZion, Rehovot, Gedera and Yesud Hama'ala. In 1887, Shmuel Cohen, a very young, 17 years old, musically trained resident of Rishon LeZion, sang the poem using a melody he knew from Romania and turned it into a song, after witnessing the emotional reactions of Jewish farmers who heard the poem. The adaptation of the music for 'Hatikvah' was set by Shmuel Cohen in 1888. Cohen himself recalled many years later that he hummed 'Hatikvah' to the tune of the song he had heard in Romania, 'The Ox-driven Cart', in Romanian "Carul cu boi".

Klezmer Music Types
The repertoire of klezmer musicians was very diverse and tied to specific social functions and dances, especially of the traditional wedding. These melodies might have a non-Jewish origin, or have been composed by a klezmer, but only rarely are they attributed to a specific composer. Generally, klezmer music can be divided into two broad categories: music for specific dances, and music for listening (at the table, in processions, ceremonial, etc.).

Freylekhs dance, is the simplest and most widespread type of klezmer dance tunes are those intended for group circle dances. Depending on the location this basic dance may also have been called a Redl (circle), Hopke, Karahod (round dance in Belarusian), Dreydl, Rikudl, etc. Bulgar, or Bolgar, became the most popular klezmer dance form in the United States. Its origin is thought to be in Moldova and with a deep connection to the Sârbă genre there.

Sher dance is a contra dance with roots in an older German dance. This
dance continued to be known in the United States even after other complex European klezmer dances had been forgotten.

Khosidl or Khosid dance is named after Hasidic Jews, is a more dignified embellished dance Hora or Zhok (from the Romanian Joc) is a circle dance.
Kolomeike is a fast and catchy dance which originated in Ukraine, and is prominent in the folk music of that country.
Skotshne is generally thought to be a more elaborate Freylekhs which could be played either for dancing or listening.
Waltzes were very popular, whether classical, Russian, or Polish. A padespan was a sort of Russian/Spanish waltz known to klezmers.
Mazurka and polka, Polish and Czech dances, respectively, were often played for both Jews and Gentiles.
Sirba is a Romanian dance which features hopping steps and short bursts of running, accompanied by triplets in the melody.
The **Doyne** is a freeform instrumental form borrowed from the Romanian shepherd's doina. Although there are many regional types of doina in Romania and Moldova, the Jewish form is typically simpler, with a minor key theme which is then repeated in a major key, followed by a Freylekhs.
Moralish, a type of melody, called Devekut in Hebrew, which inspires spiritual arousal or a pious mood.

Processional melodies, including Gas-nigunim (street tunes), Tsum tish (to the table).
The Taksim, whose name is borrowed from the Ottoman/Arab Taqsim is a freeform fantasy on a particular motif, ornamented with trills, roulades and so on; it usually ends with a Freylekhs. By the twentieth century it had mostly become obsolete and was replaced by the doina.
Fantazi or fantasy is a freeform song, traditionally played at Jewish weddings to the guests as they dined. It resembles the fantasia of "light" classical music.
A Terkisher is a type of virtuosic solo piece performed by leading klezmorim such as Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein. There is no dance for this type of melody, rather it references an Ottoman or "oriental" style, and melodies may incorporate references to Greek Hasapiko into an Ashkenazic musical aesthetic.
Parting melodies played at the beginning or end of a wedding day, such as the Zay Gezunt (be healthy), Dobriden (good day), Dobranotsh or A gute Nakht (good night) etc. These types of pieces were those which may have given an air of dignity and seriousness to the festivities.

Klezmer Music Elements
The traditional style of playing klezmer music, including tone, typical cadences, and ornamentation, sets it apart from other genres.
Few klezmer musicians before the late 19th century had formal musical training, but they inherited a rich tradition with its own advanced musical techniques. Each musician had their understanding of how the style should be "correctly" performed. The usage of these ornaments was not random; the matters of "taste", self-expression, variation and restraint were and remain important elements of how to interpret the music.
Klezmer musicians apply the overall style to available specific techniques on each melodic instrument. They incorporate and elaborate the vocal melodies of Jewish religious practice,

including *khazones*, *davenen*, and paraliturgical song, extending the range of human voice into the musical expression possible on instruments.
Among those stylistic elements that are considered typically "Jewish" in klezmer music are those which are shared with cantorial or Hasidic vocal ornaments, including imitations of sighing or laughing. Yiddish terms were used for *these v*ocal-like ornaments such as *kneytsh* - "nuance", *kvetsh* - "pressure" or "stress", "krekhts, "- a sort of weeping or hiccoughing combination of backwards slide and flick of the little finger high above the base note, while the bow does, well, something – which aptly imitates Jewish liturgical singing style."
Other ornaments such as trills, grace notes, appoggiaturas, *glitshn* (glissandos), *tshoks* (a kind of bent notes of cackle-like sound), flageolets(string harmonics), pedal notes, mordents, slides and typical klezmer cadences are also important to the style. In particular, the cadences which draw on religious Jewish music identify a piece more strongly as a klezmer tune, even if its broader structure was borrowed from a non-Jewish source. Sometimes the term *dreydlekh* is used only for trills, while other use it for all klezmer ornaments. Unlike in Classical music, vibrato is used sparingly, and is treated as another type of ornament.

Klezmer Music Influence
Many Jewish classical music composers, such as Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland, were influenced by the klezmeric idioms heard during their youth, just as Gustav Mahler had been. George Gershwin was familiar with klezmer music, and Klezmer revival. The wedding Ceremony the opening clarinet glissando of "Rhapsody in Blue" suggests klezmer influence.
At the same time, non-Jewish composers were also turning to klezmer for a prolific source of fascinating thematic material. Dmitri Shostakovich in particular admired klezmer music for embracing both the ecstasy and the despair of human life, and quoted several melodies in his chamber masterpieces, the Piano Quintet in G minor, op. 57 (1940), the Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, op. 67 (1944), and the String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, op. 110 (1960).
The compositions of Israeli-born composer Ofer Ben-Amots incorporate aspects of klezmer music, most notably his 2006 composition *Klezmer Concerto*.

Some clarinet stylings of swing jazz bandleaders Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw can be interpreted as having been derived from klezmer, as can the "freilach swing" playing of other Jewish artists of the period such as trumpeter Ziggy Elman.

Klezmer music, whether in Europe, America or Israel adapted the music to the larger, surrounding culture. What it has never done is assimilate completely. Rather, klezmer music in particular, and Jewish music as a whole has consciously and subconsciously borrowed generously, but never sacrificed its Jewish sensibility. Jewish values, the internal rhythms of Jewish languages, synagogue musical motifs, all these allowed Jewish music to retain a unique imprint that set it apart from the surrounding community.

This concludes episode 16; in the next episode we will discuss the Khazars and their impact on the Romanian lands.
Until then be well.