

## Klezmer Music Written by Merlin Shepherd

It is impossible to ignore the importance of music in Jewish life. One need only look to the Bible to see descriptions of large orchestras and the importance of the Levites as music makers. After the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 C.E. music making in the synagogue was banned by Rabbis and instrumental music survived only by virtue of the fact that merry-making and song were necessary at weddings.

References to klezmer bands are found in surviving town records, memoirs and historical accounts as early as the fifteenth Century, although knowledge of what the actual music sounded like has to remain speculation. There were several different classes of Jewish musician. Take for instance Michael Joseph Gusikov, a rare exception who managed to cross these classes. He was born in 1809 in the Russian-Polish city of Shklov into a Hasidic family and through his “otherness” and his enigmatic slight frame and sheer musical skill rose from a simple musikant to a celebrated koncertant, playing to packed concert halls and to the Gentry. Whilst still a teenager Gusikov developed the *shtroyfidl*, a precursor of the modern orchestral xylophone. Similar in principal to the African *balophon* although popularised in Europe by its use in Yiddish music, it consisted of a set of chromatically tuned hollow wooden slabs which lay on a bed of straw and were beaten by small sticks like a *tsimbl*. At the peak of his career, Gusikov’s repertoire included Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, French, and light classical music.

Majer Bogdanski, who was born in Piotrkow, Poland tells that the Prima violinist in his town (nicknamed Katshke) was a cinema musician who played to accompany the silent movies every night. The other members of his band were all semi-professionals and barbers by trade. There simply weren’t enough weddings from which to earn a living for his particular *kapelye* in Piotrkow. Although there were full-time professional musicians like Katshke, most had to rely on other trades to earn a living. There were also many “amateur” musicians, who played *a heim*, in the home, for family entertainment. As Y.L.Peretz says in his story “A Gilgun Fun A Nign”, *Vilt ir visn vifl mentshn es gehert tsun a shtub? Kukt oyf di vent! Vifl es hengen fidelekh, azoy fil manslayt*” (Want to know how many people there are in a house? Look at the wall! However many fiddles hang there, that’s how many men there are! (Slobin, ed 1982, pg 542).

Klezmorim always played more than just Jewish music at weddings. Jews then, as today, would often request, i.e.be required to play, court dances, light classical and popular music as well as traditional Jewish repertoire. They were preferred by the non-Jewish employer often because of their wide travelling, broad repertoire, their modesty and sobriety. Jews and non-Jews often played together. There are many accounts particularly of Jewish and Gypsy musicians playing together. Why? Let us speculate on the similarity of their status and of the music trade being one of the few since time memorial open to itinerant peoples. And to the low cost of employing lower social status groups, who would play conscientiously. Musical language was shared. At least as much then as today.

In many municipalities, Jewish musicians needed approval from local governments in order to work. Certain principalities forbade more than a certain number of musicians to play together. In Metz, for example, a trio was as large as a band could be, unless it were playing for a wedding, in which case it could be a quartet. In other towns, musicians had to stop playing by midnight. (This type of restriction not only applied to Jews, however. In Athens, 1926, the Greek clarinetist Yannis Kyriakatis was allowed by the police to play past 10pm on the merits of his refined playing style).

Some towns forbade Jews to play “loud” instruments, like drums, brass or even clarinets. Perhaps for this reason the violin became the principal instrument of Jewish music along with viola, ‘cello, bass, *tsimbl* and flute. These instruments were all familiar to Jewish and non-Jewish music alike. Also to

Jewish and non-Jewish musicians, therefore playing these instruments made it easier for the cross-fertilization of musics between cultures. It was only by ca. 1855 that clarinets were allowed to be played by Jews in Ukraine due to the liberal attitudes of Czar Alexander II.

So how did the music of non-Jews and the music of Jews differ? The most direct answer is that Jewish music was played in the *shtaygerim*, or prayer modes, from cantorial music as heard in the synagogue. This sets Jewish music apart, in that although it is secular (despite the fact that it was the preferred music and style of the Chassidim) it is rooted in devotional music, and will cause the listener familiar with the various shtaygerim to enter a quasi-religious state. This fact separates klezmer music from the music of most of the Jews' neighbouring cultures.

In fact, many, if not all of the ornaments found in klezmer music are taken from the vocal style as sung in the synagogue. Some of the ornaments exist in Gypsy music, although the interpretation in Jewish music is very specific and clearly different from its Gypsy and Rumanian counterparts. The *krekhsts*, (moan, or sob) for instance, is a direct mimic of the cantorial ornament of the same name. The same ornament will sound different in other contexts and indeed it will have different meaning, though technically produced by similar means. Imagine the difference between the meaning and pronunciation of the word "*formidable*" in English and French!

One main difference, (still apparent amongst people making Jewish music today), between the music of the synagogue and the secular music for dancing is that the religious music holds onto traditional values much tighter than the secular. The musicians who worked with non-Jews, Gypsies in particular, would find a cross-fertilization of culture and musical style occurring on a continuous basis, whereas the Synagogue would always strive to maintain its traditionalism, and therefore embrace a changing world much more reluctantly.

Coming between the tightly bound music of the synagogue and the relatively free instrumental music of the klezmer was the *badkhn*. He was a "master of ceremonies" at weddings, whose function was to make the wedding run according to plan and to the wishes of the in-laws. He would perform the specific rituals (seating, veiling and exhorting of the bride and instructing the groom), ceremonies, speeches, etc. and guide the betrothed, their families and guests through the necessary emotional points of the day. He would also call dances, and often lead the party in the dances themselves, sometimes even acting as clown or waiter if so needed.

Sadly, the tradition of *badkhones* has been lost in the transplanting of Yiddish culture across the continents and decades.....who can tell whether the revivalist tradition will bring a post-modernist Badkhen back into life in the pending millennium? The modern klezmer revival has succeeded in breathing new life into the old songs and dances of past centuries but much of the tradition has been left behind. Whilst research enables the revivalists of klezmer music to come ever closer to an "authentic" playing style, the functional aspects of the tradition in terms of its placing within Yiddish (and non-Yiddish) communities in 19th Century Eastern-Europe can never be retrieved. Perhaps it is that which has been left behind which drives us onwards to rediscover and redefine the Art of the Klezmerim....

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