

KLEZMER MUSIC: FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

FEATURE ARTICLES

SECULAR MUSIC



By Hervé Roten

Klezmer is an instrumental music for celebrations which was once performed in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe at weddings or joyous religious celebrations, such as *Purim*, *Simhat Torah*, or for the inauguration of a new synagogue. Like most of musical Jewish traditions, klezmer is a music of exile ^[1] strongly marked by its geographical and cultural environment. But in Eastern Europe, consisting of many different people and languages, this environment was constantly changing. Klezmer music therefore took from here and there, and developed a rich and pluralistic practice which never stopped developing through time and space.

To speak today of the klezmer phenomena, is therefore to study how a musical genre is born, evolve and transforms through history. It's also to consider the music in a given society and the interaction between these two elements.

Etymology

The word “klezmer” comes from Hebrew “kli zemer” which means “instrument of the singing”. It is in a manuscript from the XVIth century kept in Trinity College of Cambridge, that “klezmer” designated the musician and no longer the instrument ^[2].

The word is pejorative: in slang, it means a thief, a criminal. In the beginning of the XXth century, “klezmer” meant a self-taught musician who played popular music by ear. According to the native Polish cantor Shalom Berlinski (1918 – 2008), “In the 1920-30's, there were no definite words to call the instrumentalists playing at weddings. The word “klezmer” – that we use today everywhere – was pejorative: it meant a “bum” who plays vulgar music. Klezmers were not really appreciated. When they played, each one added harmony, the one passing by in his head, depending on his talent, his inspiration. It wasn't very valuable; actually it had no value at all” ^[3]. But nowadays, the word has become more complimentary for the musician and in everyday language, it also qualifies traditional Jewish music from Eastern Europe.

Historic route

Klezmers are therefore children from roaming Jewish musicians, from which we find traces since the Roman period. Until the end of the Middle-Ages, many Jewish people joined the universal class of entertainers. Ironically, their inferior status of musician guaranteed them a certain indulgence that their wealthier co-religionists didn't have. We find therefore indications of Jewish musicians related to Christian kings as well as Muslim Califs.

These Jewish minstrels and jugglers performed an international repertoire, mainly composed of songs, intrumental pieces, but also recitations of long epic stories and various types of poetry. In the XIIIth century they perform their art among provincial troubadours, Trouvères from North of France and Minnesänger from Rhine region.

From XVIth century on, the instrumental usage of klezmers was severely restricted, by civil authorities who gave very few playing authorizations to a limited number of musicians (in Metz in XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries, only three musicians, maybe four were aloud at weddings), and also by Jewish religious authorities who did not really like this craze from worshippers for this music hardly compatible with Jewish ethic.

Klezmers were nevertheless regularly invited by the communities to play for different festive occasions. In Prague, where they formed an actual guild, the musical life was intense. The welcoming of the *Shabbat* was the occasion for great spiritual concerts. In 1678 in Prague, there was a great procession with more than 20 instrumentalists, a choir of cantors and assistants, and a choir of worshippers. Klezmers were also requested for celebrations that the community gave for the various emperors. But such events didn't happen everyday. In order to make a living, the professional Jewish musician also performed in front of a Christian audience. Jewish musicians therefore created bridges between Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. This is why we see Jewish musicians playing in local orchestras, and non-Jewish musicians playing in Jewish orchestras called *kepelyes*, *kompanye*, or *orkestr*. This is also why musical exchanges happened daily between Jews and Gypsies ^[4].

At the turn of the XXth century, hundreds of thousands Jews from Central and Eastern Europe fled pogroms and misery and emigrated to the United States. Among them, many found jobs in theater, cabarets, hotels, cafes, circuses, and later on in cinema. The American Jewish community continued to request klezmers for weddings and other traditional celebrations. The community soon owned its own cafes, restaurants, cabarets and its radio, where musicians could perform. The Yiddish theater was also a place where singers, musicians and composers could express their talents. A new generation of actors, singers, such as Aaron Lebedeff (1873-1960) or Molly Picon (1898-1992) appeared in that period.

During the second world war, Central and Eastern Europe were emptied from its Jews by nazi barbarism. Entire communities vanished, taking with them a multi-secular culture. But in the United States, klezmer music survived and flourished as music for dancing and rejoicing due to musicians such as Abe Schwartz (1881-1963), Harry Kandel (1885-1943), Naftule Brandwein (1889-1963) or Dave Tarras (1897- 1989). Feeling there was potential money to make, the American industry of records got interested since the end of the XIXth century to this repertoire. About 50.000 records of Jewish music, among it 700 just of klezmer music, were made between 1894 and 1942.

After the second world war, a tendency to cultural assimilation and Zionism that was strong among Jews from America gave less importance to Jewish music. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 launched a new cultural and linguistic program which did not look back at Eastern Europe; Hebrew replaced Yiddish and the new Israeli culture became a reference for the diaspora.

However, in the 1970-80's, the interest for Yiddish culture came back. And with the performance of various pioneers such as the clarinet player Giora Feidman, Henry Sapoznik (from the band *Kapelye*) or Lev Liberman (*The Klezmerim*), a music named "klezmer" reappeared, just like "celtic" was named for Irish music.

Starting in the United States, this "new wave" klezmer didn't take long to arrive in Europe and Israel. In 1970, the reviving klezmer movement counted 3 orchestras in United States; in 1990, there more than 50, 10 just for New-York ^[5]. In France, new bands playing klezmer music appear each year and the record production dedicated to this genre is growing. Observation shared by professionals: "Late of more than 20 years compared to United States, the Klezmer phenomena breaks through in our old country, touching professionals and amateurs. They are more and more to sign up French "Klezkamps"".

Klezmer is still alive, but it has strongly changed, as we can see with the instruments and repertoire in usage.

The instruments of klezmer music

The instruments played by klezmers were always varied: first was the violin and other string instruments (alto, cello, double bass), but also clarinet, flute, percussion, and brass instruments in the XXth century. According to Henry Sapoznik, "{the importance was its capacity to play the local repertoire, the possibility to make and repair them, and its transportability}" ^[6].

In the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries, klezmer ensembles were mainly composed of a lute or a small string ensemble – in general two violins and a viola da gamba. Sometimes there was a cymbalum, from which the soft and sizzling sonorities completed the virtuoso performance of the violins. In Ukraine, in XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, the law divided music instruments in two categories: "strong" (brass instruments and percussions) and "soft" (strings and flutes). Jews were authorized to play just those from the second category. But around the second half of the XIXth century, linked likewise with the military brass bands, klezmer ensembles started integrating wind instruments, such as the clarinet, and progressively brass instruments. The accordion was used a lot at the end of the XIXth century, but rare due to its expensive price. The percussions were often just a simple drum (*tshekal*) or a bigger bass drum (*puk* or *baraban*) with or without cymbals (*tats*).

At the end of the XIXth century, in order to have more balance, the number of string instruments became bigger in bands, and bigger orchestras appeared.

The first records – in Europe in 1897, and especially in United States – also influenced the composition of the orchestras. The first known recordings of klezmer music are mainly small ensembles, like two violins and a cymbalum, with sometimes an accordion. But progressively, the record companies encouraged wind and brass instruments due to the technical means of recording which were more effective for the more powerful and directional sound of brass instruments than of strings. The tuba therefore replaced the double bass. In the United States, influenced by jazz music, saxophone and banjo were also used. Nowadays, klezmer ensembles, incorporated to "world music", can use guitars, pianos, but also ethnic instruments such as didjeridoo or tablas!

The repertoire

Klezmer music is very mixed. It has borrowed to the hassidic movement ^[7] the joy, the eagerness, and especially the *niggunim*, these melodies without words, easy to memorize and repeat. Is added to it a subtle blend of popular Jewish and non-Jewish melodies, music from secular dances and synagogue music. Like for klezmer art, the ashkenazi cantorial style (*Hazzanut*) includes much ornamentation. Furthermore, it uses the same modes and motives. This influence of *Hazzanut* on instrumental Jewish music is clear, like for certain ornamentation – such as the *krechts* (sigh) -that comes directly from the cantorial tradition.

However, it is mainly during dances and Jewish events that the klezmers could express their talent: for each event was a particular style of music: for meals and meditation, they played mostly *niggunim*. But the biggest part of the repertoire was linked to weddings that included music for dancing (*broyges tants*: reconciliation dance between the step-mothers; *patsh tants*: clapping in the hands; *freilekh*: happy dance; *sher*: square dance: etc) but also ritual music and for procession (the arriving and leaving of the guests, the procession of the bride and groom under the wedding canopy (the *khupa*), etc).

The klezmer repertoire in its larger meaning include also many Yiddish songs, traditional or more recent. It is not surprising when we know that traditional weddings, for one part, were enlivened by a *badkhan*, a master of ceremony who was at the same time a comic improvisator, a parodist or moralist, and sometimes a singer, and for a second part, that the ceremony or *Purim* was the occasion to performances (*Purimshpil*), with musicians, actors and singers.

Although the repertoire is varied, klezmer music is still a genre that is easily recognizable. What are its main musical characteristics?

Music systematics

The conception of klezmer music is borrowed to oriental music: the melody has the prime place and the discourse develops itself with the ornamenting and modal improvisation. But what’s the most surprising when we listen to klezmer music, is this sensation of freedom, one can even say chaotic noise. Like if every instruments talked at the same time! But all say the same thing, all refer to a same melodic model, but each one of them develops it in his particular way. It’s a heterophonic relation, just like in the synagogue, when every worshipper sings the prayer with his own tonality, speed, with his phrasing and ornamenting.

Harmony is although not completely absent; it is subject to the melody: therefore, one only chord can be enough for a whole section. It is the friction between the melody and harmony that creates the discords and the melodic tension, typical of this music.

The ornamenting is extremely rich and varied (*krekhts*: sigh, *dreydelekh*: *grupetto*, *tshok*, clicks, etc). The vibrato is not very used but the long notes are completed with trills. The glissendi are often used by the fiddlers but also by other instruments.

Improvisation is frequently used in klezmer music. At first, it consisted of modifying the phrase, or the ornamenting of a melody. But this conception has naturally evolved in the 20th century under the influence of jazz and the emergence of solos on music chords.

Klezmer music mainly uses five mode types; the major mode, the minor modes (natural, harmonic, and ascending) and three synagogue modes (*shtaygerim*^[8]): *Ahava Raba* (great love), *Mi sheberakh* (the one who blesses) and *Adonay molokh* (God king), named after the beginnings of famous prayers. These {shtaygerim} are defined by a modality very close to the Arab modes (*maqamat*) or Indian (*raga*) ^[9].

The rhythms, in general binary, borrow to the characteristics of the dances to which they correspond (*khosidl*, *hora*, *terkish*, *sirba*, etc.). However in certain pieces (*taksim* or *doyna* for example) or inside songs, there can be unmeasured parts: the backing, often played by the accordion or cymbalum, just keeps a note or a chord while the soloist improvises his melody.

At first, tempo was quite free and changed according to the atmosphere or the audience: it had to be faster when the ambiance was heating, and slower and a grand-mother came into the dance. This adaptation is hearable in the way they end the songs: a chromatic rise ends up on a melodic and harmonic suite VIII – V – I, played at tempo or often slower, allowed to end a piece quickly and and at anytime according to the event (entrance of the bride, announcement of a present, etc.).

Traditional klezmer music is purely functional, linked to the lifestyle of Ashkenazi Jews. Today, things are slightly different: like jazz, klezmer is become a genre on its own; it is played by artists of all origins and all religions, and has climbed on stage. Klezmer’s particularities has been a little bit erased by universalism of its inspirations: mix of popular music from Romania, Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Hungary, Greek, Ottoman (Turkish or Arab), and especially Gypsy, we can maybe say klezmer music is one of the first “fusion” music. But by leaving its original place and function klezmer music may lose its identity. And as the sociologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett said, going from a “traditional music” to a “heritage music” is not without danger ^[10].

Nowadays, klezmer musicians swing between respect, tradition and modernity. Some play it reproducing the sounds and arrangements of the past. Others kept its paraliturgic function, performing it at weddings and Jewish events. Finally, others, the predominant number, marry their music to contemporary music, to jazz, to world music...

But after all, isn’t klezmer music a music for marriage?



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[1]

How can one forget that the Jewish people spent more than half of its existence outside its homeland ? To the point that the Greek word “diaspora” (dispersion) which was used only for the displaced Jews has now entered the common language to designate exiled ethnic minorities (Chinese diaspora, Armenian diaspora, etc.) !

[2]

A great part of the documentation for this article comes from Michel Borzykowski’s website (<http://borzykowski.users.ch>) who did a remarkable work on the subject. May he be thanked here.

[3]

Conversation with the cantor Shalom Berlinski (1918-2008) recorded by H. Roten on September 24, 2003.

[4]

These exchanges between Jews and Gypsies result from a community of fate (same inferior status and same travelling way of life) as well as a preference for Eastern influenced music. The {doina}, this sad tune, is an example of music played by both of these people. In fact, one of the creators of Gypsy-Hungarian national music, Mark Rozsavölgyl (1787-1848) was actually called Mordchele Rosenthal. His Gypsy orchestra was entirely composed of Jews disguised as Gypsies.

[5]

PAYEN Dominique, {La musique klezmer et les klezmorim de Berkeley}, mémoire de Maîtrise, Université de Rouen, oct. 1990, p. 31.

[6]

SAPOZNIK Henry, Klezmer ! {Jewish Music from old World to Our World}, New-York, Schirmer books, 1999.

[7]

The hassidic movement is a mystic branch born in Podolia in the first half of the 18th century. It preaches that one can access the divine with collective and extatic experiences based in particular on music and dance.

[8]

The *shtayger* (or *steiger*) – word which means “mode” or “way” in Yiddish – is a melodic model which serves as a base for the cantor’s improvisation. It is composed of a determined scale and of specific melodic formulas.

[9]

Cf. AVENARY, Hanoch, “*Shtayger*”, Encyclopaedia Judaïca, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1972, vol. 14, pp. 1464-1466.

[10]

Cf. KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT Barbara, « {La renaissance du klezmer : réflexions sur un chronotope musical} », Cahiers de Littérature Orale, n°44, 1998, pp. 229-262.

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