

Klezmer music, then and now

An introduction by Alan Bern

Klezmer is a Yiddish word meaning a professional instrumental folk musician. For hundreds of years, *klezmerim* (plural) played music to accompany the events, rituals and rhythms of life of both Jewish and non-Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Their repertoire and their style of playing varied greatly depending on the nature of the event, for whom they were playing, their geography, their artistry, current musical fashion and more. Dr. Walter Zev Feldman, a leading scholar of Ottoman Turkish and Jewish music, writes: ‘The essential repertoire of the *klezmerim* were the ritual tunes, improvisations and dances for the Jewish wedding, in a distinctive Jewish performance style, continually replenished by the best klezmer composers, which comprised similar genres over a very wide area of Eastern Europe where Yiddish was spoken. In addition to these, the *klezmerim* played both a local peasant repertoire, and a cosmopolitan popular repertoire for non-Jewish clientele, depending on their social class’. Until well into the 20th century the term *klezmer* referred only to the musician, not to the music. By the time this usage changed, a great amount of the older musical variety and repertoire had already vanished due to urbanization, modernization, secularization, immigration, assimilation, and of course, the Holocaust.

Starting in the United States in the late 1970s, young musicians began to rediscover this almost-lost musical heritage. Their sources included 78 rpm recordings from 1905–1930s, a few older *klezmerim* whose careers and memories reached back to the early 20th century, and written sources including books, scholarly articles and collections of written music. Insight and understanding emerged step by step, with not a few blind alleys along the way. Eventually, the *klezmer revival* that began in a few major American cities spread throughout the United States to Europe and beyond, giving impulse to a bewildering variety of new musical genres including *Radical Jewish Music*, *New Jewish Music*, *New Yiddish Music*, Yiddish-inflected pop, rock, punk and jazz, traditionalists, classicists, primitivists and more. This proliferation is evidence of a creative tension between the remarkable power of early 20th century klezmer music to continue to inspire, and the myriad of ways in which our very complex social world shapes and molds contemporary music and musicians.

Learning klezmer music and becoming a klezmer musician

The artistry of a klezmer musician consists not only of having a large repertoire of tunes, being an expressive and technically accomplished player, and knowing which tunes to play for which occasions. All of that is necessary, just not enough. Artistry means being able to freely vary the way one plays a tune – on the spot – and within the parameters of a style. It also includes being open and responsive to the other musicians playing. These are skills and nuances that can only be transmitted by ear and practical experience, not via written music. For the same reasons, it’s impossible to become a fluent speaker of a foreign language only by reading books.

Each piece in this book, therefore, is only one possible version of a piece that has infinite possible versions. Think of each piece in this collection as one example of how it can be played, not as the final, authorized version. Try to understand how variations in ornamentation, phrasing, melody and harmony work, and feel free to try them out at other places and with other tunes. Let your ear and those of your fellow musicians judge the results. If something sounds good, keep it. If not, try to understand why.

The accordion in klezmer music

The accordion is an amazing, gorgeous instrument. If you’re reading these words, you probably already know that! Its history and role in klezmer music, however, is limited compared to the clarinet or the still older flute, violin or *tsimbl* (a small hammered dulcimer), instruments traditionally played by *klezmerim*. Why? In klezmer music the expressive quality of the melody has immense importance. It should remind the listener of the human voice. For that reason, in addition to the repertoire of trills, grace-notes and mordents that are familiar from other kinds of music, klezmer music also includes ornaments that remind us of sobs or

laughter. These are much more difficult to produce on the accordion than on wind or string instruments and a true *glissando* (smoothly gliding between two different pitches), which is so characteristic of klezmer style on the violin, clarinet or flute, is just not physically possible on the accordion. That makes the accordion, all in all, somewhat less suited for the 'voice-like' flavor of klezmer melodic style than the traditional klezmer melody instruments. On the other hand, the traditional klezmer ensemble includes a melody, a chordal accompaniment and a bass, and the accordion was designed to play all three of these at once! Our challenge as accordionists is to play these three voices with as much independence and invention as possible. The melody must be freely expressive, the bass driving and the chords filling out the sound, complementing the other voices and the melody without detracting from them. This is especially true of accordion solo style, the subject of this book.

Compared with the number and variety of recordings of violin and clarinet, we have only a small sample of klezmer accordion recordings. These are models for different ways the accordion can be played but it is equally important for klezmer accordionists to listen to, imitate and adapt clarinet, violin and other melody-instrument styles to the accordion, as well as the rhythmic accompaniment styles of tsimbl, piano and trombone. Most of the pieces in this collection are arrangements for accordion of music originally played by clarinet, violin or large klezmer ensembles.

Harmony

Many klezmer melodies can be accompanied with only two or three chords. For musicians used to more harmony, such simplicity can sound primitive. On the other extreme, it's also possible in klezmer music to use all of the harmonic variety of Western classical, popular and jazz music. Some listeners find that beautiful, to others it can seem overblown or kitschy. Between these two extremes, there's a huge range. In this book you'll encounter different harmonic approaches in different pieces, or even in different sections of the same piece. These are not 'authoritative' choices, just examples of how a melody can be harmonized. You can develop your own harmonic approach by exploring the musical logic you find here and reflecting on what pleases your ear and why.