

Klezmer for Klarinettists

a Beginner's Guide

– Michèle Gingras

A question I am asked often is: “How did a French Canadian end up playing, recording, and teaching Jewish music?”

About five years ago, a student of mine asked if I'd like to borrow her tape, *The Magic of Klezmer* featuring clarinetist Giora Feidman. I thought to myself: “Klezmer music... I've read about it before...” But when I put the tape in the cassette player, little did I know that after 20 seconds of listening, I'd be running around the hallways of Miami University wanting to share this wonderful music with my friends and colleagues.

I spent the next year listening to numerous recordings (vintage and contemporary), consulting with clarinetists David Krakauer in New York and Ilene Stahl and Hankus Netsky in Boston, and attending various klezmer workshops in Chicago and Canada, thanks to the generous support of Miami University. Later on, I joined a band, The Cincinnati Klezmer Project (led by Josh Moss), recorded three CDs, and I now spend each and every Saturday nights playing Bar Mitzvah's, Jewish community events, black tie affairs, fund raisers, and world music festivals. As a classical musician, the experience has been glorious and rewarding, and has allowed me to tap into new kinds of performance venues which were previously unavailable to me.

How did klezmer music start?

Klezmer music is the traditional instrumental celebratory music of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish people of Eastern Europe, and dates back at least as far as 16th century Central Europe. Klezmer was heard in parts of Europe that are today's Poland, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary. The term *klezmer* is derived from the Hebrew roots “*kli-zemer*” or “vessel of song”, (consistent with an ancient Jewish belief that a musician is not really a creator of music, but a vessel through which music flows.) It refers to the professional Jewish

folk musicians of Eastern European origin, and since the 1970s, it also has been used to describe the genres of music they performed.

From 1881 to 1924, there was a wave of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe entering the New World. The people naturally brought their music along and performed for the Yiddish Theatre (New York City) and for all kinds of celebrations. In the '30s and '40s, their American-born sons and daughters became more interested in “fitting in” the new world, and turned to jazz and other musics rather than perpetuating the klezmer tradition. A few generations later, their great-grandsons and daughters wanted to rediscover their roots and proudly re-engaged in playing their forefather's music.

Since the '70s, there has been a klezmer revival movement sweeping the nation, and many new bands emerged. With today's “World Music” phenomenon, klezmer is in great demand and is more popular than ever. Itzhac Perlman and other great classical musicians helped in spreading its popularity among classical audiences.

Legendary clarinetists

Because klezmer music was essentially regarded as functional music in the first half of the 1900s, few performers stood out as individuals at that time, except perhaps clarinetists Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein. The two became the most famous and respected *klezmerim* of the 20th century. Reissues of their vintage recordings are now available on CD. Their style of music became known as “Jewish dance music” during the post-war years.

Dave Tarras produced numerous recordings, and his artistry and repertoire were unique. Born near the Ukrainian city of Uman, he was a descendent of several generations of hasidic *klezmerim*. When he arrived in New York in 1921, his clarinet was destroyed by fumigation at the hands of the Ellis Island authorities, and he went to work at first in the fur trade. Eventually Tarras bought a new instrument and in 1925 he recorded his first clarinet solos for



the Columbia label and went on to make hundreds of recordings, not only of Jewish music, but Russian, Polish, and Greek music as well. He died on February 13th, 1989. Dave Tarras' available recordings include: “Yiddish-American Klezmer Music 1925-1956” (Yazoo Records 7001 CD/MC); “Master Klezmer Music, Volume one and Volume two” (Global Village Music CD 105 and CD 106)

Klezmer is Keyless

Klezmer is primarily a modal music using chromatic or “Oriental” modes known under several names. These modes are similar to Eastern Ashkenazic liturgical modes, as well as Turkish, Romanian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian modes. In Yiddish music, the scales are called *gustn*. As with the major and minor modes of Western music, these modes can be built on any scale degree as long as the relationships between whole and half tones are retained.

The most important *gust* is a *freygish*. It is characterised by the augmented second between the second and third degrees, as well as the minor 7th chord serving the “dominant” function at the cadences or phrase endings. (See ex. 1) A full description of these modes can be found in Joel Rubin’s wonderful book: *Mazltov! – Jewish-American Wedding Music for Clarinet*, published in 1998 by Schott (Catalog number ED 8695.) The following examples, with the exception of the final Freylekhs, are from this book.

freygish on D



Another popular chromatic *gust* is the altered dorian or Ukrainian dorian.

ukrainian dorian on C



Another scale includes a flatted second and fifth degrees, known as “minor” or *yishtabach*.

“minor” on D



A *gust* using a “major” character is also referred to as mixolydian because of the flatted seventh degree. It is characterised by the alternation between the flatted and natural seventh degree, as well as between the natural and raised fourth degree.

“major” on F



Sometimes several modes are combined within phrases. Each *gust* has several modal areas to which they typically “modulate”, although actual modulation in the classical sense never takes place. These modes are not strict and almost always include flexible tones, notes which are sometimes raised or lowered, depending on the contours of the melody.

How to start klezmering

As with jazz music, the key is to listen to expert musicians and try to assimilate the language slowly, but surely. Listening and imitating (by ear) master *klezmerim* such as Tarras and Brandwein is the best way to grasp the traditional and “pure” approach to Yiddish music. Listening to today’s players is not recommended at first, because these (great) players add their own voice to the traditional sounds, therefore modifying the initial folkloric idea. After studying with a klezmer connoisseur and listening to vintage recordings, one can then move on and listen to today’s klezmer stars such as David Krakauer (ex-Klezomatics, Klezmer Madness), Ilene Stahl (Conservatory Klezmer Band-Boston), Kurt Byorling (Chicago), Joel Rubin (Brave Old World), Andy Statman, and others. Some traditional klezmer artists describe Giora Feidman’s performing style overly ornamented or “popular”, but I just can’t help regarding him as a most expressive and soulful klezmer-as a result, I listen to him regularly.

Forget Classical!

The most important thing to do when learning klezmer is to momentarily forget what was learned during classical training, and begin experimenting with a looser embouchure, a flexible throat, and an idiomatic ornamentation style. Many musicians tend to think that they will have to learn improvisation to play klezmer, but the fact is that traditional klezmer involves *ornamentation* rather than improvisation. Florid ornamentation can be regarded as a kind of improvisation, but what matters most in klezmer is to maintain a stable rhythm and keep the melody clear. After all, this is dance music and what dancers need most is a tune and a beat!

Let the dance begin

Accompanimental rhythms in klezmer are used according to each dance. Traditional Jewish dance is beautiful, noble and expressive in character. It focuses on community (circle dances in a group), rather than one-on-one, person-facing-other-person dance style. Examples of dance rhythms are:

Turkish (although the Jewish don’t seem to have developed any specific dance steps for this dance)

“Turkish” rhythmic accompaniment figure



Khosidl

Khosidl – rhythmic accompaniment

Example accompaniment figure:



Hora

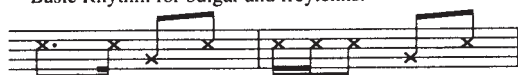
Hora accompaniment

Typical accompaniment figures:



A *doina* is a florid showcase for the clarinetist. It is a highly structured improvisation, mostly non-metric. It is a piece intended for listening rather than dancing. The soloist is accompanied by sustained or tremolo chords. The *doina* is often followed by a fast dance in duple meter, such as the *bulgar* or the *freylekhs*.

Basic Rhythm for bulgar and freylekhs:



The *bulgar* alternates “triplets” with syncopated phrases combining eighth and quarter notes. These “triplets” are neither triplets in the classical sense, nor are they two sixteenths and an eighth note, but lie somewhere between. Thus, the first two notes are somewhat faster than the third note of each grouping. When reading written triplets in modern transcriptions, I tend to play two sixteenths and an eighth instead. Other dances include the Russian *sher*, Romanian *sirba*, *Miserlou*, *Patsch Tanz* and others.

Ornamentation

Klezmer compositions usually consist of simple melodies which are ornamented. These ornaments are known as *dreydlekh*, or “turns”. It is the variety and seeming irregularity in ornamentation, phrasing and articulation that largely determines the quality of a klezmer performance. Below is a description of the most common ornaments:

Trills and mordents

These are played very rapidly and steadily. Trills often begin on the top note, especially in a descending melody, or when the same note is repeated in the melody.

Appoggiaturas

These are usually played AFTER a note and “swallowed” thereafter, being rhythmically attached to the preceding note.

Bent notes and glissandi-Clarinet soars and moans-Krekhts

Krekhtsn (“moans”) is a general term for ornaments which imitate the sound of the break in the voice, common in Eastern European synagogue chant, and hasidic and Yiddish folk song. The transition between certain intervals such as the ascending minor or major second almost always includes the addition of a minor or major third in between. This note is “swallowed”, or played as a “ghost” note.



There also can be portamentos from note to note, downward or upward glissandi during long notes, and “chirps” at the end of high notes, especially when these are repeated. Chirps are played by tightening the throat and immediately letting go entirely of the embouchure while rapidly lowering the tongue, as if saying: “eee-yakhh” or “yuck!” (I’m serious!)

Notation

There is no standard notation for klezmer music, as the melodies were handed down generations in the oral tradition. Ornamentation is usually not notated and modern transcribed clarinet parts should be read an octave higher and transposed for the Bb clarinet if needed. (Klezmer used to be played on C clarinet, although many modern players now opt for the Bb.)

As mentioned earlier, the best way to learn klezmer is by listening to vintage recordings and start learning by imitation. One must understand the modes, as well as the typical cadential patterns (i.e. how to end a typical melody), and which tones are flexible in each mode.

Since klezmer is essentially dance music, it is important not to play fast melodies too fast in order to maintain the dance’s elegance. Pieces are usually begun either on the beat or with pick-up notes, and the ensemble often plays a vamp of rhythmic figures for two or four bars before the melody begins. The typical klezmer ending is an ascending chromatic scale or glissando culminating in the descending pattern of the tonic, dominant, tonic.

Freylekhs in D-Bb Clarinet Melody

(chords in C)

Ornamented Version*:

*Ornaments by Michèle Gingras

Forming a band

Although klezmer can be played on any instrument, the most traditional choices are clarinet, violin, trumpet, saxophone, and/or voice (for the melody or top part), accordion, piano, mandolin, and/or guitar (for the harmony part, although the mandolin can also be considered a soloistic instrument), and drums and bass. Other instruments such as flute or trombone may be added. My experience is that a small ensemble tends to sound cleaner and clearer, so I usually prefer a three to five-member group. One example is: clarinet, mandolin, voice, piano and drums.

Finding printed music and recordings

The best source for Jewish music and books is Tara Publications in the U.S. Their website catalog can be found at: Jewishmusic.com. Phone (410) 654-0880, or tollfree from the U.S.: (800) TARA-400. They carry many books (complete with CDs) such as *Klezmer Plus! Folio* by Peter Sokolow with essays by Henry Sapoznik and Shulamis Dion; *The Compleat Klezmer* by Henry Sapoznik; *Mazel Tov! Music for a Jewish Wedding* by Velvel Pasternak. Other books include the Giora Feidman collection, the Kammen Dance and Concert Folio #9, *Peter Sokolow's Guide to Klezmer Arranging and Orchestration*, and others. A very fun book which comes with an

accompanying CD is: *The Jewish Play Along Vol. 1* by Velvel Pasternak. Tracks are recorded with and without the solo voice, and the band is excellent.

Other online sources are: "A bisl yidishkayt": <http://www.yiddishmusic.com/> and [Jewishsource.com: http://www.jewishsource.com/](http://www.jewishsource.com/)

Klezmer CDs are easily found in good music stores and CD websites which stock a wide variety of "world music" recordings, such as EveryCD.com, and CDnow.com

– **Michèle Gingras** is Professor of Clarinet at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Her latest klezmer CD, "Klezmer's Greatest Hits" (Mastersound 3591-Distributed by Intersound-Platinum Entertainment) can be ordered through any music store or internet CD website (see above), or by writing her directly: gingram@muohio.edu. A CD review, sound clip, and description can be found on her website: <http://miavx1.muohio.edu/~gingram/> The Cincinnati Klezmer Project site is <http://members.aol.com/klezme2/>

To hear "Klezmer's Greatest Hits" on Tara's website, visit: <http://jewishmusic.com/cgi-bin/SoftCart.exe/kzckl10d.htm?L+jmcom+dxuf2381+937439438>