The Klezmorim

"Streets of Gold"
L to R: Elmore, Raskin, Liberman, Dvorin, Gray, Wishnefsky.

When I was small, I would spend Sundays afternoons listening to klezmer — improvising Yiddish musicians. . . hearing, at the corner, a clarinetist and the sweet-and-hot fiddle, I ran to get a place as close as possible.

The music was so joyous that I deeply envied the klezmerim, getting paid for having such a good time. It also seemed magical to me (a different sense of the classical tradition) that they needed no scores. It was all in their heads, and furthermore, if they played the same tune again, the solos were different the second time. And the third. Like jazz players.

Some of the musicians were young and double as jazz players in the goyishe nights. Others, older, achieved a high status among klezmer performers, and a few told me from time to time of the roots of their profession. Klezmerim on the highways of the Middle Ages, wandering from Bohemia to Lithuania to Poland, and beyond. And 19th-century klezmerim roamed Eastern Europe. . .

By the time I was in my late teens, the klezmerim who came to our synagogue were sounding more like the lovely music of their own volition but because newfangled were now more American in their tastes. They wanted ballads and pop novelties, walts and the movies, and other "refined" airs. Once in a while, for the benefit of the old folks — who, God knows, still insisted on speaking Yiddish among themselves — the players would waltz. And then the clarinet and the fiddle and the trumpet would intertwine in dizzling spirals and feet would pound and I would close my eyes and grins at the ghosts of my clan in Minsk and Pinsk.

For years now, I had thought the klezmerim to be nearly extinct. Oh, some old players might still be born into the same dwindling Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods, but surely they are the last of their line. Quite surprisingly, however, in a new album — The Klezmerim/East Side Wedding — the high-spirited quickeners of my youth have returned. And they are young! Five players — who appear to be in their 20s and 30s — have taken up and Merrily revivified this heritage. Hard dues and proud roots, romance and even a little ecstasy. They’re all in the music of these klezmerim of the New World who somehow found a passage back to the Old. Nat Hentoff reviewing the first Klezmerim LP "East Side Wedding" (Arhoolie 3006) in The Nation.

DI ZILBERNE KHASENE (The Silver Wedding)

From the wine-cellars of Bucharest, the alleyways of Constantinoine, wandering musicians blended nineteenth-century Western harmonies and choral modes into Eastern modes to create klezmer music. This soulful, defant Old World jazz came over on the boat with refugees from European oppression and was heard often in the streets of America — streets which, for many, were paved not with gold but with broken backs.

Our arrangement of this wedding freylekh (merry dance) is based on three different recordings made in the 1910s by klezmer bands.

PAPIROSN (Cigarettes)

This song was popularized by “Der Poyres” (The Clown), Herman Yablokoff, whose lyrics told the tale of an orphaned cigarette peddler freezing on a street corner. “Papirosn” long ago entered the folk tradition. Several of us know various versions. Our instrumental arrangement reflects this diversity. We begin with an improvised doina or lament in Russian-Yiddish style. Then we strike up a hell with renditions of a version originally done by the great clarinettist Dave Tarras with Abe Suster’s Orchestra.

The stringed instrument heard prominently here is a tsalimbal built by Jozsef V. Schunda of Budapest. Its 35 courses (strings) strike with a pair of small hand-held wooden hammers with cotton-wrapped tips. When the tsalimbal was enlarged and refined from Hungary to Russia to a central Europe, its distinctive sound soon became an integral feature of urban Hungarian, Slovak, Rumanian, Gypsy, and klezmer ensembles.

BEDEBIK UN FREYLEKH

As a traditional wedding the scribe or bandleader would frequently shout, “Lebedik! Freylekh!” to urge the musicians on to excesses of speed and virtuosity. This is one of our favorite klezmer tunes, and if you don’t dance to it, you’ll never find out why.

FREYLEKHS FUN L.A. (Merry Tune From L.A.)

The band learned this nineteen-century klezmer tune from David Gray, who learned it from his father Max Benes, who learned it from his neighbor Israel Rakretz, a mandolin-playing retired farmer born in Russia and now living in Los Angeles.

Cover: L to R: Elmore, Wishnefsky, Dvorin, Liberman, Gray.

BAYM REBSN SUDE (At the Rebbe’s Meal)

This courting dance is found in our repertoire, and we play it as it might have been played by a street band in the days of the Czar. As in the old days, the clarinetist improvises an introduction based on the liturgical modes and on military fanfares, and the other players join in as soon as they recognize the theme. The folk drum heard here is a baraban made by hand out of wood, rope, calfskin, and goatskin.

AF SHABES IN VILNA (On the Sabbath in Vilna)

This raucous march from an old disc by Abe Schwartz’s Orchestra has little to do with the Lithuania town of Vilna, and even less to do with the Sabbath.

DI ZILBERNE KHASENE (The Silver Wedding)

SONYA / ANUSHEK (At the Rebbe’s Meal)

FIREN DI MEKHUTONIM AHEYM (Leading the In-Laws Home)

LEBEDIK UN FREYLEKH (Lively and Merry)

BESSARABYANKE (Girl From Bessarabia)

TAXIM (Improvisation)

AF SHABES IN VILNA (On the Sabbath in Vilna)

SONYA / ANUSHEK

TAXIM (Improvisation)

DI ZILBERNE KHASENE (The Silver Wedding)

SONYA / ANUSHEK

BESSARABYANKE (Girl From Bessarabia)

TAXIM (Improvisation)

THE KLEZMORIM:

Lev Liberman: alto sax & flute

David Julian Gray: Boehm Bb & Albert Eb clarinets, mandolin & alto sax

Rick Elmore: bass trombone, tuba, bass drum & cymbals

Brian Wishnefsky: trumpet

Miriam Dvorin: violin & vocal

John Raskin: percussion

David Skuse: violin

Lev Hanson: accordion

Brotman: tsalimbal, peckhorn, & string bass

Produced by The Klezmerim and Chris Strachwitz

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