

Klezmer Music

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Music has long held a special place in Jewish communities, and despite strict historical limitations set by Jewish religious authorities, it is vital to many Jewish communities. Klezmer music is a musical style that has evolved over hundreds of years and encompasses a wide range of styles. Klezmer music exists in various forms in both the New World and the Old World, originating from a conglomeration of styles performed by Ashkenazic Jews in central and eastern Europe, where it served as music fit for weddings and other festive functions. In the Old World, Klezmer music can trace its origins primarily to Germany, Poland, Russia, Hungary, Turkey, and Romania, and was influenced by Christian and secular music, melding together to form a unique style. Once it arrived in the New World in the early 1900s, Klezmer music changed distinctly and adopted elements of American big-band music and Jazz. Overall, Klezmer music is a catch-all phrase for a wide variety of music with a rich history rooted in Ashkenazi Jewish culture.

Klezmer music has a long history that is traced back to the Middle Ages. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., Jewish religious authorities of the Middle Ages set strict limitations on the performance of instrumental music, with it generally being outright banned as the Rabbis believed that the Jewish people should be in mourning until the Second Temple was rebuilt.¹ There was an exception to this rule, though: weddings. Rabbis permitted Jewish musicians to perform instrumental music at weddings, preserving traditional Jewish folk melodies.² As time went on, instrumental music became extremely important to the culture of the Jewish quarters of European Cities in the late Middle Ages, where Jewish musicians played in the streets and for both Jewish and Christian audiences.³ Throughout the Renaissance and beyond, Jewish folk and instrumental dance music developed across Europe, both secular and

¹ Yale Strom, *The Book of Klezmer* (Chicago: A Capella Books, 2002), 3-7.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*

nonsecular.⁴ The Klezmerim, Jewish Musicians, faced various restrictions and challenges but developed a unique music style from traditional Jewish folk music melded with different local styles.⁵

Old World European Klezmer music is rare, and there are few surviving examples of historical Klezmer music prior to the World Wars. The lack of surviving examples of manuscripts and sheet music is attributed to the musical illiteracy of the European Klezmerim, meaning they did not read or write in western notation.⁶ Rather, Klezmerim learned through oral tradition, playing melodies and tunes by ear. During World War II, Nazi Germany murdered a majority of Europe's Klezmerim during the Holocaust, leading to the destruction of a vast majority of traditional Klezmer music from Europe.⁷ The majority of surviving examples of traditional Klezmer music come primarily from Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Lithuania; examples of their musical traditions were preserved in collections of sheet music by a Soviet ethnomusicologist prior to WWII.⁸ Instrumentation for European Klezmerim included primarily the violin and, but also the clarinet, string bass, tsimbl, and hakhbreydl.⁹ These remaining examples of traditional Klezmer music form the basis for what is understood to be European Klezmer music.

The violin and Chazan, a vocalist, were the two most important elements of traditional Klezmer music. The Chazan utilized a wide variety of ornamental and vocal techniques that made Klezmer music sound especially distinct.¹⁰ Krecht is an ornamental technique that imitates crying, moaning, and laughing, based on ancient chants sung in the Synagogue; this gives the

⁴ Strom, *Book of Klezmer*, 8.

⁵ Mark Slobin, "Klezmer Music: An American Ethnic Genre," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984): 34.

⁶ Alan Jacobs, "Klezmer - Music with a Jewish Soul," *Jewish Affairs* 64, no. 1 (2009): 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁹ *Ibid.*; Slobin, "American Ethnic," 39.

¹⁰ Jacobs, "Jewish Soul," 48.

music a distinctly Jewish sound.¹¹ Knyetshn sounds similar to a kretch, but it is swallowed, cutting the sound short while still punctuating the music with an element of lament. Tshoks are bent notes, where a pitch is bent for a short period of time before returning to the original pitch or a new pitch.¹² Flageoettes are harmonies played by the violin to accompany the vocalist, but they are not complex harmonies.¹³ Klezmer music has a distinct melodic sound created by the unique modes and scales used to construct the melody; these practices originated from Ashkenazi synagogues.¹⁴ These musical elements, many of which originate from the Middle East, along with chromaticism and scales derived from Ashkenazi synagogue cantillation, give Klezmer music the distinctly “Jewish” sound it is famous for.¹⁵

American Klezmer music is distinct from European Klezmer music, adopting elements of American big-band and Jazz music. European Jewish populations began mass immigration to the United States of America starting in the late nineteenth century, which continued through the 1920s; these immigrants brought Klezmer music with them to their new homes.¹⁶ In America, the violin fell to the wayside as the primary instrument and symbol of Klezmer music, along with other elements of European instrumentation. The clarinet replaced the violin as the lead of the band, the tuba replaced the string bass, and the accordion replaced the tsimbl.¹⁷ While this did change the makeup of Klezmer bands, it did not change the most important element: Klezmer music is lively music fit for celebrations. Klezmer music thrived in America throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but traditional Klezmer music fell out of popularity until its return in the

¹¹ Jacobs, “Jewish Soul,” 48.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Alex Lubet, “Maxwell Street Wedding - The Maxwell Street Klezmer Band,” *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 1 (1995): 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Slobin, “American Ethnic,” 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

1980s. In America, as in Europe, Klezmer musicians adopted elements of local music and changed to fit the needs of their communities, leading to more unique music being created.¹⁸

In America, various prolific clarinetists Klezmerim rose to prominence. Jewish immigrants to America discarded the violin in favor of the clarinet, and a good clarinetist became crucial to American Klezmer ensembles. David Tarras (1897-1989) was a Ukrainian Klezmerim who immigrated to the United States in 1921 following the Russian Revolution in 1917.¹⁹ In Ukraine, Tarras was exposed to Klezmer music from childhood, and upon his immigration to New York, rose to prominence as a Klezmer clarinetist.²⁰ Tarras worked for a wide range of Klezmer ensembles and orchestras and was the most popular Klezmer clarinetist from the 1930s to the 1950s.²¹ His style was characterized by a “smoother, more dignified [playing], with a slow vibrato”.²² This style of playing was less soloistic and less traditional, with Naftuli Brandwein (1889-1963), a clarinetist and a predecessor to Tarras, playing more soloistically and traditionally.²³ Klezmer music in America adopted elements of American popular music as well, specifically jazz and big-band music. Sammy Muziker (1916-1964) was a jazz musician and Klezmerim who was famous for being able to switch between the two styles and also blending them.²⁴

Following World War II and the murder of millions of European Jews, Klezmer music took on a new role in Jewish society. The war devastated Jewish populations, but the founding of the State of Israel served as a beacon of hope for many Jews across the world. Following the war, Zionism, which is a movement that advocated for the founding of a Jewish state, flourished

¹⁸ Slobin, “American Ethnic,” 40.

¹⁹ Lubet, “Maxwell Street Wedding,” 160.

²⁰ Strom, *Book of Klezmer*, 159.

²¹ Lubet, “Maxwell Street Wedding,” 160.

²² Strom, *Book of Klezmer*, 160.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

across Europe and America in many Jewish communities. Klezmer music reflected this sentiment.²⁵ While the European Klezmerim was largely destroyed, the American Klezmerim began writing music that reflected the idea of “triumphant Zionism”.²⁶ At the same time, in Europe, Eastern European traditional instrumental Klezmer music experienced a fierce decline in popularity, with old folk tunes often falling to the wayside.²⁷ The constant change of evolution of Klezmer music also meant that in order to succeed on a professional level, one had to be flexible and adaptable to the ever-changing musical scene.²⁸

Klezmer music continued to change throughout the mid-twentieth century and traditional melodies experienced a decline in popularity, but a revival occurred by the 1970s and 1980s. While Klezmer music did return to a higher level of popularity during this period, Klezmer music never went away; it just changed. This was a revival of the old ways of the bygone Old World Klezmerim.²⁹ The revival of Klezmer music was not just found in America but in Europe as well. In the late 1980s, Western Europe became more open to Jewish culture, and various Klezmer groups from America went on tour across Europe.³⁰ These musicians received a warm response from European audiences, and many groups even relocated to Europe.³¹ Klezmer music continued to develop throughout the 1980s and 1990s and is still being performed throughout the world in the twenty-first century.³²

Due to the eclectic nature of Klezmer music, the instrumentation of a Klezmer group is not clearly defined at any point throughout history. However, there are instruments that are

²⁵ Mark Slobin, “The Neo-Klezmer Movement and Euro-American Musical Revivalism,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 383 (1984): 99.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁰ Strom, *Book of Klezmer*, 192-193.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 241-242.

common to Klezmer music. The violin is the most iconic symbol and instrument historically used in Klezmer ensembles, as mentioned above. Other instruments that are extremely common in Klezmer groups are the clarinet, accordion, and trap set; the clarinet was most prominent in the United States.³³ As Klezmer music evolved over the course of the twentieth century, more instruments were introduced to fit the needs of a specific artist. Bassoons and Saxophones were common in more jazz-oriented groups, while the electric bass and guitar became common in others.³⁴ The instrumentation of a Klezmer group can change according to one's need as long as the musical qualities common to Klezmer music are preserved.

“Chusen Kala Mazel Tov ” is an instrumental Klezmer song performed by Tarras.³⁵ The song’s title translates to “Congratulations Bride and Groom,” meaning that this is a wedding song, characteristic of Klezmer music. This song features Tarras on a clarinet accompanied by an accordion. The song opens with just the accordion, quickly followed by Tarras on the clarinet. The tempo of this song is quick and upbeat, with the Klezmerim playing on the front side of the beat, propelling the song forwards. The clarinet takes the place of the traditional violin in the song as this is of American origin. Tarras’s playing imitates that of a violin, such as when he slides between notes, his quick ornaments, and trills, all seemingly replicating what was once sung or played. These harken back to the aforementioned ornaments used by the Chazan in Europe. The ornamentation played on the clarinet, along with the distinct harmonic motion provided by the accordion, gives this piece the characteristic “Jewish” sound one listens for in Klezmer music. While this song treats the clarinet as the featured instrument, Klezmer songs also often include vocals.

³³ Christina Baad, “Jewzak and Heavy Shtetl: Constructing Ethnic Identity and Asserting Authenticity in the New-Klezmer Movement,” *Monatshefte* 90, no. 2 (1998): 212.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Lindyhopper, “CHUSEN KALA MAZEL TOV - Dave Tarras,” 2009, YouTube video, 2:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrFVVUM4cPA>.

“Goodbye Odessa” is an example of a Klezmer song with vocals.³⁶ This song opens with an accordion and violin duetting, with the accordion providing harmonies and the violin playing a melodic line. The violin then gives away to a clarinet which takes on the melodic line. This demonstrates a blend of both new and old Klezmer music as both the violin, which was later replaced by the clarinet in America, is present alongside the clarinet. After the clarinet takes the melody, a female vocalist takes over, singing in Yiddish. While fast and upbeat, there is a feeling of lament and sadness that permeates the song. This is reflected in the lyrics of the song, which, when translated, means, “Oh Odessa, goodbye Odessa, I will miss you so much, I will never forget you, Farewell my friends, Let's shout together: Odessa Mama, I love you so much.” This lament is a common theme in Jewish music, reflecting the harsh history of the Jewish People throughout history.

Klezmer music is an eclectic genre of Jewish wedding and festival music that developed from the Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe; Klezmer music has survived throughout the ages and is still performed in the twenty-first century in both secular and non-secular settings. Beginning in the middle ages, Klezmer music was played in the Jewish quarters of Central and Eastern European cities in the Middle Ages by Ashkenazi Jew as wedding music. This upbeat and happy music became popular among Jewish populations, and Klezmerim began playing in the streets and for events both Jewish and non-Jewish. As the Klezmerim played for such a wide range of events, they were very adaptable musicians, learning by ear and picking up local customs along the way. There are very few surviving examples of old Klezmer music from Europe, as a vast majority of the Old World Klezmerim were murdered in the Holocaust. In the late 1800s, thousands of Jews moved from Europe to America, and Klezmer music took on a

³⁶ Olga Mielezczuk, “Goodbye Odessa - Yiddish song,” 2020, YouTube video, 3:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2TQ2ehSsKs>.

new life, distinct from its European counterpart. Klezmer music took on its own life in America, featuring different instrumentation and stylistic changes.

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