

Welcome To Klezmer

Klezmer is the traditional folk music of the Ashkenazi Jews. The origin of Klezmer music lies with late 19th century Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. In the mid-nineteenth century, pogroms began that would eventually culminate in the Holocaust. Large numbers of Yiddish speaking Jews emigrated to Canada, the United States, Australia and other more hospitable locations. (There is a well-documented 80-year tradition of performance of this music in Canada.) The Holocaust had a devastating effect on the ongoing development of Yiddish culture. Jews everywhere responded by becoming more assimilationist or more insular, in an attempt to survive the horrific events surrounding them. In Israel, Yiddish and Yiddish culture became reviled, identified as the language of meek victims who passively accepted their fate in the gas chambers with prayers on their lips.

As Jews began to come to grips with this century's history, a renewed interest in Yiddish culture emerged. One of the significant manifestations of this renewed interest was the revival of Klezmer music. In the 1960's young Jewish musicians (importantly, Michael Alpert, Alan Bern and Henry Sapoznik) began collecting and studying 78RPM recordings; they sought out master Klezmer musicians from the early 20th century such as Dave Tarras, Sid Beckerman and the Epstein brothers, studied with them and encouraged them to perform again.

Today Klezmer music is no longer the domain of Jewish musicians or played at Jewish functions only; it's exponents and their audience reflect an ever-widening public. A body of music that has been played primarily at social functions has now found its way to the concert stage, folk / jazz festivals and clubs. In the 1990's particularly, this evolution resulted in some Klezmer musicians extending the tradition by drawing on an ever-increasing variety of musics. This paved the way for Klezmer music to become a vibrant cultural force again.

The challenge for those 1990's Klezmer musicians was to find appropriate musical languages that honour what had been the centre of the tradition while organically creating something new. As all true oral traditions do, Yiddish culture has transformed itself from generation to generation.

Our Approach

To extend the Klezmer tradition in new and innovative ways is one of our primary objectives.

We move from the Klezmer music tradition, speaking to the present day by transforming into something new and different those things that we know, we feel, in our bones.

How we "hear" a particular piece includes discussion of historical context, musical style, tempo, timbre and harmony. We like to first play the piece as is, or perhaps more accurately as was at a certain point in history. Of utmost importance to us is that arrangement ideas are not explored just for their interesting effect. The ideas must give to the piece and to the tradition something special and new. The concept must fit in every way.

Rather than grafting on other styles we are familiar with we allow the arrangement to evolve by planning, work-shopping, rehearsal, extensive experimentation and performance. We are both composers as well as improvisers and have developed a highly dynamic way of playing together that allows lots of room for spontaneous changes in the plans.

The current “world beat” phenomenon, the growing appreciation by audiences worldwide for diverse cultural expression, and the political and social implications such appreciation of diversity carries, places our work in a global context. Like many artists around the world, we too are working to keep alive the flame of a culture that has been severely damaged by racism and monolithic political ideologies. With our work we hope to encourage greater harmony, understanding and tolerance than has always been the case in the past.