



Building Interdisciplinary Bridges Across Cultures

Richard Fay, Ros Hawley & Elinor Sherwood

Abstract

In this paper, having introduced the music-culture known as klezmer (a word combining the Hebrew words klei and zemer and translatable as 'vessel of sound'), we outline our approach to teaching it in recent years in a UK conservatory-type context in which Western Classical music is prioritised, and then reflect on the broadening of our students' musical, cultural, and contextual horizons through engagement with, and performance of, klezmer. The genre of music now known as 'Klezmer' has roots dating back to the Middle Ages and was originally an integral part of the wedding (and other) celebrations of the often Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jewish communities in central and eastern European. Those communities experienced great oppression throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and were very largely destroyed during the Holocaust. However, this music-culture survived as a result of emigration and the resulting establishment of diaspora communities especially in the USA. Recordings made in the early part of the 20th century in this New World context (and, as recently discovered in the EMI archives, also in Europe) captured some of the Old World sound and provide invaluable access to an otherwise lost sonic and cultural world. As the century progressed, these recordings also evidenced the desire, to quote a local radio jingle of the time, for 'Jewish melodies in swing', i.e. for a mixing of Old and New World musical sensibilities. Then, as the emigrants settled, and their children and grandchildren became a part of the American melting pot, klezmer almost disappeared completely. It seemed that this shtetl-music had limited relevance and resonance in the new cultural setting where few wanted to remember the Old World experience of being Jewish. However, for the revivalists of the 1970s and 1980s, sufficient recordings had been archived and enough older klezmerim (i.e. klezmer musicians) remained to ensure that American klezmer could be rekindled and reframed as part of the contemporary music-landscape. Since then, and not without controversy, klezmer has mushroomed into a transglobal world music genre with a widely distributed pool of players and aficionados.

But what this might mean varies from context to context. Given that the available klezmer pedagogy relates to an earlier era and to a particular musical, cultural, and educational context, we needed to develop an approach, shaped by the pioneering work of others, but nonetheless reframed to be appropriate for our time and context. In the presentation, we outline the main characteristics of the approach we have developed as shaped by these diverse possibilities.

Bio

Richard Fay - a Lecturer in Education (intercultural communication & TESOL) at the University of Manchester - and Ros Hawley - a freelance klezmer musician and music for health practitioner (the focus of her current doctoral studies) - are the founding

Co-Directors of The University of Manchester's klezmer ensemble, the Michael Kahan Kapelye (the only assessed klezmer ensemble in the UK Higher Education context). Elinor "Ellie" Sherwood - currently studying for a Masters in Ethnomusicology - is a product of that ensemble, now performing with the L'chaim Kapelye. Together, employing an interculturality-framed appropriate methodology approach, they are currently researching the teaching and learning of klezmer within a conservatoire context in the UK, and the performance of klezmer for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences in the city and beyond.