



## JEWISH AND KLEZMER VIOLIN STYLE by Cookie Segelstein

*This is the first in a series of articles in which Cookie Segelstein will explore some of the details of playing klezmer music on violin.*

*As an introduction, this piece faces a question that reverberates through the world of fiddlers not brought up “in the tradition” in any style. What do you think?  
- Stacy Phillips*

When I was in graduate school studying viola in the 80’s, a Japanese violin student asked me, “Cookie, how do you make a JEWISH sound?” I looked him in the eye, closed my fingers into a fist, and slowly pounded my chest, a gesture that is done by Jews on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement) to apologize to God for all of the transgressions we have committed throughout the year. We both laughed and continued on to our classes.

To my mind, such a huge question could not be answered in words. At least not in the few minutes we both had between our theory class and music history. To really be clear about what makes a “Jewish” sound on the violin, I would have to educate my friend about so many elements of the culture; the humor, the physical gestures associated with Jewish expression, the sing-song sighing sound of familiar Yiddish. Or would I? Is it possible to explain this familiar but unexplainable sound through purely musical terms?

Must you be Jewish to effectively play the instrumental music of Ashkenazic East European Jews, otherwise known as *klezmer*? Can Gentiles, even Germans, become great klezmer musicians? What about Jews raised in totally assimilated homes with no remnants of east European Jewish traditions? This is a question that has often been fodder for verbal and almost literal fistfights in the Jewish music scene.

This music of this culture that has called so many places home but had no homeland until 1948, is a confusing one to teach in the same way that one can teach music for example the music of Ireland or even the Appalachian Mountains. Jewish instrumental music has begged, borrowed and replaced ornaments and styles of all of the places Jews have lived. And the even more complicated fact is that many of these “Jewish” sounding musicians were in fact Gypsies. As a matter of fact, it was not uncommon for the klezmer bands to be made up of as many non-Jewish as Jewish musicians. But those musicians who played for and with Jews, had to learn to sound native to the culture. They also had to learn the customs associated with the music.

Since most of this music was played at weddings and celebrations, the *klezmerim* (the Yiddish word for “musicians”) had to also be versed in the religious customs of the Jews

they played for. And since the customs varied so much by towns, each community had their favorite klezmerim, those that fit in well with the celebrations that were so important to community life. So of course, Jewish musicians in Moldova sound(ed) much different than those playing the same melody in Budapest, or Kiev, or Warsaw. This was not music that was played for its own merit, but to serve a function in the life of the community. It was played for the dancing that was required by custom for weddings and other celebrations. It was also played to conjure prescribed emotional states for these functions; e.g. improvisations to “make the bride cry” or haunting melodies to invite the spirits of dead parents to the wedding of an orphan.

Music of a culture can be thought of in a similar way to an accent, or even a dialect. Can a foreigner learn to speak like a native? If that foreigner can learn all of the gestures and hidden meanings, slang, and speaking style of the culture, than they can be accepted as a native, a *landsman* (Yiddish for “fellow countryman”).

So the big question again, do you have to be Jewish to play Jewish music? My feeling is no, you don’t have to be Jewish. But just in the same way a native speaker can almost always hear even the slightest accent of even an assimilated foreigner, anyone playing the music of a culture from which they did not spring must do the homework to try to speak that musical language without an accent.

And in fact, even Jews have such individual experiences of the culture, some are completely disconnected to their European pasts and many have no interest in it. So clearly, a Jew who has been raised in a very assimilated household with no traditions of Europe will have little context to the music of their own history. But then, even if a Jewish musician plays only classical music, or American folk music, or even the music of another culture, does their “Jewishness” come through? Even in a household where no music of the “old country” was ever heard, it’s possible and even likely that gestures of language and expression are passed down. So suffice it to say that each person’s way of expression, be it with music, art, cooking, storytelling or even in argument, is most likely influenced by all those that came before in the lineage of family experience.

Since there are very few pre-Holocaust *klezmerim* left, and the culture that employed these musicians was almost destroyed, it is very difficult to find sources for the traditional way to play Jewish instrumental music. In the klezmer workshops that flourish around the world, people teaching this style have at best pieced together knowledge from old recordings (the earliest barely 100 years old), and music of surrounding cultures to come up with a restructured old style. But to some survivors of pre-World War Two East Europe, this style, almost revived from the ashes is not even recognizable. I remember when I played one of the many Jewish melodies that my parents taught me as a little girl with some of the newly learned ornaments (from a fiddler that is very respected in the klezmer revival), my father, a Holocaust survivor from a musically rich area in the Carpathian mountains put his hands up to his ears and said, “What’s all that noise?!” He proceeded to tell me how I took out the “Jewish” in that melody and turned it into “something that sounds Greek.”

This leads to the idea that the “authenticity” of ethnic music is really measured in the response of the audience. To some audience members in a concert, a certain phrase played by the musicians on stage will strike an intense emotional response of reminiscence, and to others, it will be unfamiliar. Of course, the ability to put the “Jewish” in Jewish music really depends on the musical skill of the player. A violinist who can speak fluent Yiddish and who was raised with many of the traditions of East European Jews but can’t play those nuances into the strings will not play in a recognizably Jewish way.

So is this music in the ear of the beholder or in the hands of the musician? Not looking for the afore mentioned fistfight, I leave the question unanswered. But when I play or hear something that reminds me of the songs and melodies I learned from my folks, I almost smell the paprika, onions and butter in my mother’s kitchen. And that’s Jewish to me.

**BIO:**

Cookie Segelstein, received her Masters degree in Viola from The Yale School of Music. She has taught klezmer fiddling at KlezKamp and The Festival of American Fiddle Tunes. Her band, Veretski Pass, has two CD’s on Golden Horn, the newest titled *Trafik* ([www.goldenhorn.com](http://www.goldenhorn.com))

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