



# FIDDLER'S FORUM

## Klezmer Fidl

by Judith Eisner

In Yiddish the violin is called a “fidl” — no pejorative connotations. Recently when Itzak Perlman explored his Jewish roots, he turned to klezmer fiddling and called his beautiful and popular CD *In the Fiddler's House*. Like Perlman, many classically trained violinists, as well as folk musicians from many styles, are attracted to klezmer music for its interesting modes, emotional depth, technical challenges, and ever widening audience appeal. So what exactly do we mean by “klezmer” music, where does the style come from, and how can one get involved with it? I will try to answer these questions without being a proselytizer for this music, which has been a passion of my life for the past 9 years or so.

First of all, let me be very clear that you don't have to be Jewish to love or play klezmer music. Witness the enormous revival of the genre in Germany today where very few of the players or listeners are Jewish. The term “klezmer” is actually two Hebrew words put together — “kley” and “zemer”, which means musical instruments, or the people who play them (plural “klezmerim”). The heart and soul of the genre comes from the Ashkenazic communities of exiled Jews who lived in Eastern Europe before their culture was destroyed during the Second World War. In those countries — mostly Rumania, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Bessarabia, and Hungary — music was played for celebrations, particularly weddings, by roving bands of klezmerim. The fidl was the instrument of choice (there were usually up to 4 in a typical band, playing different parts) because it is easily portable, able to sing, wail, cry, and laugh — in short to express all the emotions of the human voice. It was said that a really fine fidl player could make the fidl speak. An old Yiddish riddle asks, “what grows in the woods, hangs in the shop, touch it and it speaks?” It wasn't until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that clarinets and other loud wind instruments began taking the place of fiddles. The reason for this change was that violins didn't record as well as the winds on the

early phonographs. However today's revival of period instrument performance practices has brought the fidl back into prominence.

Once you've heard klezmer folk music you'll know that it's not the Broadway score to *Fiddler On The Roof*, but a very rich instrumental tradition dating back centuries. But what makes it distinctive from, say Cajun, Irish, or Swedish fiddling styles? In one word I would say — the modes. Modes in folk music, like scales in classical music, make each style unique. When many people first hear klezmer music they think it sounds plaintive or sad, but once they become more familiar with it, they hear the bittersweet, joyous and exuberant feelings it evokes. The most common mode in klezmer music is the one known as “freygish”. If you play your open D string and then go up to E $\flat$ , F $\sharp$ , G, A, B $\flat$ , and C you'll get a fairly good idea of this mode. Watch for the minor second between the first and second notes (borrowed from the Phrygian church mode) and the augmented second interval between the second and third notes. These same patterns could also be played starting on G, A, or C. But the bulk of klezmer music is played in D. In fact so much klezmer music is played in the key of D freygish that one player said, “For you it's a mode, for me it's a way of life!” Centering on open strings for much of its harmony, it's the perfect key for fidl. Of course there are other modes, including the familiar major and minor keys we all know, but I've never played a klezmer piece in A $\flat$  minor! (And I never hope to.)

Once a fiddler has a good grasp of some tunes — mainly dance tunes like the freylekhs, bulgar, hora, sher, or terkisher — it's time to look at the ornaments that make it so heart wrenching. There are really only two basic ornaments one has to master — the trill, and the “krechz.” Klezmer trills are different than their classical counterparts. They're usually combined with a wide vibrato-like movement and either done with one finger, or as a half step (no matter what key you're in). But the ornament that makes the

fidl cry, wail and moan is the “krechz.” I can only describe it as a small harmonic-like sound played at the end of a note with the pinky. It sounds like one is choking off the sound or swallowing it up in the back of the throat — hard to describe but unmistakable and haunting when heard.

Klezmer music, like any other folk tradition, is best learned by ear. Even if a piece is learned by notation, it is vital to play it by heart in order to truly feel the emotional intensity. There are so many excellent CDs out there: bands of all styles and instrumentation. My personal favorites are bands that stick to mostly traditional style and of course (no bias here) use fiddles as the primary instruments. My four top picks are Alicia Svigals, *Fidl*; Steven Greenman, *Khevrisa*; and Budowitz, *Wedding Without a Bride* and *Mother Tongue*. Get these CDs or your own favorites and play along with the big shots. If you can't keep up, no problem; use the Amazing Slowdowner on your computer like I did and you'll soon become a klezmer wannabe.

Here are some useful books to get you started too: *The Compleat Klezmer* by Henry Sapoznik and Pete Sokolow, *The Ultimate Klezmer* by Joshua Horowitz, and *The Klezmer Collection* by Stacy Phillips. These people did fine transcriptions of the most popular old chestnuts and many transcriptions from old 78's.

A wonderful summer workshop is outside of Montreal, Canada, every year in late August for a week — KlezKanada. There you can explore any aspect of klezmer music from its history, dance, and cultural roots to learning the basics of Yiddish, in a very informal and fun atmosphere. Check out their website or contact me, since I've been attending for the past 4 years and just loved it. There are so many more klezmer workshops here in the states and abroad I couldn't possibly mention them all. After all, the realm of klezmer music is so wide, so fascinating and rich that I invite you to explore it at any level and in any capacity. Mazel tov! I hope reading this has piqued

your curiosity enough to try playing some klezmer fiddl.

*Judith Eisner has been teaching for 18 years at the MacPhail Center for Music, offering individual and group instruction, classes,*

*and workshops in classical violin, Baroque violin, traditional Irish fiddling, and Klezmer fiddl. She plays in two local klezmer bands: Tsatskelehs and Gasn Nign, as well as in the storytelling duo Tsimmes. In order to avoid taking herself too seriously, Judith*

*has recently taken up playing the accordion. She would love to hear from you about your experience and thoughts on playing klezmer music. Contact her by e-mail at [maven@icq.net](mailto:maven@icq.net) or by phone at 612-321-0100 x443. ♪*