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VIDEO: How Veretski Pass reloaded the klezmer canon

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Whenever the klezmer trio Veretski Pass accompanies Jewish dancing, the Berkeley-based musicians hear the same question from dance leaders: Why don't we dance the obereks and mazurkas — the Polish folk dances — like we do the horas and the shers from Russia, Ukraine and Romania?

And trio member Joshua Horowitz replies: "Nobody has the music for it, that's why."

Until now. With its fourth CD, "Polyn: A Gilgul," Veretski Pass has teamed with clarinetist Joel Rubin to reload the klezmer canon with the long-forgotten celebratory music of the

3 million Jews of pre-World War II Poland. The musicians call it "reimagined, recomposed and rearranged old urban and rural music."

Horowitz and bandmates Cookie Segelstein and Stu Brotman will explain how they and Rubin transformed the long-neglected music into 33 new klezmer, or klezmer-ish, songs at a Thursday, June 16, demonstration lecture at the Jewish Community Library in San Francisco.

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Veretski Pass is turning its attention to Polish klezmer music.

"In the klezmer scene, two things have been missing, really," explained Horowitz, who plays button accordion and cimbalom, a stringed instrument struck with mallets. "It's klezmer rural music, but we just don't know what that is, because it wasn't written down. Then, also, music of the regions of Poland."

Polish klezmer tunes were included "in the 1916 fake book used by klezmer musicians in America — Wolff Kostakowsky's 'International Hebrew Wedding Music' — but they just did not make their way into the (1970s) klezmer revival," Horowitz said.

Revival bands, including Berkeley's The Klezmerim, were inspired by "recordings that were done in the 1920s, '30s and '40s of music that was originally from Ukraine and Romania.

Polish Jewish music during that time wasn't really that popular," Horowitz added.

"The Romanian fad that had started in the late 19th century, exemplified by songs like 'Romania, Romania' — wine, women and song — remained as the standard even in the klezmer revival," he said.

Polish klezmer differs from the more familiar music from Russia, Romania and Ukraine.

"Most of the genres of Polish dance are in 3/4 meter — the obereks, the mazurkas, the kujawiaks, all those things — and most of the genres of Jewish dance are not," Horowitz explained. "Then also sometimes the modes are different. The Polish ones use more major than minor" making them more cheerful sounding than melancholy.

Many of the songs featured on "Polyn: A Gilgul" were new even to bassist Brotman, who has been performing and researching klezmer for five decades. "The stuff that was closest to Polish dance tunes was familiar, but only from listening to it as Polish dance music" rather than in a klezmer style, he said. "There was a lot of material that did come from Hassidic and related sources that was more familiar."

Fiddler Segelstein was the driving force behind the trio's Polish push, inspired by hearing Polish music associated with Jews, courtesy of musician friend Stefan Puchalski, a violinist and tuba player whose focus is folk music. Horowitz and Segelstein, who are married, then turned to their own archive of Polish Jewish music.

"We have a lot of recordings and written materials," Horowitz said. "I had made some expeditions to Poland back in the late 1980s or early '90s and gathered stuff from archives then that I never used.

"And then Stefan provided us with a lot of stuff. Then there are Polish radio recordings that we have. We went through hundreds of things before we chose what we did."

All of the Veretski Pass members previously played with Rubin, an ethnomusicologist based at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville also considered a klezmer master.

The four musicians practiced together briefly and recorded the music in a free-flowing style. Brotman said they "played the tunes the way we understood they likely would have been played in the old days." Some of that was conjectural, he conceded, but the approach was buttressed by recollections of elderly musicians and a Sholem Aleichem Yiddish story about an unrestrained bass player.

"Polyn: A Gilgul" is named for an I.L. Peretz Yiddish story about a melody that undergoes a gilgul, or metamorphosis. The CD recently received a five-star "Top of the World" review in the world music magazine "Songlines."

Veretski Pass, 7 p.m. Thursday, June 16, at Jewish Community Library, 1835 Ellis St., S.F. Free. <http://www.jewishcommunitylibrary.org>; 7:30 p.m. June 18, at Fifth Street Farms, 1517 Fifth St., Berkeley. Tickets \$20. <http://www.fifthstfarms.com/concerts>.

