

Interview with Veretski Pass and Joel Rubin

Q: Okay, I want to jump right in with a general question: what made you all want to do this project?

A: Well, as you may have noticed, klezmer music has come to mean many things, but even if we all agree that it is the instrumental music of the East European Jews (which is how we've always defined it simply), this doesn't take into account the galactical number of styles that exist in what we call "East Europe."

Q: Can you talk about those styles?

A: Sure. The majority of 78 recordings that exist of klezmer music come from what was formerly Bessarabia (today Moldova and Romania) and West Ukraine, which, when the so-called "revival" began in the 1970s, the repertoire was exactly that – Jewish music of that region, which came with all its typical stylistic characteristics, its collection of tunes. Poland was almost completely left out of the picture, despite the fact that there were some 3 million Jews living in Poland before the Holocaust.

Q: Can you postulate why Bessarabia and Ukraine, and not Poland?

A: The popular Yiddish song, "Rumania, Rumania" tells almost everything we need to know. Romania was the symbol of cosmopolitan Jewish life. It was romanticized in a "wine, women and song" way. Even Ottoman Sultans requested that their court musicians include urban Romanian dances in their repertoire, known as Longas. And the Yiddish theater, which began in Iasi Romania in the 1870s, became the standard of worldly entertainment. So once East European life got transplanted to America, the musical tastes of Romanian city life narrowed the style palette. If you look at the earliest klezmer fakebook we have from 1916, The "International Hebrew Wedding Music" (reissued as "The Ultimate Klezmer" by Tara Publications, edited and arranged by Joshua Horowitz), there are at least 20 tunes of the 270 dedicated to Polish music, almost 20 percent – not a majority, but large enough to warrant attention, even in the klezmer revival, yet the tunes don't sound quite as "exotic" as the Romanian fare.

Q: Why didn't any of the Polish forms make it into the klezmer revival?

A: That's partly because of what was recorded and documented. Beregovski didn't research Polish music, and a lot of the 78s are of that Ukrainian/Moldavian repertoire. On the other hand, the bands I had or played with in the beginning played some Polish repertoire (Obereks, Krakowiaks, Polka Mazurka), and Alan Bern and I used to play some of that stuff too, but since the klezmerim were predominantly an urban phenomenon, they tended to play urban music, so the Polkas Dave Tarras, Brandwein (maybe his 4 Polish recordings will materialize someday!), Beckerman et al. played were urban, so they probably didn't play the kind of back country polkas etc. that we have from Stefan Puchalski. I've also read that the klezmerim often hired Polish or Ukrainian musicians to go with them to play for Count So-and-so, so they'd have loads of Mazurkas, Polonaises, Polkas, etc. at their fingertips.

Q: Why the title “Gilgl”? That’s taken from “The Metamorphosis of a Song” by the Yiddish writer, Peretz, no?

A: Yes, it is, and we modeled all the suites after the different stations that the song enters in the story. But after we had fashioned all the suites we realized that the whole CD was really a kind of allegory for the metamorphosis of Poland itself. The title could mean both “The Metamorphosis of Poland” as well as “The Metamorphosis *from* Poland.”

Q: Is Poland morphing?

A: Clearly. The interest in Jewish music in the past two decades has shown an almost bizarre development in Poland.

Q: You mean like the Krakow Festival?

A: Among other things. There are bands all over playing their versions of Jewish music, sometimes informed and sometimes conjectural. But the hunger for the ghost of Jewish past is palpable there. Szeroka Street is as close to a Potemkin Village as we’ll find – they’re Jewish storefronts that are recreated to imitate what they looked like before the Holocaust, but not intended to function at all – they’re there just to look at. It’s the visual counterpart of the Polish klezmer revival.

Q: But are they playing Polish-Jewish, or Jewish-Polish music?

A: Very little of either. They took the lead from the American revivalists and assumed the Moldovan repertoire that everyone else was playing. But just recently, a few Polish revival groups delved into the repertoire that has been deemed Jewish.

Q: What are their sources?

A: Well, first, the Kolberg tomes, then some of the field recordings of Bienkowski of village music that has Jewish names or have something to do with Jews.

Q: Such as?

A: Like, a tune called Polka Szbasowka (Shabbat Polka) may be a tune learned from Jews, but who knows? I mean, your skepticism meter has to be calibrated pretty high when you’re dealing with music whose origins are unknown with names that reference Jewish life. Sometimes the word “Jewish” simply means “weird” or “not from our side of the tracks.” Even Kolberg wrote that what he called a Chussyt (Khusidl) was heard by students in the early 1800s in Warsaw who used it in a Nativity scene. Did that mean that it was a Christian imitation of Jewish music to represent the birth of Jesus, the Jew? It starts to go around a lot of corners when you put it under a microscope.

Q: What do we know about rural Jewish music?

A: Great question. Not much at all, as the nature of the 78rpm recordings we have are

commercial releases, and not field recordings. In other words, they're not done *in situ*, or on site, so Jewish village music is practically unknown as it is barely documented. If we go by the attitudes of the professional klezmerim based on descriptions and manuscripts, which show that the repertoires were determined by the tastes of the clients, and those clients included non-Jewish communities, we could safely assume that they did indeed play rural music when they served that audience. It's interesting that rural musical phrases show embedded in the tunes that Beregovsky collected, and even in full songs.

Q: How do you know what is rural and what is urban?

A: Well, there are some typical traits. One is the form itself. The simpler structures often show a simpler origin. Most folk dances are in two parts, AABB. Also, there are typical ways that folk tunes use the motifs of those parts. For instance, often you find the cadence (end phrase) of the first part forming the first phrase of the second part. Or a very repetitive phrase that goes round and round with little variations usually shows a more peasant-like origin. Harmonies tend to be quite basic and harsh dissonances are not eschewed. The upper class doesn't tolerate such roughness as much in general I guess.

Q: So is the Poyln CD rural?

A: It's both. We've included the whole gamut of "classes," from the very cosmopolitan ballroom stuff to the earthy, repetitive trance-like stuff, as well as Hassidic court music, and even the Kolberg tunes.

Q: Could you talk about Kolberg for a minute?

A: Sure. He was Poland's pioneering folklorist who lived from 1814-1890. He was actually a Catholic priest who was an avid collector, and did publish some Jewish tunes in his 33-volume work, mostly from Mazovia. Since the transcriptions he made were simple and schematic, we're pretty much on our own as to how to play them, so we simply played them the way we do anything.

Q: All four of you have a deeply traditional background, right?

A: Yes, so we basically just let loose and played them and didn't get into the "ooh, how precious are thine gems, Pan Kolberg, and we shall not soil them with such banalities as emotion and decoration" kind of prissiness.

Q: Did you do actual arrangements?

A: We only had two days prior to the recording to play through the tunes all together, and we never do the kind of arranging where you say "okay, clarinet on the A section, then altogether on the B section," etc. It's just so much more fun to leave all that up to chance and to listen to each other and adapt on the spot. So no, we didn't arrange like that, but Stu and Josh did work out harmonies for the tunes when needed, especially on the more sophisticated tunes like the Katz March, or the ballroom-type tunes, but no matter how

much we decide on ahead of time, someone will change it midstream.

Q: That must make it hard in the studio.

A: Not as much as you might think. We did a few takes of each tune, but didn't cut them up at all – they're all "live" renditions, warts and all.

Q: You also decided to record to tape, old style. Did that change your approach in the studio?

A: Yeah. Beside the absence of editing the takes, we didn't process the sound like you might do in digital recording, like equalizing the instruments or fixing the working noises that you hear, such as the clacking sound of the buttons on the accordion or the clarinet keys. We're really happy with the warmth and transparency of the sound.

Q: Do you think the old style of analogue recording has become fetishized, though?

A: Yes, actually. Okay, so, all of us grew up with LPs, then later learned so much of our music from scratchy 78 recordings, so the presence of noise on recordings is natural to us. As musicians, we're sensitive to sound, but if noise were something that bothered us, we'd be in the wrong business. Still, we do notice the difference on this recording, especially with headphones on.

Q: The graphics on this are extraordinary. How did those come about?

A: Phil Blank had done the illustrated libretto (he actually called it a graphic noveletto, as a new form in and of itself) for our chamber opera, "Lilith, The Night demon." His work is so sensitive to the mood and meaning of the music and his ideas are so phantasmagoric that we wanted him on board again. The layers of meaning and whimsical quality of his work fits so well into our aesthetic that its as if we all conceived of the whole thing at one time. We're really lucky.