

# Veretski Pass' new album explores the meeting of Jewish and Polish music

December 23, 2015

10:58 AM MST



Stuart Brotman, Cookie Segelstein, and Joshua Horowitz, the members of Veretski Pass

*courtesy of Old First Concerts*

The Veretski Pass trio of Cookie Segelstein, Joshua Horowitz, and Stuart Brotman is an ensemble based in the San Francisco Bay Area, which means that I have enjoyed the benefit of **listening to them in concert several times**. The name refers to a pass through the Carpathian Mountains located near the western border of the Ukraine. Their focus is on Jewish

instrumental music from Eastern Europe prior to the Second World War. This would suggest that they are a klezmer trio. However, at **one of the concerts I attended**, Segelstein told the audience, “This is not your grandmother’s klezmer. It is *her* grandmother’s klezmer.” Since then, I have preferred describing the trio as “a group of enthusiastic ethnomusicologists more interested in performing the results of their studies than in reading papers at conferences.”

A little less than two month’s ago Golden Horn Records released the latest recording of Veretski Pass performances, *Poyln: A Gilgul* (which translates from the Yiddish as “Poland: A Metamorphosis”). While Segelstein’s comment about the “ancestry” of klezmer referred, in part, to the absence of a clarinet in the Veretski Pass trio, this album features clarinetist Joel Rubin performing as a guest artist. The trio musicians play violin (Segelstein), bass cello (Brotman), and cimbalom and different forms of accordion (Horowitz).

Were I still an academic, I would probably suspect that the research behind the music on this album would make one hell of a paper at an ethnomusicology conference. Most of the selections involve traditional Polish dance forms, such as polkas, krakowiaks, Kujawiaks, and obersks. However, just as Frédéric Chopin polished up such indigenous source material to make it fit for performance at nineteenth-century French salons, the Jews of nineteenth-century Poland probably appropriated such music for their own festive gatherings. In addition the likely confrontation between these Polish sources and the ecstasy-inducing Hasidic tunes may well

have created a “critical mass” that “exploded” into new ways of making music.

The title of the album was inspired by a 1901 story by Isaac Leib Peretz (usually known just as I. L. Peretz) entitled “A Gilgul fun a Nign” (metamorphosis of a melody). This story provides the source for several Peretz quotes on his [Wikiquote page](#), two of which are appropriate for the new album. The most relevant of these quotations is:

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**“ According  
to the  
generation  
is the  
music  
thereof.**

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The history of the Jewish people has always been one of confrontations between tradition (yes, in the *Fiddler on the Roof* approach to reading the tales of Sholem Aleichem) and the contemporary practices of neighboring goyim (non-Jews). Thus, the music on *Poyln* is “the music thereof” of one or more generations of Jews living in nineteenth-century Poland.

However, the other quotation that really matters is:

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**“ A letter  
depends  
on how  
you read  
it, a  
melody  
on how  
you sing  
it.**

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This gets to why Veretski Pass prefers to spend their time “singing” the music they study through their instruments (all through their own highly personal arrangements), rather than reading dry papers to conference attendees. By doing so they bring to life music from past generations, not so much in the interest of riding the crest of a wave of interest in klezmer as in recreating a spirit behind that music, which is a heady mix of the sacred and the secular. Just as this is not the klezmer of recent ancestors, it is also not the music of the current “klezmer revival.” There are raw qualities of performance that honor the earthy metaphor of “roots” music; and those qualities are far more enjoyable than any of the more refined interpretations calculated (often by bean-counting managers) to appeal to mass audiences.

## **SUGGESTED LINKS**

- ▶ **Veretski Pass brings work-in-progress ethnomusicology research to Old First**

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# Veretski Pass brings work-in-progress ethnomusicology research to Old First

December 7, 2014

8:42 AM MST



Stuart Brotman, Cookie Segelstein, and Joshua Horowitz, the members of Veretski Pass

*courtesy of Old First Concerts*

When I first encountered the Veretski Pass trio of Cookie Segelstein, Joshua Horowitz, and Stuart Brotman **almost exactly a year ago**, I concluded that it was more appropriate to describe them as a group of “enthusiastic ethnomusicologists,” rather than a klezmer trio. Listening to them perform again last night in the **Old First Concerts** series at Old First Church definitely affirmed my

initial choice of nomenclature. Basically, they study practices of making music, collecting artifacts (including both instruments and scores) in the process, and then convert their studies into their own music-making efforts, often for energetically supportive audiences.

The group is named for a pass through the Carpathian Mountains located near the western border of the Ukraine. Considering current events, that description of location is subject to change without notice. The practices that most interest the Veretski Pass musicians are those of Jewish instrumental music from Eastern Europe prior to the Second World War, a time and place when the implications of being Jewish was also subject to change without notice.

What was particularly interesting last night is that those musicians were playing from notated music. I took this to mean that their current research activities were in a transitional state.

They had provided themselves with a new body of artifacts, but they had not yet internalized the practices involving those artifacts. Perhaps they had not yet even figured out the right questions to ask to go about developing those practices.

(The difference between research and technology is that technology is all about answering questions. Research lives for the premise that answering one question leads to many new questions to ask.)

As a result last night's performance was significantly different from last year's. On the surface it seemed as if the group was now in the process of exploring some fascinating new approaches to rhythm. This was most evident in Horowitz' cimbalom work, which in no way

resembled any of the idioms (folk or “refined”) customarily associated with how the instrument is played.

There also seemed to be a coarser approach to intonation. Segelstein even talked about how that approach had emerged from field study. On one trip she discovered that the minor third barely resembled what you would get from an equal-tempered piano keyboard. Figuring out just what the interval was involved her trial-and-error playing of a lot of different examples to her informant. When she finally homed in on the right way to play it, she asked the informant what he called the interval. He answered, “Second finger.”

Regular readers probably know by now that I have a weakness for stories like that. These are the delightful little anecdotes about how the making of music often blurs the line between *what* you do and *how* you do it. The modern piano keyboard abstracts away that distinction to such a strong extent that much of the study of music tends to ignore it. Indeed, that keyboard has much to do with how specific the current system of putting marks on paper has become. Where the string family is concerned, however, the tyranny of that particular abstraction quickly dissolves.

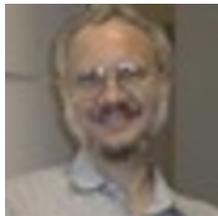
Even the cimbalom gets beyond the rigid abstraction of the piano keyboard. In talking about his instrument, Horowitz noted that it had 105 (if memory serves correctly) strings. He said that, as a result, a cimbalom player spends half of his life tuning his instrument and the other half playing out of tune.

Stories like these make it clear that

ethnomusicology is no dry intellectual pursuit. Often, the more we pick up from such stories, the better equipped we are to listen to the music. When it comes to speaking to the audience the Veretski Pass musicians clearly do not come off as dull academics. Perhaps, if they spent more time talking about the work they have to put in behind the music they make, the rest of us would emerge as better listeners when the music-making begins.

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- ▶ **Veretski Pass brings entertaining ethnomusicology to Old First Concerts**



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# Veretski Pass brings entertaining ethnomusicology to Old First Concerts

December 8, 2013

9:06 AM MST



Stuart Brotman, Cookie Segelstein, and Joshua Horowitz, the members of Veretski Pass

*courtesy of Old First Concerts*

Veretski Pass is a trio led by violinist Cookie Segelstein. She is joined by her husband, Joshua Horowitz, who plays cimbalom (a form of hammered dulcimer), and Stuart Brotman, who plays a bass cello. The group is named after one of the most important passes through the Carpathian Mountains, located (according to current national boundaries) near the western

border of the Ukraine. Their repertoire consists primarily of Jewish instrumental music from the Eastern Europe that predated the Second World War.

Strictly speaking, this is klezmer music. However, as that particular word grew in popularity over the last few decades, it also grew in its capacity to misrepresent. Early in last night's program in the **Old First Concerts** series at Old First Church, Segelstein told the audience, "This is not your grandmother's klezmer. It is *her* grandmother's klezmer." (This was her way of explaining the absence of a clarinet.)

Thus, rather than calling Veretski Pass a klezmer trio, one might do better by describing them as a group of enthusiastic ethnomusicologists more interested in performing the results of their studies than in reading papers at conferences. That approach brings them closer to the anthropological foundations of their discipline than the efforts of many of their colleagues. One may describe the approach as a shift of attention from objects to actions. Rather than simply collecting artifacts (such as field recordings) that will then serve as objects for the study of an "alien" culture, they recognize that their primary interest is in that of a *culture of making music*, which can only be understood through active involvement in that music-making.

For those of us in the audience of a Veretski Pass concert, that involvement is passionate and infectious. Segelstein is less interested in talking about the names and backgrounds of songs, because that takes time away from jamming with her colleagues. She would thus refer to a particular collection of numbers as, for example,

“a G minor set,” the key being the one unifying factor. Any additional “background knowledge” runs the risk of distracting the listener from simply taking in what the performers are doing, which is making music from a relatively unique combination of instrumental resources.

From the point of view of sonority, however, it is worth devoting a few words to the tuning of those instruments. Segelstein’s opening remark veiled a mild reprobation that grandma probably spent too much time around an equal-tempered piano. Last night’s tuning systems were anything but equally tempered. On the other hand, it was unclear just what they were or even whether they were consistent from one performance to the next. The best joke of the evening was that the cimbalom player spends half his time tuning his instrument and the other half playing it out of tune. There is some sense that the emotional intensity of this music arises, at least in part, from deliberate efforts to warp pitches beyond the expectations of both listeners and players.

The result is that the performance of this music is as much a matter of “catching the spirit” as is the engagement among the members of a jazz combo who happen to be really “in the groove.” The only difference is that the “groove” of the Veretski Pass repertoire is, for most of us, just as unfamiliar as that pass through the Carpathians. Nevertheless, when the members of Veretski Pass get together to jam, it does not take long for those of us on audience side to find that groove and revel in it.



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