With Viola in Hand

The Klezmer Viola: A life, history, and a bit of how to do it

An interview with Cookie Segelstein, by Katrina Wreede

Katie: First, I want to thank you for the excellent Klezmer workshop you gave for our Northern California Viola Society Salon. Today, I'd like you to talk about Klezmer viola in a historical context and in your own life, and hear a few hints to get the rest of us started.

Cookie: My parents, both Holocaust survivors, created a home steeped in Jewish European culture, where I was handed a fiddle at the age of five and was expected to play folk songs for my family. My father would sing Yiddish, Carpatho-Russ and Ukrainian songs, and I learned them by ear. I also learned Ukrainian dances, Kolomeykes, Kozachoks (means "little Cossack") and other music from his youth. I took classical lessons, too, but at home I played folk music.

The songs I learned were local to the region around Veretski Pass, where my parents grew up. It's in the Carpathian mountains where Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Hungarians, Jews, Russians, and Roma (gypsies) all lived and traveled through. My mom's town, Munkacs, was mostly Hungarian, and my dad's town, Nizhniye Veretski, was more Ukrainian, so they had different ideas about the songs. Since my mom is a wonderful cook but can't hold a tune, I learned the songs the way they were played in my Dad's town.

Klezmer music has always been regional. There is no "typical" Klezmer. What we think of now as Klezmer is from a revival in the 1980s. It's just one of many, many styles of European Yiddish music.

Katie: Like *Hava Nagila*?

Cookie Segelstein demonstrating a traditional Klezmer viola position (photo by Katrina Wreede)

Cookie: *Hava Nagila* is usually associated with Israel but originally comes from a Romanian tune. Here's my quick history of Klezmer:

Jewish music was used in temples before the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD. When the temple was destroyed, the rabbis got together and decided the Jewish people should go into a state of mourning, which meant NO music. So all the musicians and instrument makers were out of a job. They found a commandment in the Torah that said you must rejoice with a bride and groom with music and dance. They approached the rabbis and got permission to perform for weddings. If the music got too exciting, the rabbis would come and break plates to remind them they were still grieving and should stay muted. If that didn't work, the rabbis would intone death chants while the musicians played. This would go on for days.

Musicians have to travel to work. Traveling musicians meet other musicians. Due to the ubiquity of the Ottoman Empire—the trade routes to Constantinople and the Silk Road—you start seeing elements of Turkish, Greek, Rumanian, and especially Roma music blending with Jewish wedding music. For Jewish and Roma musicians especially, music was one of the few occupations that you could carry with you as a "lower class" itinerant person and get some kind of work pretty much anywhere. So what becomes Klezmer is really a melting pot of musical ideas that reflects the experiences and region of each player. The word Klezmer came into being, we think, in the early 1930s when Moshe Beregovsky went into West Ukraine with a wax cylinder recorder and recorded the musicians there. Klezmer is really just the term used to describe a musician who played for Jewish functions.

With my band, Veretski Pass, we have a lecture/demonstration called "Grand Theft Ottoman" where we take one melody and demonstrate early source recordings from different cultures, comparing how each treats the melody, claiming it as their own.

Katie: Tell us about the viola in the Klezmer tradition.

Cookie: The typical Klezmer band, sometimes called the "Jewish Quartet" would have one *prim* (premiere) violin playing in the upper octave, a *sekund* or *contra* violin or viola on the lower octave playing chords, a tsimbl (hammered dulcimer) and a wedding bass (3-4 string cello) played sideways with a shoulder strap. This made it possible for the whole band to process with the bride and groom. These same musicians might also play for local non-Jewish events to earn a living, playing the local folk and popular classical music, just like now, to make ends meet. The viola has been used in Klezmer for a long time on the *contra* accompaniment part. It played chords with lots of open strings and rhythmic bowings, typically quarter notes with two or four *marcato* hooked bow strokes on each up or down bow. The *contra* viola is usually held sideways and bowed vertically. Often it will have just three strings and a flat bridge, tuned to make changing chords efficient and fast (C, G, E, for instance).

Katie: How about your own Klezmer viola playing?

Cookie: My rebellion in high school, instead of getting a tattoo, was to switch from violin to viola and quit playing Jewish music. My Dad said, "What's viola?!" So I got to be the black sheep for a while. When I had children, it brought me back to my heritage, but I came back with classically trained viola sensibilities. That meant I was eager to play Jewish melodies on my viola, not just rhythm parts. But I had to find ways to make the viola timbre come forward in the band to make the melody heard. Re-tuning helps with that.

With Klezmer and Eastern European music, there's a long tradition of re-tuning. I have a violin that I re-tune A, E, A, C# or G, D, G, D or A, D, E, E. The re-tuning creates a great harmonic resonance and makes playing chords much easier. This music was designed to be played at loud outside weddings with lots of dancing, so anything musicians could do to get more resonance and volume was great. Klezmer music is celebratory music, and therefore tends to be played at party-level dynamics, except when played for listening, such as at the table. And a lot of the dynamic control came from adding and subtracting parts.

Katie: Kind of like a Baroque concerto grosso?

Cookie: Yes, and the improvisation is very much like [music of the] Baroque, embellishing and filling the melody. You might change the cadences a little bit. It's a very vocal approach with lots of slides and crying effects as well as filling in passing tones, and adding turns, trills and mordents.

Most Klezmer groups still use viola just as a rhythm and accompaniment instrument. In the Klezmer scene right now, I don't know of anyone else regularly playing melodies on viola.

Katie: My introduction to Klezmer was sitting in with bands that are a crossover with jazz. Is that legitimate?

Cookie: Klezmer is not jazz. A lot of people say that Klezmer is Jewish jazz, but in jazz, you have a harmonic progression and improvise a new melody over that. In Klezmer, the chords are about keeping the rhythm. The original melody is always there, just embellished.

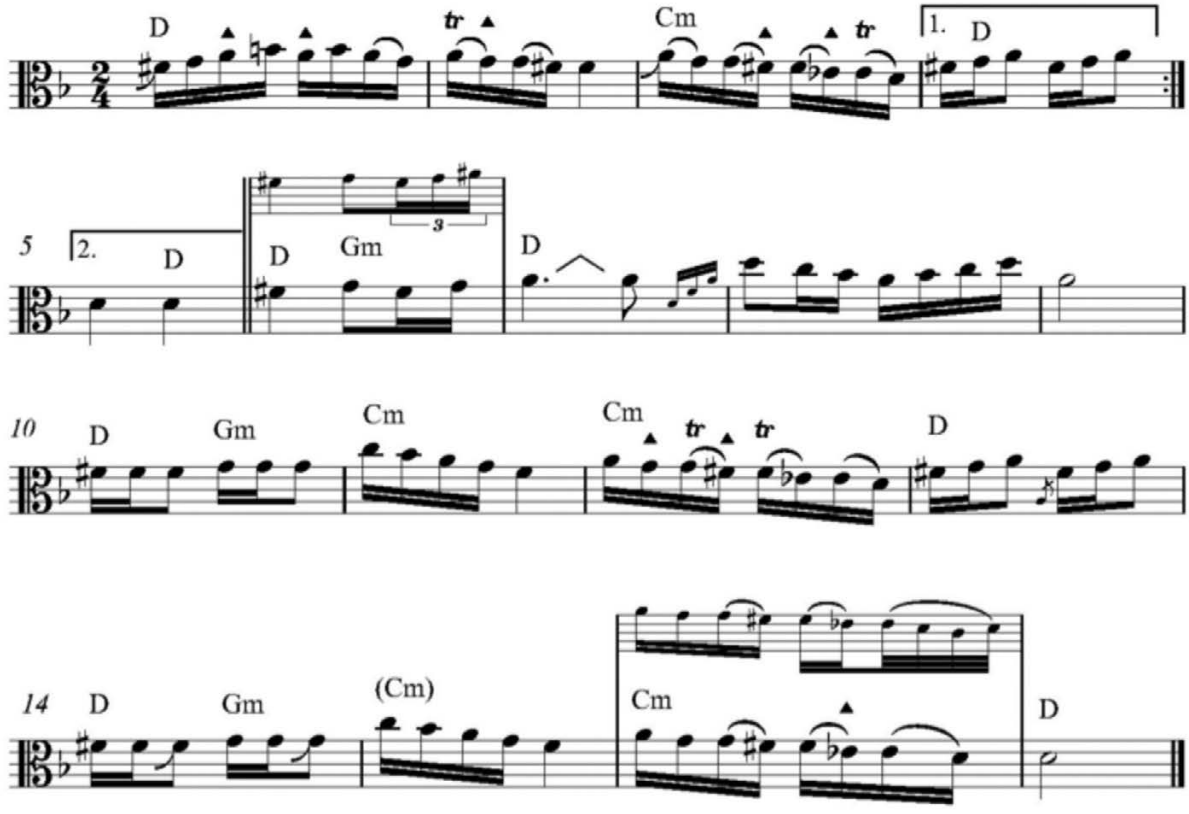
And the harmony only changes when the melody indicates by using transitional phrases that draw your ear to the next chord. This happens especially in a *Doina*, which is approached like a classical cadenza. The melody player is free to go longer or shorter on any chord. The harmony players follow by listening for transitional phrases. During the *Doina*, the lead violin would entertain at the bride's family's table with a tip bag tied to his scroll, so they could go on for a while.

A lot of Jewish musicians who came to America in the early 20th century earned at least part of their living playing jazz for clubs and parties, so what you, Katie, were playing is probably from that tradition: jazz tunes that incorporate Jewish scale tones and sensibility.

Katie: I suspect there is still room for new music in the Klezmer tradition since Veretski Pass has an original opera out, right?

Cookie: We do a lot of composition in the band as well as performing traditional tunes from many regions. Even before we did our "Lilith" opera, we did a project called "The Klezmer Shul", which was 23 original movements that followed the emotional flow of a synagogue service. We spoke to rabbis and cantors and collected chants and prayers as our source material, which we realized into musical forms that drew on tradition but were a new and unique voice, too. There's one tune at the deepest, most somber part that sounds a lot like "My Old Kentucky Joe", but is really a central Polish Hasidic song that is just incredibly tender.

Khusidl fun Iasi



tr Vibrato trill

Pitch bend

Slight slide

▲ *Krekhts* (stopped tone)

When we created "Lilith", it was mainly Josh Horowitz's (button accordion, cimbalom, piano) composition, with Stu and me adding several instrumental movements and one song by me. Because Josh is a counterpoint junkie with a degree in composition, it has a lot of complexity in addition to being a folk opera.

Katie: So now the big question, how to you play Klezmer on viola? What I noticed in the NCVS workshop, there was a level of anxiety in the room because I don't think anyone had ever learned a song by ear. I know that's the tradition for Klezmer, learning from other musicians and source recordings. But when we had the written music in front of us, no one took any risks and it didn't sound as musical.

Cookie: Right. That's a trade-off. With students who want to become [by] ear players, we start with very small snippets as call and response. I might start with just an open G and first finger A and ask them to listen for accents and articulation, not just pitch and rhythm. I'll gradually add some Klezmer elements: using the fatter part of your finger, slides and portamenti, *krekhts* (partly stopped mordent/ghost tone that stops the sound briefly), vibrato trills, scooping the pitch up or down, etc. Pretty soon, they are listening for the music, not the notes. Understand, most of the world learns their music this way.

Katie: Do you see a difference with players who started with the Suzuki Method?

Cookie: I find they often have really excellent ears, but sometimes they've been trained to be very specific in their technique, so it's hard for them to break out and use the instrument in different ways. Klezmer is a great way for them to both draw on their skills and expand their expressive techniques.

Here is a Klezmer tune called *Khusidl fun Iasi*. It translates as "Little Hasidic Dance of Iasi"—a town in Moldavia. The basic melody is notated, and I've added some typical Klezmer embellishments to show what a player might do with it. There are some standard effects:

Vibrato trill: keep the trilling finger close to the string and use a wide vibrato to create a fast trill.

Pitch bend: start on the pitch, lean the finger back to bend the pitch down, then bend back up to original pitch

Slight slide: start below the written pitch and slide up to it

Krekhts: a stopped tone played like a quick mordent flick. The flick note hits the string with only harmonic pressure and makes the sound stop for a moment. It gives the note a "catching breath" quality that will sound like weeping.

Katie: Thanks, Cookie. This was inspiring and exciting.

Katrina Wreede is a jazz violist, composer, and founder of Composing Together, a group that brings composers into classrooms to collaborate with kids.

For more information on Veritski Pass, visit their website: https://veretskipass.com

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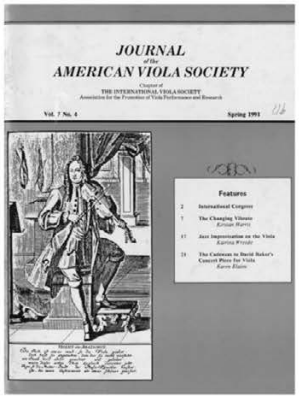

The Spring 1991 issue had quite a jazz presence. Katrina Wreede of the Turtle Island String Quartet, provided a brief guide to improvisation, advocating that "Improvisation, especially in jazz, enables the player to be a composer in a very immediate, personal way, rather than an interpreter of someone else's ideas. Karen Elaine's collaboration with jazz composer David Baker produced the Concert Piece for Viola, and her article explored the various cadenzas, and included the scales that provided the work its "jazz flavor."

Kirstan Harris provided a detailed history of vibrato, from the earliest reference for the use of the technique on stringed instruments in 1545: ". . . while stopping fingers teeter/Produce a melody much sweeter/Than 'tis on other fiddles done." Details include how at the turn of the 18th century vibrato was still "subject to fashion," how notations of ",." and "m." were used to indicate the use of the technique, and that the accelerating vibrato dates back to Leopold Mozart's treatise.