

## PROJECT REPORT FROM JILL ANDERSON TO THE FINZI TRUST SCHOLARSHIP

### KLEZMER THEN AND NOW – A PROJECT IN NEW YORK – 13<sup>TH</sup> – 31<sup>ST</sup> OCTOBER 2007

The train from Boston to New York stopped at New Haven, Connecticut. It looked a rather bleak place with many cast iron bridges criss-crossing the tracks. I pictured Sam Norr arriving there from Russia in 1910, to stay with *Uncle, S. Schuster*; this from the records of ships' manifests held at Ellis Island. I suppose, even if he thought it was bleak, it was a good deal less bleak than the pogroms in Russia. This, after all, was *the land of the free*. Sam Norr, by the way, was my Great Aunt's husband. He came from Panevezys, now in Lithuania. He must have been familiar with Klezmer music, and probably came across it in New York. Most of the Eastern European musicians who emigrated went to the US. I suppose the popular music scene was in better shape than it was in England. They thought, quite rightly as it turned out, that they could be absorbed into it, and that is exactly what happened to Klezmer. It became somewhat sanitised; effects of Broadway shows, dance music, big bands and crooners soon became evident. That mixture of musics showed itself in the first concert I went to – *A Great Day on Eldridge Street*, on 14<sup>th</sup> October at Symphony Space, 95<sup>th</sup> and Broadway.

Eldridge Street is a Synagogue – *the first house of worship built in America by Eastern European Jews*. The building, which is being restored and was not yet open, will be used for *programs (sic) for adults, school children and families (to) explore cultural continuity and change, instil respect for Jewish traditions and practices and draw analogies between the Synagogue's immigrant founders and contemporary immigrants*. The *Great Day on Eldridge Street* was a ten day series of Klezmer concerts, lectures and educational events which travelled to upstate New York.

*This is a real heymishe event* said my cousin who was with me – meaning basically that it was a typical Jewish event that did not seem to be organised by anyone in particular and started half an hour late. No-one had thought about the need for someone to move microphone stands around on the stage nor to help the musicians set up their instruments, but all this mattered little because the music was wonderful, fantastic, varied in style, but never in professionalism. My hat went off to the organiser, Yale Strom, who also played his violin. How do you persuade so many Klezmerim (Klezmer musicians) to come to New York to perform for four minutes each? I cannot imagine they were paid much, but there they all were. Practically every group I could think of – all in one place at one time.

The first group was (bravely) called *Die Goyim* – (*the non-Jews* – actually the translation does not indicate the slightly disparaging feel to those words, making it all the more remarkable to choose that name). They came from Holland – trumpet, clarinet, violin, accordion, tuba, drum kit. Their music was a bit whacky – played too fast which made it sound like circus music, I thought. (Ha, *Goyim* who do not understand Klezmer!)

Margot Leverett (about whom, more later on) and her *Klezmer Mountain Boys* were next. I know her cds well – *The Art of Klezmer Clarinet* and *Margot Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys*. The set was not particularly successful, maybe because they were on so early. She tried to get the audience to join in, but you can only do that if a) they already know the tune, or b) you teach it to them. Oh dear – neither was the case. But, it was good to hear how deftly they alternate between cowboys and Jewish weddings in Russia. It works too – I would never have thought it. (she talked to me about the two kinds of music and why they go together when I interviewed her later that week. Please listen to track 1 of the interviews). The line-up was clarinet, guitar, double bass, mandolin. I was interested in the tempi they chose. If you are playing for dancing, then of course, the tempi have to suit the dancers, but this was just too slow and slightly boring as a result. It needed more, well, direction.

Next up – a *Doina*, played on a marimba by Alex Jacobowitz from Germany. A *Doina* is rather like a classical cadenza. It is improvised and is intended to show both the technical prowess of the player and his or her ability to affect the audience's emotions. But unlike a classical cadenza, it does not come in the middle of a piece, but is usually the slow introduction to a fast tune. The *Doina*, which originated in Romania, is accompanied by chords played by other members of the band. The chord changes are indicated by the soloist nodding his or her head. In this case, there were no other instruments, so the harmony was also played by the soloist. I do not recall having heard a marimba used in Klezmer before, but it has similarities to the hammered dulcimer (or Tsimbl) which is and was a traditional instrument in Klezmer, so why not use this more up-to-date instrument? Mr. Jacobowitz played in a gentle reflective way. He also recited a poem in Yiddish – a *Gasn Nigun* (literally *a street tune* which would have been used to accompany a bridal party to the wedding venue).

One of the great Klezmer revivalists – Pete Sokolov and his band *Kapelye* – were next. His is a name I have known for a long time as a scholar and clarinetist. But the group is stuck in the 1960s, or, if I am feeling kind, the 1970s. The clarinet, piano and tuba played a Klezmer rumba with jazz breaks in it, including one for tuba – urgh! This was a band that must have played at lots of weddings and barmitzvas where nobody wants to be challenged; they just want to dance around. It was gimmicky, too long and they had no contact with the audience. I will not be rushing out to buy their cd!

The ninety-year-old Yiddish singer, Beyler Schechter was a bit of a novelty item, either intentionally or more probably, unintentionally. Whether she enjoyed singing or not, I was not sure but there was not much voice left. She sang a lullaby in Yiddish.

Fresh from Boston MA was the *Klezmer Conservatory Band*. They too were in at the start of the Klezmer revival, but although their sound is old-fashioned, it still works, at least for me. Eleanor Reisser was the energetic vocalist. Hankus Netsky was the pianist and arranger with Margot Leverett and Jeff Warschauer on guitar. I know him through *Klezfest* in London (and I met him the next week). He is now more of a traditional Klezmer man, so it was nice to see him back with the band – he was a founder member – playing this rather rumpty-tumpty version of *Ot Azoy (Like this)*.

Talented, useful people were turning up in different bands. It was now Hankus Netsky's turn to change into his Yiddish theatre *yamulke* (skull cap) for a jazz club version of *Mayn Tayere* by Ilya Trilling. The muted trumpet solo was lovely, evoking a smokey night club. Jim Guttman (double bass, who is also in the *Klezmer Conservatory Band*) played a gentle version of *Gasn Nigun*, all pizzicato – lovely.

The last Polish film in Yiddish was made, at a guess, in the late 1930s. Judy Bressler sang a song from it - *Tiefe dir die Nacht* by Abel Stear. Poignantly, her grandparents starred in the film What happened to them after that was not mentioned.

The *Klezmer Conservatory Band* then returned with the clarinetist, Don Byron. He played a *Doina* using a lovely, large, interesting sound – rather hollow – unusual. The accompanying piano, drum kit and bass gave the set a jazzy feel. Then the music went straight into a fast number. I noticed that he used *krechts* here, though he had not done so in the *Doina*. (*krechts* are Klezmer ornaments. The word means ‘a moan’ and they give the music its characteristic sound. There are two kinds of *krechts* – one which is like a classical mordent and another which uses the minor third above in a kind of ghosted way.)

Now, remember what I said about 1960s bands? Along came one, complete with tuxedo'd clarinetist, Ray Muziker (wonderful name). His playing was straighter than I had imagined. The *Doina* was followed by a *Bulgar*, which, in my humble opinion, was too slow for dancing, but then, there was only one mad guy dancing, at the back of the stalls, and it did not seem to bother him! What I disliked most about this set were the silly coconut shell noises from the drummer – but that is what happened in the 1960s. No wonder people wanted something else!

David Julian Gray is a clarinetist from Washington DC. He is also a sound engineer for NPR and my friend's brother-in-law. All that (I used to be a sound engineer too) made me more interested in his playing than I might have been ordinarily. His playing was good; actually better than that on his website. He played his own composition *It ain't what you don't know*, dedicated to Lev Litterman. The chord changes came earlier than I felt was

right, but this was, presumably, them being clever. It was a *Terkish* rhythm – in 4/4, crotchet, quaver rest, quaver, crotchet, crotchet.

The trumpet player, Paul Brody and pianist, Burton Greene turned to an arrangement of an Andy Statman tune. He admitted that we would not be able to make out the tune - - how true! The piano part was minimalist and the trumpet part a little less so, with singing while playing. It was a bit wild, but there is nothing wrong with that!

Singing was next, not really Klezmer, but, as I went on discovering throughout the trip, Yiddish song and Klezmer are closely entwined (listen to Jeff Warschauer's interview to find out more). Phyllis Berk sang a song about a cat – a metaphor for the Jewish people being used as scapegoats. She said it was written in Russia during the cold war. The instrumentation was alto saxophone, clarinet, guitar, drum kit, double bass, trombone and piano.

I only know of Zalman Mlotek as the Director of the National Yiddish Theatre, the *Folksbiene*; an arranger, and a pianist. But here he was singing and accompanying himself in this Yiddish version of *Alexander's Rag-time Band*. It was great –full of energy.

Garry Lucas is a rock guitarist who played in *Massive Attack*. He is related to a family which was murdered along with the rest of the town's inhabitants, by Poles during World War Two. The town was called *Yevgenia* and when he went back there, he received an apology from the then President of Poland, Mr. Katsav. Gary Lucas wrote a song commemorating the massacre. He speaks, rather than sings and was accompanied by saxophone, Ernie Brooks on bass guitar and Billy Frinker on drum kit. It was moving, but only because he told the story first.

*Hot Pastrami* is a meat sandwich, as far as I know, but his one was a piece of music. Yale Strom, the organiser, played the violin with two double basses. It seemed to be sung in Hungarian, no matter it was all great, with a good, tight band.

Then came the interval – it was 9.30.

Amazingly, at the start of the second half, there was Theodore Bickel, looking for all the world as if he had just stepped out of *Anatevke* in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Well, he had; he used to play *Tevye*. He sang, accompanying himself on guitar. It was a song about a man with a medical problem – “only in Yiddish folk music will you hear a reference to hemorrhoids” – everyone laughed. Then – and this was my first highlight of the evening – he introduced the “best Yiddish singer in the world” – and I knew who he meant. There was Shura Lipovsky. I know her, a bit, and have heard her, a lot, at Klezfest in London. She has such a wonderful, clear, un-mannered voice. It is always in tune, the words are always clear and she puts such a lot into each performance, even when she is just teaching a tune. She has a presence on the stage; you just have to watch her. But the most touching thing is that she is not afraid to show her vulnerability. You can see how moved she is sometimes, but she shares that with her audience – acknowledging that we are all

in this together. She is a great artist. They sang together – a song in Ladino (an ancient Jewish Sephardic language). Then, with the excellent Tamara Brooks on the piano, we heard a love song.

The hammered dulcimer, as I mentioned, is a traditional Klezmer instrument. Pete Rushefsky played a lovely doina, accompanied, sensitively on clarinet, by Joel Rubin. I have their cd. It was great to hear two such eminent pioneers in the flesh.

My favourite Klezmer group at the moment is *Die Naye Kapelye*. (*The only Klezmer Band*). I listen to their cds over and over again and have borrowed some tunes to play. So, imagine my delight when I realised that the next group, lead by Bob Cohen – was them. Wow. They are based in Hungary, so it was unexpected. The reason I like them so much is that they do not sound perfect – they sound as if they have not been to music college. But they do sound as if they enjoy what they are playing and they are particularly good at medleys. That is what we heard, with singing, doinas, violin solos and with each tune seamlessly flowing into the next before you realised it.

By the end of that set, it was getting on for 11 o'clock and we reluctantly left. In fact, I heard later, from Jeff Warschauer, that the number of musicians taking part in the grand finale was greater than the number left in the audience!

A day later I decided to book a rehearsal studio to do an hour's practice as I had a lesson booked with Margot Leverett that week. I found Roberto's Winds on W 46<sup>th</sup>. At only \$10 for an hour, I thought it was good value. There was a music shop there too, but no Klezmer music or cds. I bought some French reeds which were cheaper than in London! In the afternoon I went to *Yivo- the Institute for Yiddish research*. I wanted to have a look at their archives to see if there were any photos or reminiscences by Klezmer musicians that I had not seen. I obtained my reader's pass and went into the very quiet library. I spoke to the archivist and he suggested that I look in the catalogue, which I did. But of course, people had been there before me and found the most interesting Klezmer photographs (there are only a handful) and articles. Nevertheless, it was interesting just seeing the catalogue and the wealth of archive material. The Institute was started in Vilnius in 1925. Here is the introduction from their web site:

Founded in 1925 in Vilna, Poland (Wilno, Poland; now Vilnius, Lithuania), as the Yiddish Scientific Institute, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research is dedicated to the history and culture of Ashkenazi Jewry and to its influence in the Americas.

Headquartered in New York City since 1940, today YIVO is the world's preeminent resource center for East European Jewish Studies; Yiddish language, literature and folklore; and the American Jewish immigrant experience. The YIVO Library holds over 360,000 volumes in 12 major languages, and the Archives

contains more than 23,000,000 pieces, including manuscripts, documents, photographs, sound recordings, art works, films, posters, sheet music, and other artifacts. YIVO also offers a series of cultural events and films, adult education and Yiddish language classes (including the pioneering Uriel Weinreich Program in Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture intensive summer program begun in 1968), various scholarly publications, research opportunities and fellowships.

The sound archivist is the eminent singer, Lorin Sklamberg, whom I heard later on, at the Yiddish Sing-along. Many of the old Klezmer recordings have now been released onto cd and we therefore have evidence of how Klezmer musicians played at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – or, more accurately, we have evidence of how *some* Klezmer musicians, who emigrated to the US, played.

It was interesting to hear people in the library speaking Yiddish to each other. I probably should have realised this would be the case. We are not used, in England, to hear people conversing in Yiddish. We still hear some Yiddish expressions, but in the middle of English sentences. But that is the difference, I realised, between New York and London. As Jeff Warschauer said to me, “New York is the Yiddish capital of the world”. And that is why there is an enthusiastic following for Yiddish song and language and that is why the American musicians who come to London to teach, use these songs in the Klezmer classes. Although a good number of Yiddish-speaking Jews came over to settle in England, it seems that, in my great-grandparents’ case, for example, they did not teach their own children to speak Yiddish, let alone the next generation. Whereas in America, the language still lives in some communities, (it seems to me, and this is just conjecture, that it lives in more communities than it does in London) and where it does not, there are classes, at the Workmen’s Circle, to learn. In fact, they have classes for children to learn Yiddish.

I left Yivo on West 16<sup>th</sup> Street, with my reader’s card and not very much new information, but it was good just to have been there. In the foyer there were notices of public events including these:

*Under a charter from The Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York, the Max Weinreich Center offers graduate level seminars and fellowships in the fields of Yiddish language, literature, and culture, as well as Jewish history, ethnography, and folklore. It sponsors public lectures and scholarly conferences and oversees the publication of journals and books.*

Next time!

On **Wednesday** I went to Philadelphia for the day to see *A Night in the Old Market Place* at the Prince Theater. This is an adaptation by Glen Berger of a story by I.L.Peretz. The music was composed by Klezmer trumpeter, bandleader, teacher and arranger, Frank London. The story deals with life, death and pacts with a gargoyle (female), which comes to life. She resurrects a bride and some other town dwellers, but they soon die again. There is just one set and the play is introduced by the *Badkhen*, the wedding jester. The bride, Sheydele, married Nosn, but is taken away from him by Itzhak. Sheydele throws herself down the well and drowns. Itzhak becomes a recluse and Nosn takes to drink. Years later, encouraged by the *Badkhen* they try to wake the dead, who appear from the cemetery. But, of course, they all die again – a failure for Man and a triumph for G-d.

The music is a mixture of contemporary, Broadway, Klezmer, Copeland, Stravinsky etc. It is scored for keyboard, accordion, tuba, guitar and drums. It was clever, atmospheric, interesting and never detracted from the drama. The singing was good, with words clearly articulated. Particularly good was Ray Wills, the *Badkhen*. I did not quite understand why the gargoyle was a sexy woman. Was this the director being perverse, or was there another reason that escaped me? The musical was presented without an interval and it worked very well as a piece, well constructed and directed. I hope Frank London continues to compose. He is a talented guy.

**Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> October.** To Ditmars Boulevard on the subway for a lesson with Margot Leverett. She is a classically trained musician, who was specialising in contemporary music, but decided she wanted to play something different. She came across Klezmer and that was it – she was hooked. She is a fine player and has taken the learning process very seriously, studying with Sid Beckerman. Jeff Warschauer spoke highly of her. I explained to her that I now had a Klezmer duo and that we had our first gig planned for 10<sup>th</sup> November. I wanted to play her the set that we had worked out. I started with a Doina – actually a Naftule Brandwein Doina, which someone else (Bob Cohen) had recorded and I picked up from the cd. Margot gave me a few tips for Doinas: you should tell a story, leave gaps between sections and do not rush. She would have liked more trills and repeated sections. It is, she said, an opportunity to show off. It can start with a flourish.

Then I played a *Hora* – a slow dance tune in 3/8, with the second beat of the accompaniment being silent. She said that the first beat should be articulated, especially for dancing. As far as ornaments are concerned, she does not like the word *Krechts*. I do not know why, after all it just identifies a particular ornament. In what David Krakauer calls *Krechts number 2*, Margot says you should use fingerings so that the upper note is

sharper than a tone. (I feel I should explain, for the more technically minded. Take the note D. A *Krechts number 2* would be C, E, D, with the E ghosted so that the pitch is not really heard. That is the note to which Margot referred. *Krechts number 1* is like a mordent in classical music – ie. D, D #, D, but again, with the upper note ghosted and the fingering used is not the normal one, for the upper note, making that almost pitchless). In order to find these false fingerings, it will be necessary to work through the instrument.

The Bobover Wedding March, which I also heard on *Die Naye Kapelye's* cd, is one of my favourites. I was playing it in a low octave. Margot thought it should go up an octave. We talked about other ornaments, such as glissandos and laughing sounds. She thinks they are used too much and does not think that my lack of ability in this area is something to be worried about. Hooray. I then interviewed her about how she started playing Klezmer and the scene now. Please listen to track one of the cd.

On **Saturday** I went to the TKTS booth at the equivalent of Leicester Square and managed to get three very good seats for *A Chorus Line*, that afternoon. What does this have to do with Klezmer? Nothing, but it was music in New York and I enjoyed it.

In the evening, my cousin and I went to the first concert in the *Oyhoo Festival – Fiddlin' with the Roof*. Each of the songs in *Fiddler on the Roof* was performed by a different group. No only performed, but arranged, or in some cases, re-arranged!. The *Klezomatics* were first. This is from their web site:

The Klezomatics have collaborated with numerous musical luminaries such as Arlo Guthrie, classical legend Itzhak Perlman, Israeli icons Chava Albertstein and Ehud Banay, Ben Folds, beat legend Allen Ginsberg, avant-garde experimentalist John Zorn, The Master Musicians of Jajouka (a 4,000 year old Moroccan rock ensemble), Nubian Egyptian percussionist Mahmoud Fadl, and KosherGospel singer Joshua Nelson. Their collaborations have extended to numerous theatrical, film, dance, and television projects, including Pulitzer Prize Winning playwright Tony Kushner's *A Dybbuk* and *It's An Undoing World*.

They played *Tradition*, sung by Joanne Borts, and preceded by jokes told by each member of the band. Particularly good was the one from Frank London: "Manny was very ill. His wife was baking . He asked for one of her famous *Kichels*. 'No', she said, 'they are for the Shiva!'" (the period of mourning ). This arrangement was typical Frank, lots of brass, oompah bass and lots of fun.

*Matchmaker, Matchmaker*, was sung by Basya Schechter and Chana Rothman, again with the Klezomatics, with lute and guitar players.



Mike Burystn then sang *If I were a rich man* followed by DJ Hander's Rap version in which samples of Topol's recording were used and a coloured man rapped in Yiddish! It was a lot of fun.

*Sabbath Prayer* was sung by Debbie Friedman, again with the Klezmatics. This was a more traditional version. *Blue Fringe* is a group of two guitars, drum kit and voice. They played *To Life*, in a funky, loud version. I do not know what that had to do with anything. I like the name of the group, though! *Miracle of miracles* was sung by Bruce Adler and *The Dream*, played by *Heedoosh*, started with a sample of the sound track. Jill Sobule is a singer with a very individual voice. She sounds like a little girl. She accompanied herself in *Sunrise, Sunset*.

The *Wedding Dance*, in the show, is Jerry Bock's idea of Klezmer. It is all notated of course. In this concert we heard a Funk version by *Greg Wall and Later Prophets* which included a dancer. Then came a Ladino version of *Now I have everything* by Sarah Aroeste. She used the Spanish connection to make a flamenco version, accompanied by percussion and guitar.

The group *Good for the Jews* with Jackie Hoffman, performed the next number – *Do you love me? The rumour* was played by *Paul Shapiro's Ribs and Brisket review* – double bass, drum kit, saxophone. The next group was really playing jazz – *Far from the home I love* was sung by Neshama Carrlebach – Taylor Morgan was the pianist. This worked well and they captured the mood of the lyrics.

*Di Shikere Kapelye* (The drunk Klezmer band), another of Frank London's groups, played the closing number, *Anatevka*. Here Frank recreated the sound of a town band, not too good, with the tuba playing the bass line characterfully. This was, of course, a clever arrangement, with short solos given to the band members. Michael Winograd was playing clarinet, (I interviewed him a few days later. Listen to track 2 of the cd), with Brandon Seebrok and Matt Darieux on saxes.

**Sunday** morning – *Bagels and Bongos* at the Highline Ballroom, West 16<sup>th</sup> St. between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenues.

The fact that then ran out of smoked salmon half an hour after they started serving should have been a warning about the music we were going to hear. There was nothing much to do with Klezmer in any of it. The bands were dabbling in it to get an audience, is my guess. The first band was *Deleon*, a very loud Cuban rock band with an out-of tune singer. Best to be avoided in future.

Another Cuban band was next, but one which claimed to have a Jewish connection: *Roberto Rodrigues and Cuban/Jewish extravaganza*. Two of the players played some

kind of Klezmery bits from time-to-time. They were the clarinet and violin players. But their riffs were too repetitive. The rest of the band stuck to jazz/rock/funk.

Irving Fields is a pretty ancient singer/pianist. He treated us to an overlong set in which he sang Jewish songs, or songs by Jewish composers, and someone played the bongos. So what?

In the evening I was taken to Williamsburg in Brooklyn, specifically to see the neighbourhood, which is predominantly Jewish – rather like a large Stamford Hill – but with a greater variety of clothes. There are many Jewish shops, schools, synagogues, and even a university. The people I met are very observant and the men seem to want nothing more than to study. Admirable – but who pays the bills?

**Monday.** I went to the Apple Store near Central Park. I realised that I could get free internet access there, rather than sitting in a not very comfortable McDonald's. I emailed a young clarinetist, Michael Winograd, whom I had heard on Sunday, and who had been recommended to me as someone with whom it would be interesting to talk. I arranged to meet him the next day.

In the evening I went to *Travelin' Music* at the Jewish Cultural Centre on Amsterdam and West 76<sup>th</sup>. The show was billed as *4,000 year history of the Jewish people – a musical comedy*. The book was by Lee Thuna with music by Charles Fox, the lyrics by Norman Gimbel. It was a staged reading, ie. one that is rehearsed but with no props nor costumes and the actors have books to read from. This was quite a clever conception. G-d and a colleague supervise a family through the years. The music was sub-sub Marvin Hamlisch. However, it was good fun. Max, played by Richard Kline, sent it up a bit and was not a good singer, but he held the audience. Jerry Matz (G-d) was excellent, as were Elyse Wolf and Joel Briel. The MD was Laurence Yurman, who played the piano and was a sensitive accompanist. Funnily enough, I was more enthusiastic about the piece than the rest of the small audience. Again, nothing to do with Klezmer, but plenty to do with Jewish life in New York.

### **Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> October**

I took the subway to deepest Brooklyn to meet Michael Winograd. He lives in Cortelyou, a mixed neighbourhood, but one that apparently contains many musicians who cannot afford to live in Manhattan. In fact, we met one, a pianist from *Klezmer Conservatory Band*. I interviewed Michael in a café. He is in his twenties and was recommended to me by a friend who met him at *Klezcamp* in Canada this year. Michael is interested in the more traditional interpretation of Klezmer, as am I. He had interesting things to say about the Klezmer scene in New York and mentioned people incorporating Klezmer into other

kinds of music without knowing much about it. This confirmed what I suspected. I tried to get him to comment on other musicians and he did: David Krakauer “too much circular breathing and jazz”. He also bemoaned the fact that the *Oyhoo Festival* did not contain much Klezmer. He said that it used to be mainly Klezmer, but it has now been somewhat diluted. (please listen to track 2 of the cd for the complete interview). I asked Michael if he would tell me the best place to go to buy Klezmer cds. He said that the *Workmen’s Circle* shop was best, so that is where I went next.

The Workmen’s Circle is on East 33<sup>rd</sup> Street and Park Avenue. The organisation describes itself on its website:

Created a century ago by immigrants as a mutual aid society, the organization became known for building bonds of support and community. WC/AR branches formed across North America, providing communities of fellowship and a visionary safety net of health and education services, aiding Jewish families throughout the life cycle. Hundreds of thousands of Jews have a historic link to The Workmen’s Circle. Chances are your family does too. Today, as in the past, The Workmen’s Circle is the welcoming home for new generations of Jewish families, cultivating Jewish community and culture, and standing up for social justice.

The book store there is comprehensive with many interesting Klezmer cds that I could not get in the UK, except by special order. I bought cds by *Di Shikere Kapelye*, *The Klezmatiks*, *Dave Tarras*, *David Krakauer and Socalled with Klezmer Madness*, another *David Krakauer with Klezmer Madness*, another by the *Klezmatiks* of songs by Woody Guthrie, *Andy Statman and David Grisman*, another by the *Klezmatiks*, *Yale Strom and Klazzj*, *Mikveh* (all women band), *Joel Rubin and Joshua Horowitz*, various groups on *A musical journey to Poland* and a dvd called *Sabbath in Paradise*. This is an interesting film, made in 1997 by Claudia Heuermann. It is a documentary about radical Jewish culture, with interviews and music played by Michael Alpert, Anthony Coleman, David Krakauer, Frank London, Roy Nathanson, Marc Ribot, Andy Statman and John Zorn. I am glad to say that the radicalness of this music has now, ten years later, become somewhat diluted. If it had not, I do not suppose there would be much of an audience for

it. Of course, it was the musicians who abandoned the avant garde, but whether that was because of a lack of audience, or whether it would have happened anyway, I am not sure. But if I compare it with the avant garde in contemporary so called *classical music* in the UK, then, the same thing happened. I can remember having to sit through many hours of this kind of experimental music when working in studios at the BBC. I tried my best to understand it and approach it with an open mind, but on the whole, I realised that it was performers' music and not listener's music.

In the evening I went to another Oyhoo concert – *Ghetto Cabaret Diaries, Two Premières*. The first – *Radical Amazement: a musical exploration into the poetry of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, was composed, played and sung by Basya Schechter. The songs were composed to poems from Abraham Joshua Heschel’s diary – *one of modern Judaism’s greatest spiritual authors, written between 1927 and 1933, which appeared in Warsaw when Heschel was only 26 years old. The show is a powerful song cycle; mixing elements of Leonard Cohen meets Kurt Weill with the theme reflecting the foundations of Heschel’s beliefs – struggles with radical spiritual striving to cure the world’s ills.* There were ten songs, all sung in Yiddish and scored for voice with guitar or oud, violin, cello, piano/accordion, percussion and trumpet. The arrangements were lovely, done by Uri Sharlin, also the pianist. Basya Schechter is a well known singer/composer. She runs a successful group called Pharaoh’s Daughter. She has a pure voice which she uses unselfconsciously. There are ornaments so subtle that they seem not to be there – they are integrated into her style. The vocal lines are based on Leonard Cohen or Joni Mitchell and the harmony is nothing special, apart from some unexpected modulations, but with the interesting, tasteful arrangements it added up to a moving cycle. Her commitment to this music is obvious. Heschel asks the questions we have all thought, but few have the courage to voice: *Haven’t the prayers of generations, then achieved some mercy from you, G-d? Our devotion, ardour, our lust for you – none of these considered?* Frank London played a *shofar* (ram’s horn used to welcome in the New Year) at the words *an alarm*. A moving moment.

In *Palaces in Time* there was a joyous chorus, with bells accompanying. *To a lady in a dream* was composed in a Middle Eastern style with oud accompaniment and some unison playing: *Grant me a breath, a finger’s touch; For a thousand hours of yearning Give me one word!*

The second work in the concert was a US première of *Diary of a Partisan: Resistance songs from the ghetto of Vilnius*. The diary is real; a partisan describing the humiliation of life in the ghetto. There was back projection of the translated words (as they were spoken in Italian) and of photographs of the ghetto. The narrator, guitar player and mandolin player was Amerigo Fontaini and other members of the Italian group *Oi Vey* were Gabriela Soltz (vocals), Ugo Galasso (clarinet) and Alessandro Moretti, accordion. This was all presented in a rather matter-of-fact way, which made it all the more moving. The photographs were difficult to look at, as was the prose hard to listen to. The scoring was effective, with partisans’ songs accompanied by photographs of the composers. A harrowing piece, but very much appreciated by the audience.

The next day, after lunch at the *Neue Gallerie* and failing to see the Klimt pictures, as that bit of the gallery was closed (not too disasterous as I saw them last year), I went to the *Avery Fisher Hall* to hear the New York Philharmonic conducted by Christoph von Dohnanyi. The first piece was English – Harrison Birtwistle’s *Night’s Black Bird*. It is scored for a huge orchestra and is based on Dowland’s lute song *In darkness let me dwell*. The other influence was Dürer’s engraving *Melancholia*. I enjoyed this work and I do not always enjoy Birtwistle’s music. The soloist in Sibelius’ *Violin Concerto* was Nikolaj Znaider. He makes a large, sweet sound, but there were interpretative passages, especially in the slow movement, that I did not like.

Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* was brisk, but effective. It was great to hear such a large violin sound – really different from English orchestras, where one often sees numbers of violinists, sawing away, but does not get the rich sound to go with them. The wind solos here were good too, with the acoustic of the hall letting through the winds to good effect. I could have done with more quiet playing though.

At the end of the concert, about a quarter of the audience simply stood up and went out – extraordinary. Most of the audience had left by the time the remaining people had stopped clapping. Didn’t they like it?

**Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> October** was the day of the *Yiddish Sing Along* and I met my friend from Philadelphia and we went to the Empire State Building – a place I last went to about forty years ago! Then to the Frick Collection – a wonderful gallery full of Gainsboroughs, Rembrandts, Van Dycks, Manets, etc. It is an Italianate style house with a pond indoors with fountains.

Then to West 83<sup>rd</sup> Street and the magnificent *Congregation Rodeph Sholom*. This is a huge Synagogue, built in Moorish style (see photographs) and with neo Norman arches and neo baronial hall ceiling. It was packed. The MC, Corey Breier, introduced various artists who sang two songs each. We, the audience, had the words transliterated into English and joined in with the singing. The band was Zalman Mlotek, keyboard, a double bass, a saxophone, Margot Leverett on clarinet and a violinst. The singers were Zalman Mlotek Maria Krupores, from Vilnius, Baysa Schechter, Ron Elivan, from Israel, Phyllis Berk, Reyna Schaechter, Jewish People’s Philharmonic Chorus, Carrie Chanin, Elizabeth Schwartz, Michael Fox, Robert Paul Abelson and Cantor Rebecca Garfein (she is the cantor of that Synagogue). The New Yiddish Chorale, Sarah Gordon, Lorin Sklamberg, Adrienne Cooper, Mitch Smolkin and Joanne Borts also sang. I am afraid that most of the songs are sentimental and musically not very interesting. However, what an event, with a number of young people present. My friend told me that you can have a career in New York, as a singer of Yiddish songs – *oi veh!*

On **Friday** I went to the Tenement Museum. We toured two apartments in Orchard Street, the first from the 1890s. Apparently this particular house had been unoccupied since the 1940s and little had been done to it before that. They have re-created the apartments to show how people lived and worked in a couple of rooms. They had done some research on the occupants and had the census records for that building.

On **Saturday** evening I went to the JCC again to hear the first performance of *Atonement*, an oratorio adapted, composed and directed by Elizabeth Swados. She is a famous Broadway director, according to the woman next to me. Well, not surprisingly, it looked and sounded like *A Chorus Line*, though not as good. The young singers were all trained to sound alike and to be next in line for Phantom, I suppose. They were very committed though, and performed well. There were solos, trios, and choruses. It was agreeable; quite good even, though not memorable. The texts she set were short. It was all about taking responsibility for bad things that go on and how we cope and learn from them. It began and ended with settings from the *Yom Kippur* Service.

In all the times I have been in New York, I had never been to Carnegie Hall, until **Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> October**. Joshua Bell was playing with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, conducted by Roberto Abbado (a nephew of Claudio's). The first piece was by Joan Tower, a composer in residence. *In Memory* is an emotional piece, competently written, with clear lines. The language is not difficult nor new, but it is a worthwhile work.

Joshua Bell was the soloist in Barber's *Violin Concerto*. He plays beautifully with a large but always sweet sound, effortless intonation and expression. After the interval he played a new work by a sixteen-year-old boy who was sitting two rows in front of me, Jay Greenberg. That a sixteen-year-old can write a twenty-four minute concerto is laudable; but whether it should be played by Joshua Bell in Carnegie Hall, is another matter. Jay Greenberg had done his homework on instrumentation, but this was just a collection of bits of other concertos. There was nothing of substance; no structure, just the usual kind of melodies you find in Romantic concertos. The audience went wild, of course. I am afraid this English person did not and I refused to stand to applaud this stuff. It will be interesting to see if he turns into a real composer, or if he goes on producing this note - spinning, money- making music. I see that he is already a Sony BMG artist.

Suddenly, it was my last day. After lunch in New Jersey with friends, I went back to the *Workmen's Circle* in the evening, to go to Jeff Warschauer's Klezmer class. This is a weekly class with adult instrumentalists of mixed abilities. Jeff teaches tunes by getting

people to sing them first, with the Yiddish words. Then, comes the playing. There was some experimentation in playing in Freygish (a mode) and in other keys. Everyone gets a chance to play on their own and gets personal help from Jeff. The members of the class were all interested and committed and friendly.

I interviewed Jeff after the class (audio cd track 3). He is interesting and I would have liked to talk to him for longer, but the caretaker wanted us to leave . . . . In addition to describing the New York Klezmer scene, he talked about his education work in California. I shall have to talk to him again when he comes over for Klezfest in London.

## **CONCLUSION**

This trip enabled me to see the Klezmer scene in New York with a clearer perspective. What I learned was that Klezmer there is linked to the Yiddish culture which is thriving – hence the mixture in *Oyhoo* of Yiddish and Klezmer musics.

There is a predominantly male group of musicians who play Klezmer and who are religiously observant.

The level of scholarship is high amongst Klezmer musicians, with several being academics or people who have high academic qualifications.

They are open minded about the current scene and, even if they don't want to use a DJ, are perfectly happy that others do, and will even go and hear them play.

## **WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?**

The most exciting thing that has happened to me is that I now have a Klezmer duo with an accordion player. We have so far only played in two concerts, but we are working on repertoire and doing our own arrangements. What I learned from this trip is helping me set up this duo and makes me feel better qualified to do so. Apart from that, although it is connected, I intend to do some education work using Klezmer. It will be useful, as children of all abilities will be able to join in and if they cannot play a tune, they can play an accompaniment.

I had a wonderful time . Thank you Gerald Finzi!