

# Klezmer and concert bands ~ an unexpected wedding

Itamar Danziger

I am a Kitchener-based composer, and am particularly interested in marrying several worlds. Predominantly, I love fusing Classical with Klezmer music styles.

Klezmer is the music style developed by Jews of Eastern Europe, likely starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Actually, Klezmer seems to have originally evolved in a folksy manner, in that various local styles of music were espoused and adapted by those Jews, ranging from synagogue cantorial music to various broader Eastern European folk melodies as well as Balkan, Turkish, and Classical music. In the late 1800s, a Jewish immigration wave came from Europe to North America, and brought Klezmer along. As a porous musical style, some forms of Jazz were then also integrated into some North American Klezmer. Klezmer was originally played by small groups in settings such as weddings and such social events. Most of the music was originally not annotated, but learned by ear, with the musicians often being unable to read notes as classical musicians do. With that, many of those Klezmer players were very virtuosic.

Pieces were generally tied to a function: dance pieces, songs, prayers, reflective chants, reflective melodies (i.e. called Doina). There were also various pieces dedicated to specific parts of the Jewish wedding, such as processions. There is even a piece dedicated to the bride and groom's parents, should they want to resolve tensions through dancing together at their children's wedding.

A central part of the Klezmer style is that a piece of music does not get its main merit from its melody, harmony, or rhythm alone. Instead, much value is given to the feel of the piece, as often also portrayed through dynamics and ornamentation. The ornamentation is usually not annotated, but is strongly expected, and is chosen at the discretion of the performer. The ornaments are seen as crucial to making the Klezmer piece be played convincingly and beautifully. Klezmer often values a piece performed in a manner that mimics the human emotional affect. The pieces often try to convey the human voice, heart beats, or various parts of



the dancing body. For example, the performer is expected to infuse a melodic line sound like a genuine sigh, laugh, various types of cry, yelp, or shrill. A vibrato is expected to be similar to the vibrato of the human voice speaking an experienced feeling. As genuineness is expected, each performer will ornament in different ways and in different places within the melody.

To play such ornaments convincingly, they have to be clear, mirroring actual experiences, and importantly, not exaggerated. The dramatic effect of those ornaments is not their extravagance, but their ability to be personal and evocative. It may be acceptable to the Klezmer audience that a bass-line may overtake a melody, should the bass-line be needed to recharge the dancers, as bass-lines often mimic the limbs of the dancers. The key is to convince the listener's experience that the music is played in a deeply emotional and genuine manner. Such playing has evocative qualities to it, and I have heard the term "intersubjectivity" to describe such a phenomenon. I would love to have neurologists study the interplay between Klezmer and mirror neurons.

It seems to me that Klezmer makes an assumption about its own music and related feelings. Specifically, Klezmer assumes that each feeling also contains its complementary opposite. Sadness and happiness are intertwined, as are mourning and a rebirthing relief. A related assumption is that visiting the sadder side of feeling through music (and related song or dance) often has a relieving effect. Furthermore, emotions are deemed to be experienced in a deeper and richer way than on a merely cerebral level. Such emotional intertwining is reflected in klezmer's use of mode changes combined with ornaments reflective of human emotive inflections.

Within the Klezmer band, the rhythm and bass lines give the frame to the piece, the higher voices are given the melody. Intermediary pitched instruments are given the function of supporting the melody harmonically (I.e. alto/tenor voices), and/or connecting the base with the melodic instruments (tenor-baritone instruments). In some forms of Klezmer dances, polyrhythms are definitional, such as when 4/4 and 8/8 (3+3+2) are played simultaneously, creating a torsion helpful to dancing.

Heterophony is also commonly used in klezmer where each player plays



a varied version of the melody, with some even playing rubato (while others not necessarily Rubato-ing). The Klezmer polyrhythms and heterophony techniques, are expected to be personally derived for the sake of emoting, and therefore, not necessarily annotated, nor necessarily repeated at the next performance of the same piece by the same performers.

Melodically, modes often change, between sections of a piece, and sometimes even within a phrase. Beyond the major and minor modes, altered Phrygian, Dorian and Mixolydian modes are quite common.

I grew up in a musical family, with my mother being an opera singer. Music, namely classical music, was a given in the house. All four children ended up playing an instrument. I started playing the clarinet at age seven. For my eleventh birthday, my mother bought me a CD of clarinet music with the assumption that I would appreciate the clarinet part of the music, as I played the clarinet. The CD is Giora Feidman's "The Singing Clarinet". It seems funny how different people hear different things in the same music. Unlike my mother's expectation, I got excited by the Klezmer, more than by the centrality of the clarinet in that CD. My love for Klezmer and its raw emoting was in stark contrast to the refined esthetic I perceived in the classical music I also enjoyed. The passion for Klezmer grew in me with each exposure to that style of music.

My first attempt at composing music was during a time I was grounded, as many children have experienced. I was eleven years old, and was made to stay at home for an afternoon while the family was out. Stuck in a house with nothing to do, and a lonely piano, I made staff paper out of blank papers, and wrote something... probably musically incoherent. When my parents returned home, I was excited to show them my new artwork. My parents were confused as they were unsure what to make of a punishment that turned into an enjoyable activity for me!

At some point, a Canadian composer named Srul Irving Glick became a family friend, and I was exposed to his music. Srul often combined Klezmer with classical music, much to my awe! The more I spoke with him about music, the more he encouraged me to write.

Throughout primary and secondary school, I did some composing, and I got my first theory/composing lessons, from Michael Leibson. Most of my compositions were for small groups, and combined classical and Klezmer styles, and performed in school talent shows.

But the passion of composing is hard to modulate. While studying social work in university, I continued private composition studies with Dr. Michael Damian, alongside my social work degree.

After my university studies, I entered the workforce as a social worker, and began playing in community concert bands wherever I lived. Some people go to the gym, some to concert band, and I am sure that some do both.

Moving to Kitchener in 2015, I first joined the Kitchener Musical Society Band (KMSB), at the time, conducted by Dave Davidson. A funny idea came to me: if I can write for a small group, why not a big group? Dave and the KMSB were open to reading one and then another piece I wrote – or more accurately, pieces for clarinet and piano that I rewrote for concert band. It did not go well! That is, the orchestra was wonderful but the pieces I brought along had so many technical issues, some to specific instruments, and some related to the interactions between instruments. Then, with Dave and KMSB's help, I started writing for concert band after learning from the KMSB musicians more about orchestration and composing for concert bands. In the summer of 2017, my first concert band piece was performed by the KMSB. It is called "Kitchener Bulgar", and is dedicated to Dave and the KMSB for their support in my learning process. That piece went on to have performances in Montreal and the USA.

On a side note, a bulgar is a type of Klezmer dance, and within the Klezmer world, pieces are often named in dedication to a location dear to the originator of





the piece; thus the name “Kitchener Bulgar”.  
My next mission was the Christmas concert. Often, Christmas concert band concerts include a seasonally appropriate Hannukah piece. So I wrote a three movement piece called “Latkes Suite” for the KMSB 2017 Christmas concert. Just for the record, Latkes are a type of food popularly eaten during Hannukah. That piece showcases elements of three types of Klezmer pieces. The middle movement, named Nigun, visits traditional Hannukah songs, but with modal variations. Within the Klezmer terminology, a Nigun is a type of hummable, possibly reflective melody. Latkes Suite too went on to be performed in Canada and abroad.

I attend KlezKanada regularly. Klezkanada is an annual immersive and participatory Klezmer festival held in the Laurentians area, north of Montreal. With “Latkes Suite”, I started taking in my concert band scores to Klezkanada for feedback regarding Klezmer writing. The musicians offered me rich feedback about Klezmer writing. With that, there was a growing awareness of conceptual gaps between existing concert band repertoire and traditional Klezmer style. I therefore set to experiment with fusing various elements of Klezmer into my writing.

For example, “Andalusian Dance”, experiments with infusing the “Terkisher” rhythmic/dance gait, “Naomi’s Nigun”, echoes a Klezmer-Jazz piece common in the 1920s adding phrygian modes to the (swung) mix, and “From Darkness Into Light” and “Arbutus Dance”: each offers much room for parts within instrument sections to emote using Klezmer ornaments.

Within those compositional experiments, the Kitchener Musical Society Band, their musicians, and their conductors (Dave Davidson and then Josh Crouch) have been crucial in helping me learn the trade, through reading and programming my music. Beyond the regular orchestration advice that I received, the players also asked many helpful questions, which allowed me to be aware of issues to be considered when composing Klezmer for concert bands. For example:

- 1) If Klezmer prizes the individual voice’s emotionality through mimicking of the human voice’s fluctuations, how can one do that when multiple people share a part, and instrument sections may have multiple parts of each instrument?
- 2) How can I convey the stylistic and emotional aesthetic to people less familiar with it, and therefore, less naturally able to emote it well?

To the former point, I try to add solo passages within pieces, to allow those ornaments to be present, without overdoing the ornament. After all, a sigh should not be a croak. I do though feel torn between writing in too many ornaments and dynamics into my scores, as on one hand, it aids the musicians to understand the music’s intention, but on the other hand, it may take away from the spontaneity that may be warranted towards a sense of genuineness in the emotive elements of the music.

To the latter point, I often explain to players and conductors the feelings of given musical phrases in universal terms. For example, I would ask musicians to sing (or dance to) their parts, and then add a story to their singing/dancing that evokes the wanted feeling. I find it very moving to notice that each performance of a piece of mine is played differently, by each concert band; it is truly rewarding to hear how each band emotes genuinely (and therefore uniquely) through my compositions.

The novelty of writing Klezmer for concert band was recently echoed at the Bubbe Awards 2023 finalist ceremony, based in Sao Paulo, Brazil. My piece, Arbutus Dance (performed by the Greater Victoria Concert Band), won a prize in that competition. The presenter of the ceremony noted that she has

never seen that size of group perform Klezmer. The Bubbe Awards are an annual international Klezmer competition.

It seems to me that the more KMSB and I engage in fruitful dialogue around writing for, and performing Klezmer within the concert band, the more other concert bands begin to take interest in my pieces. Paradoxically, based on KMSB performances of my pieces, I have also been asked to rewrite the concert band pieces for smaller groups, such as those Klezmer was originally played by.

Based on my interactions with musicians, it seems that the biggest challenge to having my music performed is convincing that a niche-style piece is worth programming. After all, my music is competing with great music that is more familiar to players and audiences alike. Familiarity seems to be a highly valued factor on the programming decision level. After all, as explained to me multiple times, conductors often aim for the hard job of trying to make audiences or players happy, or at least conserve rehearsal time. Playing a piece of music with an emoting style novel to the musicians risks the piece not sounding ideal, or take extra effort to first understand the piece, and work to make it sound deeply and genuinely evocative.

In this ongoing journey, I am beginning to appreciate the beauty of the complexity in which emoting has universal and particular elements, both of which may be necessary towards making music sound great.



photos

p.11  
composer Itamar Danziger  
Jewish musicians of Rohatyn (west Ukraine)  
Issachar Ber Ryback - Wedding Ceremony  
Issachar Ber Ryback - Wedding Ceremony

p.12  
Description from YIVO Encyclopedia: “Tanz der Marschelik, Spassmacher (Dance of the Marshelik, Jester). Illustration by an artist identified only as “M.D.,” 1902. Postcard published by A.F.T. Drawing depicting a badkhn (Marshelik) at a Hasidic wedding. (YIVO)”

Except for Itamar Danzinger, all photos from Wikipedia

# One thousand pieces of gold

Ben Wallace

In celebration of the solar eclipse, we are proud to present the world premiere of Justin Lapierre’s **One Thousand Shields of Gold**. After 2024, we will not experience another total solar eclipse in our part of the world for over a century; this new choral work meditates on what our Earth will have become by that time. Paired with Justin’s new work is **Fauré’s Requiem**, a musical depiction of the “flight of the soul to heaven” that explores the interplay between light and dark.

Our concert features a choir and chamber ensemble of young artists directed by **Ben Wallace**, with soloists **Cassandra Amorim** ( s o p r a n o ) , **A u t u m n Debassige**(mezzo-soprano), **Grace Ronan** (mezzo-soprano), **Xander Bechard** (tenor), and **Dante Mullin-Santone** (baritone). Performances will take place at Dublin Street United Church (Guelph) on **June 1 at 7:30pm** and at the Church of St. John the Evangelist (Kitchener) on **June 2 at 3:00pm**.

# free Noon Hour concerts in Kitchener

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**May 1** voice/ string quartet  
**May 8** organ  
**May 15** handbell quartet  
**May 22** flute, cello, piano  
**May 29** Shoreline Chorus  
**June 5** piano  
**June 12** clarinet, cello, piano  
**June 19** song settings for Shakespeare