

BIBAC 2016 Conference - Abstract Submission template

Title of presentation:

'Klezmer returns to college' - intercultural experience and social engagement through musical performance

Type of presentation:

Paper

Symposium

Workshop

Poster

Themes:

- (i) The politics of what we do in intercultural and interdisciplinary spaces in terms of the entanglements of power, privilege and people
- (ii) Creativities, collaborations and the intersections of Arts and Science
- (iii) Intercultural voices from research, practice, and theory
- (iv) Transformations through Music Neuroscience Research
- (v) Innovations in Sonic and Digital Arts Practice
- (vi) Cultural, Relational and Intercultural Musicology practices: reframed and redefined
- (vii) Sound, Sight and Movement in Performing Arts Education
- (viii) Rituals of Cultures as sites for learning in and through the arts

Authors + affiliations

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Bio (No more than 150 words)

Richard Fay - a Lecturer in Education (intercultural communication & TESOL) at the University of Manchester - and Ros Hawley - a freelance klezmer musician and music for health practitioner (the focus of her current doctoral studies) - are the founding Co-Directors of The University of Manchester's klezmer ensemble, the Michael Kahan Kapelye (the only assessed klezmer ensemble in the UK Higher Education context). Elinor "Ellie" Sherwood - currently studying for a Masters in Ethnomusicology - is a product of that ensemble, now performing with the L'chaim Kapelye. Together, employing an interculturality-framed appropriate methodology approach, they are currently researching the teaching and learning of klezmer within a conservatoire context in the UK, and the performance of klezmer for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences in the city and beyond.

Abstract: (Your abstract should be 800 - 1000 words)

In this paper, having introduced the music-culture known as klezmer (a word combining the Hebrew words klei and zemer and translatable as 'vessel of sound'), we outline our approach to teaching it in recent years in a UK conservatory-type context in which Western Classical music is prioritised, and then reflect on the broadening of our students' musical, cultural, and contextual horizons through engagement with, and performance of, klezmer.

As widely discussed (e.g. Rogovoy, 2000; Sapoznik, 1981, 1999/2001; Slobin, 2000, 2002; Strom, 2002), the genre of music now known as 'Klezmer' has roots dating back to the Middle Ages and was originally an integral part of the wedding (and other) celebrations of the often Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jewish communities in central and eastern Europe. Those communities experienced great oppression throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and were very largely destroyed during the Holocaust. However, this music-culture survived as a result of emigration and the resulting establishment of diaspora communities especially in the USA. Recordings made in the early part of the 20th century in this New World context (and, as recently discovered in the EMI archives, also in Europe) captured some of the Old World sound and provide invaluable access to an otherwise lost sonic and cultural world. As the century progressed, these recordings also evidenced the desire, to quote a local radio jingle of the time, for 'Jewish melodies in swing', i.e. for a mixing of Old and New World musical sensibilities. Then, as the emigrants settled, and their children and grandchildren became a part of the American melting pot, klezmer almost disappeared completely. It seemed that this shtetl-music had limited relevance and resonance in the new cultural setting where few wanted to remember the Old World experience of being Jewish. However, for the revivalists of the 1970s and 1980s, sufficient recordings had been archived and enough older klezmerim (i.e. klezmer musicians) remained to ensure that American klezmer could be rekindled and reframed as part of the contemporary music-scape. Since then, and not without controversy, klezmer has mushroomed into a transglobal world music genre with a widely distributed pool of players and aficionados. But what this might mean varies from context to context. For example, the reappearance of klezmer in countries such as Germany and Poland (from which the Jewish presence had all but been eradicated) has led to some commentators to speak of cultural appropriation whereas others view the revived forms in terms of cultural translation (Waligorska, 2013).

A starting point for our teaching of klezmer lies with the teaching in the 1970s/80s in the USA by the revivalists, an approach described, for example, in Netsky's seminal chapter, "Klez goes to college" (2004). However, our context is substantially different. We have been teaching klezmer in a UK university department for the last five years only – an initiative which, echoing Netsky's work, we describe as 'klezmer returns to college'. Given that the available klezmer pedagogy relates to an earlier era and to a particular musical, cultural, and educational context, we needed to develop an approach, shaped by the pioneering work of others, but nonetheless reframed to be appropriate for our time and context. A further source of pedagogical inspiration lay with the traditions of Performing Ethnomusicology (e.g. Krüger, 2009; Schippers, 2010; Solis, 2004) and with World Music Education (e.g. Campbell, 1996; Campbell et al, 2005). Additionally, we brought an intercultural purposefulness (e.g. Field, 2010) to our thinking, and we sought to challenge the givens of our field, to be socially transformative (re our students' engagement with local audiences, Jewish and non-Jewish), and to enact in some ways the developing traditions of Applied Ethnomusicology (e.g. Harrison, Mackinlay & Pettan, 2010). In the paper, we outline the main characteristics of the approach we have developed as shaped by these diverse possibilities.

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Each year, a group of between 8-15 students learn to play klezmer, a genre which for them is typically an unfamiliar musical idiom flowing from unfamiliar cultural roots. By the end of their taught time with us they must be able to perform klezmer, a musical 'Other' for them, to audiences significantly Jewish in make-up (another cultural 'Other' for our students). This world music (klezmer) education process generates not only a dialogue between differing music-cultures (and their associated forms, and learning and performance styles, of which we will say more in the paper), but also a dialogue between the disciplines of Ethnomusicology and Intercultural Communication (especially concerning the criticality with which 'culture' is used). Further, most of those teaching and learning klezmer in this 21st century Mancunian (UK) context are not from a Jewish background and, whilst for some this might be seen as part of the aforementioned cultural appropriation, we believe that it has enabled purposeful intercultural dialogue through music. It also represents a process of social engagement which is playing an important role in the developing cultural weave of our city, as well as helping to shape our students' musically-framed understandings of the cultural and intercultural.

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