Clarinet: A Study on Klezmer Music

Jewish Music has drastically changed in the last two centuries, adapting with society and culture. Two centuries ago, Jewish music was much more traditional, focusing mainly on incantations and synagogue-inspired music. However, as Jews moved and integrated their surrounding influences into their own style, different subgenres began to emerge, like Klezmer Music. This subgenre falls into the category of Secular Jewish Music, which strays away from tradition and synagogue-like music. This music was made for dancing and singing, and was commonly seen at weddings, parties, and get-togethers. As Jews moved across Europe, Klezmer music's influence was spread throughout, adapting with each culture that it encountered. This is the reason that Klezmer music is so radically diverse. Some of the major influences were Romanian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian music. Later on, Klezmer music was introduced to America, which ended up influencing the jazz movement in the early 20th century. But with all these influences and changes to the genre, is it still actually considered Jewish Music? What exactly is Klezmer music? How did Klezmer music influence the world? This is one of the topics that I will discuss in more detail, in order to get a better understanding on the nature of Klezmer Music.

Before fully diving into this subject, it is important to understand exactly what Klezmer Music is. This genre mainly utilizes string instruments like the violin, the upright bass, and the hammered dulcimer. The reason for this is that these string instruments can create sounds that truly echo the musician's feelings and emotions. These musicians could imitate laughing, crying, and other sounds that simply could not be imitated on other instruments. For this same reason, brass instruments and the clarinet were also highly valued instruments in Klezmer Music. In the case of the clarinet, musicians had access to a wide range of octaves and sounds, which helped to let the musician better manipulate the instrument in order to express themselves easier. (Schnotz) As seen, the key focus in these instruments is that they allow the musician to openly show their emotions, soul, and feelings through the instrument. For this reason, Klezmer music is traditionally much more focused on using instruments in song rather than vocals. This concept is seen in the meaning of the name Klezmer, which is actually a combination of the Hebrew words "kley" and "zemer". The meaning of these words is "instrument of song", which reflects the traditional emphasis on the use of instruments rather than voice to make music. (study.com) The main concept behind this was that it was believed that singing was too restrictive and did not allow the true freedom of expression that an instrument would allow. With an instrument, you could play several notes in small spans of time, which the human voice would struggle to do. However, as time passed, Yiddish folk-singing was introduced as Klezmer music became more and more modernized. Additionally, other instruments were thrown into the mix like the accordion, piano, and trumpet.

There is one main theme that can be seen throughout the history of Klezmer music, which is that it always adapted to the culture it was in. In fact, Klezmer music is actually its own "unique style out of a variety of local musical styles."(Maxwell) For example, in areas like Ukraine, Jewish musicians were not allowed, so they played quieter instruments like the clarinet and the violin. (study.com) However later on into the 19th century, as Jews became less oppressed, brass instruments like the trumpet and trombone were introduced into Klezmer Music. (Huntington) This same theme of musical adaptation is seen during the period when Klezmer

music began to mix with American jazz music. During the Dixieland movement in the early 20th century, Klezmer music began to take influence from American jazz, incorporating the clarinet, drums, piano, and upright bass. This mash-up included the rhythmic feel of hot jazz but also introduced both the melancholic yet energetic sounds from Jewish music. Klezmer musicians loved the ideas of improvisation and driving beats. This is why during this time, Klezmer musicians shifted from a more traditional style to jazz. Not much later, Dixieland gave way to a brand new kind of jazz – Big band. This style had a louder and more “fat” sound to it that seemed to fill the room. It was fast, loud, and made you want to get up and dance all night long. In other words, it was extremely similar to Klezmer music, seeing that Klezmer music is mainly used for dancing, singing, and for big events.

One thing that makes Klezmer music unique is the fact that its rhythm and feel are distinguished and easily recognizable. It generally does not follow the typical 4/4 time like most music, and it usually has a completely different style and tempo. Ari Davidow describes the feel, saying, “It doesn't bounce, it flows. It swings, it cries.”(Davidow) This is one of the reason that when Jews came to America, Jewish musicians started experimenting with jazz and improvisation. Klezmer music is upbeat, yet has a hint of blues, which are reminiscent of the hardships that Jews have endured throughout history. One commonly known Klezmer song that illustrates the upbeat nature of the genre is ‘Hava Nagila’. The song has a fast tempo, and typically is performed with string instruments and an accordion. However, the interesting thing is that this song mainly utilizes minor chords. Nevertheless, the song still sounds joyous and very upbeat. This is commonly seen in most Klezmer music, as melancholic roots are put into fun and lively tempo to create a unique sound.

Klezmer music has been played in a variety of places throughout history; however, the main place that it would take place at would be a wedding ceremony. Rather than differentiating themes through different songs, there were four “types” of music that musicians would play. These types were Doyne, Khusid’l, Freylekhs, and Hora. (About Klezmer Music)The Doyne is an emotional improvisation that is mainly focused on displaying the musician’s skill and emotion. The Doyne was most typically played at the beginning of an event, while the bride is taking her seat. A Khusid’l is a slower song mainly for dancing which is heavily influenced by Hasidic dancing. Its rhythm was unique, as it downbeat was very strong, making it so guests would stomp along with it. (About Klezmer Music) Freylekhs were much more upbeat and supposedly meant to give the dancers “a sense of forward motion.”(About Klezmer Music) Freylekhs and Khusidl were the two main dancing songs out of all of the four types. Lastly, the Hora was a Romanian-influenced melody that was used towards the end of the event as they escorted the wedding party. (About Klezmer Music)

Klezmer music may traditionally be purely instrumental, it is still necessary to note the importance of the Yiddish language and how it was used in later Klezmer music. In fact, Klezmer music was heavily influenced by Yiddish singing in synagogues, as well as Hassidic praises. (Maxwell) The Yiddish language connected the Eastern-European Jews, creating a central language that was used for songs, prayers, and conversation. In today’s time, Yiddish singing and chanting is often mixed into Klezmer songs, but some consider it not “true” Klezmer music. The Yiddish singing is not used as the main melody. Instead, it complements the rhythm and pace of the instruments playing along. Like in ‘Hava Nagila’, a simple repeated phrase is all that is needed, and yet the singing seems almost essential to the song.

In conclusion, Klezmer music is most definitely still Jewish music, even if it is secular. It is a

unique blend of Eastern-European Jewish music, and serves almost as a timeline for Jewish history past the Middle Ages. While it may not be considered pure and traditional Jewish music, it is still clear to see that Klezmer music is still very much Jewish music. The indistinguishable mix of melancholy with liveliness is present in both traditional Jewish music and Klezmer music. I think what is more interesting however, is how the different Klezmer revivals illustrate how Eastern-European Jews integrated into new places and cultures. From living in hardship in Russia, to coming to America, the changes in the music styles and lyrics paints a picture of their history. It is also intriguing to see how Jewish music has influenced so many other genres of music. Whether it is rock, or hip hop, or folk, or jazz, Jewish music and its unique tones and sounds can be heard quite frequently. Nevertheless, it is impossible to overlook the fact that not only is Klezmer music a form of Jewish music, but it is also the most important part of Jewish Music, as it portrays its history and modernization.

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