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BOOK REVIEW

New York Klezmer in the Early Twentieth Century: The Music of Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras, by Joel E. Rubin, Rochester, University of Rochester Press (Eastman/Rochester Studies Ethnomusicology), 2020, xvii, 483 pp., \$95.00 (hardback), ISBN-13: 978-1-58046-598-4; \$24.99 (eBook), ISBN-13: 978-1-78744-831-5

With the resurgence of klezmer music in the late twentieth century and its subsequent turn into a global phenomenon, the repertoire and culture of the klezmer past and present has become a subject of scholarly inquiry in musicology-at-large (that is, ethnomusicology, historical musicology, and theory) and in cultural studies. The last twenty years alone saw a surge of studies, culminating in nearly one thousand publications that appeared largely around the world's northern hemisphere, from the United States and Canada to various European countries, Israel, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, China and Japan—a “klezmer turn,” as it were. Amongst this plethora of publications are a few dozen books, some of which discuss klezmer music peripherally, others center on it. Joel Rubin was amongst the first to canonize klezmer in musicology, most notably with his monograph in German, *Klezmer-Musik*, coauthored with Rita Ottens in 1999, a significant year for klezmer scholarship indeed.¹ Momentous publications followed, from Mark Slobin's *Fiddler on the Move* to Yale Strom's *Book of Klezmer*, Hankus Netsky's *Klezmer: Music and Community in Twentieth-Century Jewish Philadelphia*, to Walter Zev Feldman's monumental *Klezmer: Music, History and Memory*.² As with many of these authors, Rubin is both an accomplished performer and a seasoned scholar, and with *New York Klezmer in the Early Twentieth Century* he has provided an impressively comprehensive study that centers on two of klezmer's greats: the clarinetists Naftule Brandwein (1884–1963) and Dave Tarras (1895–1989). Rubin approached this subject over a vast narrative of nearly five hundred pages, and he does so with in-depth knowledge and eloquence.

To begin, Rubin's first chapter provides the reader with a short history of klezmer in Europe in order to lay the foundation for what is to come. Indeed, as Rubin states in his introduction, “it's not possible to fully understand American klezmer music without knowledge of European history” (p. 5). After a broad overview of Jewish life in towns and cities, he then focuses specifically on the role of music in Jewish eastern Europe in order to trace the emergence of klezmer as a culture. The klezmer *kapelye* as a nineteenth-century phenomenon receives particular attention. Rubin also details the klezmer's differing performance contexts, such as the Jewish wedding, the military, and events by various non-Jewish groups.

These preliminaries lead to the first substantial chapter, which brings the reader straight to New York. Rubin begins by sketching life in the Yiddish-speaking

¹See Joel Rubin and Rita Ottens, *Klezmer-Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1999). The same year saw the publications of Susan Bauer, *Von der Khupe zum Klezkamp: Klezmer Musik in New York* (Berlin: Piranha, 1999); and Henry (Hank) Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1999).

²Mark Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move: Exploring the Klezmer World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Yale Strom *The Book of Klezmer: The History, the Music, the Folklore* (Chicago: A Cappella, 2002); Hankus Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community in Twentieth-Century Jewish Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); and Walter Zev Feldman, *Klezmer: Music, History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Over ten years ago, Yale Strom had briefly chronicled the life and work of Dave Tarras, *Dave Tarras: The King of Klezmer* (Tel Aviv: OR-TAV Music Publications, 2010).

neighborhoods of the city in general and the musical and entertainment culture among the Jewish immigrants in particular to provide context for the work of the immigrant instrumentalists he discusses next. These musicians, *musikants* and *yardniks* (literally, those who performed in the yards), receive particular scrutiny, their differing career paths traced in the context of patterns of immigration as well as unions and other professional networks, such as the *landsmanschaftn*, i.e. societies of Jewish immigrants from the same European town or region that provided various kinds of support. These and other milieus such as the *khevres* or brotherhoods also give insight into the evolving musical tastes of the audiences which, according to Rubin, became more sophisticated over time (p. 55). With changes of expectation regarding esthetics came the transformation of klezmer *kapelyes* on the grounds of New York, which Rubin thoroughly unravels through a discussion of freelance structures, repertoire, and performance practice, as well as changing instrumentation, the role of the bandleader, wages, forms of employment, and more. Rubin goes into great detail sketching the grounds on which Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras developed and revealed their musicianship, capturing the klezmer as a social unit and addressing their language, and so on. Further narrowing his focus on place and space, Rubin proceeds to paint a detailed picture of New York's klezmer performance contexts which, apart from weddings, extended to other ritual contexts as well as secular environments such as resorts, cafés and restaurants, dance halls, the Yiddish theater, and radio. The klezmer participated in political events and mixed with the Jewish underworld. They also appeared in non-Jewish contexts, integrating into mainstream popular music and performing for other ethnic groups.

The two subsequent shorter chapters focus on commercial 78-rpm recordings and on the classification of klezmer music. This classification is first approached in general terms, followed by a specific take on the klezmer repertoire of 1920s New York, only to take a close look at the recordings of Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras, accompanied by a tabular overview of the same. As Rubin asserts, the commercial recording industry had a decisive impact on music making and yet early-twentieth-century recordings, given their limitations, are significantly different from live performances. Similarly nuanced is Rubin's approach to repertoire classification, which he recognizes as potentially problematic. Such classification is nonetheless necessary as it provides the ground for the substantial analytical chapters that follow.

In his fifth chapter, Rubin turns to compositional elements and scrutinizes the modality of klezmer music. He examines the criteria of scale, cadential formulas, variable tones, and modulation to develop a model of modal behavior and melodic conventions based on the metric klezmer recordings of Brandwein and Tarras. This deep modal analysis is accompanied by ample music examples. By way of conclusion, Rubin identifies four basic modal scales which interact in various ways. These modal practices influence klezmer's performance practice.

The sixth chapter then turns to performance practice to show that klezmer music is not merely a formula at the compositional level—a piecing together of figures, phrases, section-segments, and entire section structures based on the four basic modal scales—but that similar processes are taking place at the ornamental-improvisational level. Klezmer music's standard figures tend to be ornamented and varied with specific combinations drawn from a limited palette of basic gestures. Rubin provides insight into ornamentation as a key stylistic characteristic, followed by a basic overview of clarinet ornaments and articulation patterns, which he divides into two main groups, according to technique of production: ornaments produced by changes to fingerings (with or without involvement of the tongue) and by changes to the embouchure and throat muscles (with or without the involvement of fingerings and tonguing). Within these groups, Rubin further

subdivides ornaments by similarities in their characteristics, providing a granular level of detail on each, unequalled in any literature. This deep structural analysis is accompanied by ample musical examples. Rubin also discusses performance-practice techniques, among them variation, substitution, subdivision, insertion and deletion, expansion and contraction, as well as rubato and agogic accents. He then goes on to analyze how these aspects operate within the framework of a complete performance, showing the crucial roles of alternation and combination in creating variations and comparing performances of the same tune as played by Brandwein and Tarras. The results of this comparison are perhaps not unexpected: the performances differ in the specific ornaments used. Both are usually in agreement which pitches to ornament, but differ in their solution of how to do it. Rubin ascribes the differences to Tarras's greater reliance on the technique of melodic subdivisions and greater ornamental density and tone density than Brandwein's—a testimony to his more technical approach to clarinet playing overall. As Rubin concludes, Tarras's playing also points “toward the transition from an eastern European to an American style of klezmer clarinet playing” (p. 259).

In the last chapter, an epilogue of sorts, Rubin goes beyond his core period of inquiry, taking a broad look at post-1929 developments. As such he traces the klezmer tradition's decline, followed by its revitalization, and the impact Brandwein and Tarras had on subsequent generations of musicians. The subsequent apparatus comprises an impressive 200 pages that begin with a Glossary of Terms, which makes the book accessible to non-Yiddish speakers and those not well-versed in the klezmer culture. Rubin's references and documentation of sources and bibliography are thorough and comprehensive; he also includes audio recordings, films and video recordings, archival sources, interviews and personal recollections, as well as books, articles, and sheet music, the three of which are itemized under one heading, though it would have been helpful to list sheet music separately. The thorough index also indicates illustrations and musical examples, a necessity given the plethora of the latter (over one hundred altogether) but also a testimony to Rubin's meticulous authorship.

New York Klezmer in the Early Twentieth Century comes with a companion website, maintained by Rubin at <https://www.newyorkklezmer.com/>. Here the reader can find transcriptions that support the musical examples contained within chapters five and six; thirty-nine clips of audio recordings (for reference purposes only and with reference to higher quality versions); as well as three appendixes: a discography of the transcribed performances, recorded variants of the transcribed performances, and sheet music and manuscript variants of the transcribed performances. The klezmer aficionado could certainly not wish for more.

At a time when an increasing number of musicologists root their work in conceptual or paradigm-driven studies on music as cultural history, this volume is a welcome reminder of and contribution to what *makes* musicology-at-large: the author showcases his command of ethnomusicological techniques such as transcription and fieldwork in the ethnomusicological past. Indeed, Rubin roots his study in urban ethnomusicology and popular music studies, but his subject naturally also intersects with and traverses Jewish studies, ethnic studies, and “other related fields” (p. 13). Although not presenting an overarching theory, Rubin shows his deep knowledge of transdisciplinary theories, relying on and applying, for example, Benjamin Harshav's model of polylingualism and the Yiddish language to the musical language of the klezmerim, amongst others. Indeed, methods and approaches are highly interdisciplinary, relying also on critical reading and archival research. Still, the book remains firmly anchored in musical analysis, emphasizing the core of *musicological* work, which clearly distinguishes it from other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

Topics in musical interpretation have recently received renewed attention such as in this very journal;³ and Rubin's holistic approach to it, embedding it in historical, ethnographic, and analytic inquiries, is truly exemplary. As such *New York Klezmer* marks a milestone, not only for the study of klezmer music but also and especially for the study of performance practice. Lucidly written, this volume will greatly satisfy music researchers of all stripes interested in music and Jewish studies, the study of interpretation and performance practice, urban ethnomusicology and local music history. Sections can easily serve as assigned reading in classes on klezmer culture. Free from highbrow academic jargon and equipped with a glossary, this book will also be a welcome read for generations of klezmerim. As such, it is not only highly recommended, it might remain unrivaled for some time.

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³See Sezi Seskir and David Hyun-Su Kim, eds., Special Issue, *Journal of Musicological Research: Topics in Musical Interpretation* 39, nos. 2–3 (2020).