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Joel Rubin: Musician and Ethnomusicologist, Pioneer of Yiddish Music

Alan Bern

Dr. Joel Rubin (14.10.1955 Los Angeles) is an internationally renowned clarinet virtuoso and scholar specializing in Yiddish instrumental music (klezmer),¹ and hasidic music.² He is one of the foremost protagonists of the revival of Yiddish music that began in the USA in the late 1970s. Simultaneously active in many fields, his achievements as an artist, scholar, researcher, media producer and teacher have set standards for students and colleagues alike. Trained as both a classical clarinetist and ethnomusicologist,³ he is the renowned author of both scholarly and popular books and articles discussing the history and ethnography, performance practice, theory and analysis and instrumental techniques of Jewish music, among other topics. His recordings as a band leader or featured soloist are considered milestones of contemporary Jewish music. Rubin is also responsible for the publication of field recordings as well as historical anthologies of Jewish music that are acknowledged reference works. His research with older Jewish traditional musicians in the United States and Israel culminated in several original audio recordings and films, including the highly successful film "A Tickle in the Heart." Rubin has been Artistic Director of international festivals of Jewish music, and since 1985 he has taught, lectured and performed at festivals, workshops and universities throughout Europe, North

¹ Throughout this article, the term "klezmer" is used in its scholarly accepted definition to mean a "professional Yiddish instrumental musician." See Feldman, Walter: Music: Traditional and Instrumental Music. In: The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, 13 July 2010. URL: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/music/traditional_and_instrumental_music (Stand 7.2.2017)

² "Hasidic music" refers to the music of hasidic Jews. Hasidism began as a spiritual revival movement within Judaism in the Ukraine in the 2nd half of the 18th century, quickly spread throughout the Jewish world, and continues to be vital today. See Mazor, Yaakov: Hasidism: Music. In: The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, 13 July 2010. URL: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hasidism/Music> (Stand 7.2.2017)

³ "Classical" is used here in the sense of "ernste Musik" or "Kunstmusik"

America and Israel. Rubin received his Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology in 2001 from the City University of London. Since 2006, he has worked at the University of Virginia, where he is an Associate Professor and Director of Music Performance. With his own ensembles and as a guest artist he continues to perform, record and teach internationally.⁴ Rubin is married to a Swiss woman and has been a resident of Freiamt in Aargau since 2011.

Rubin's strikingly multi-faceted career locates him, first, within a lineage of classically trained, Russian and Eastern European musicians who, beginning in the late 19th century, used ethnography as a bridge to traditional Yiddish culture,⁵ and second, within the Yiddish culture revival movement, which began in the late 1970s in the USA and strove to restore, transmit and develop a thousand-year cultural heritage that had been almost completely destroyed by the Holocaust, assimilation and modernity.⁶

Rubin's New York-born, German-Jewish maternal grandfather was a passionate advocate of classical music and belonged to a circle around Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles.⁷ Rubin's paternal grandfather was from Kiev, spoke Yiddish and played guitar. For Rubin, the two grandfathers represented his dual heritage of classical and Yiddish music. Like many assimilated, American Jews of his generation, Rubin grew up listening to a wide variety of music, including Leadbelly, The Weavers, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, and Gilbert and Sullivan, as well as Beethoven and Mozart. At the age of 9, he began to study classical clarinet, from the outset learning the double-lip, "French" embouchure that would later contribute to his instantly recognizable, highly individual klezmer clarinet sound. From 1973-75, he was a student of clarinetist Richard Stoltzman at the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts). For Rubin, Stoltzman has remained a much-admired model, an artist who transcends both instrumental virtuosity and musical genre. CalArts also exposed Rubin to many of the leading avant-garde

⁴ For a complete biography, bibliography and discography, see: <http://joelrubinklezmer.com>

⁵ See Veidlinger, Jeffrey: Musical Education and Musical Societies. In: The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, 13 July 2010. URL: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Musical_Education_and_Musical_Societies (Stand 7.2.2017)

⁶ See Feldman, 2010

⁷ This and following biographical information from a personal interview with Joel Rubin, 10.01.2017

composers and improvisers of the day. From 1975-78, Rubin moved to New York to continue classical clarinet studies with Kalmen Opperman, a renowned educator whose method included etudes of phrasing and articulation to be learned meticulously by ear rather than from printed music. This training was undoubtedly helpful to Rubin's later work in reconstructing by ear the special nuances of klezmer clarinet style captured on old 78 rpm recordings. Rubin's musical education while in New York also included chamber music studies with eminent musicians such as Robert Levin and Samuel Sanders.

Although well on the way to becoming a professional classical clarinetist, by 1979, Rubin had become disillusioned with what he perceived to be an over-emphasis on technical perfection and consistency at the expense of musicality in the world of classical music, and he began to consider other options. Nevertheless, both the exquisite instrumental technique and the aesthetic ideal of chamber music that he had acquired in his classical training would remain hallmarks of his artistic contributions to Jewish music.

In 1979, Rubin was exposed for the first time to the old 78 rpm recordings from early 20th-century masters of klezmer clarinet, above all Dave Tarras and Natftule Brandwein.⁸ In their playing, Rubin recognized a level of virtuosity and musical refinement that met and sometimes surpassed the standards of classical clarinet, as well as a repertoire of phrasing and ornamentation that had been lost through cultural assimilation in America. Inspired by these and other echoes of what had once been a thriving musical culture, Rubin began to devote himself to reconstructing klezmer music and its cultural context, first using 78 rpm recordings and the few written sources that were available, then increasingly through ethnographic research with the relatively few remaining older informants. It is remarkable that just at this time, a dozen or so other young musicians spread thinly throughout the United States had just embarked on a similar path. Sharing information, recordings and insights, they comprised the core of what came to be known as the "klezmer revival."⁹

⁸ See Rubin, Joel E.: *Klezmer - A Historical Overview to the Present*. In: *Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music*, ed. Joshua Walden. Cambridge, 2015: 119-139

⁹ See Feldman, 2010

From 1980-86, Rubin was based in Portland, Oregon, where he formed his first klezmer band, the Hester Street Klezmer Band, as well as a duo with pianist Lisa Rose, called The Old Country, performing not only klezmer but also traditional Greek music. In the following years, Rubin would return repeatedly to the small ensemble and duo formats to develop his musical ideas. Most traditional klezmer repertoire could be performed by these formats, and equally important, both lent themselves to the development of a performance practice informed by Rubin's "chamber music aesthetic." This key term must be understood correctly. Unlike earlier generations of classically trained musicians who used folk music as an inspiration for their own compositions,¹⁰ for Rubin and other members of the "klezmer revival" generation, the first goal was not merely to be inspired by klezmer music but to become klezmer musicians themselves. That common goal, however, still left much room for the development of different, individual performance approaches, not least because traditional klezmer music in the 19th and early 20th centuries had already encompassed a wide spectrum of styles, ranging from a relatively direct, utilitarian way of playing group dancing to a highly expressive and refined solo style for listening. For Rubin, a "chamber music aesthetic" meant not "classical music," but a highly communicative, nuanced and flexible way of playing among equals in an ensemble.

Rubin continued to develop this approach with the Joel Rubin Klezmer Band while based in San Francisco from 1986-89. The core of this band included vocalist/violinist Michael Alpert and multi-instrumentalist Stuart Brotman, both of whom were ethnographers as well as professional musicians. Above all through Alpert and his circle of older, Eastern European emigre musicians, the ethnographic impulse gained importance in Rubin's work.¹¹ This ensemble made one recording,¹² featuring Rubin interpreting the classic clarinet solo recordings of Dave Tarras,

¹⁰ This refers not only to Jewish musicians such as Joel Engel, Michael Gnessin and Moisei Beregovski, but equally to the many non-Jewish composers of the 19th and 20th century who also followed this approach, such as Chopin, Grieg, Glinka, Enescu, Bartok, Kodaly and many others, who were models for Jewish composers. See Loeffler, James. *The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire*. New Haven, 2010.

¹¹ Already an important exponent of Yiddish culture in the 1980s, Alpert was named a National Heritage Fellow in 2015, the highest honor given to traditional artists in the USA. For more about Alpert and his ethnographic work, see <http://www.michaelalpert.org>

¹² Recorded in 1986 and released in 1988 as a music cassette "The Joel Rubin Klezmer Band: Brave Old World," then re-released on CD as "Joel Rubin, Hungry Hearts: Classic Yiddish Clarinet Solos of the 1920s, Schott Wergo, 1998

Naftule Brandwein and Shloimke Beckerman. On this recording, Rubin is predominantly in a soloist role, carrying the melody while the band provides the accompaniment. It is not yet the full "chamber music aesthetic" that Rubin would develop in his later work, but perfectly true to the model of the old 78 rpm recordings. For many listeners, including his colleagues, Rubin's performance on this CD revealed subtleties of klezmer style and ornamentation that had been hidden behind the curtain of very poor sound quality on the older recordings.

In 1988, Rubin formed a new duo with the Berlin-based, American pianist/accordionist Alan Bern. The two musicians shared similar musical and cultural backgrounds as well as common artistic goals, in particular the wish to develop a "chamber music aesthetic" in klezmer music. Following a series of now legendary concerts at Berlin's Café Einstein, first Alpert and then Brotman joined the duo. Out of this constellation grew a new ensemble, Brave Old World, that would prove to be an ideal platform for exploring new creative possibilities in Yiddish music inspired both by ethnographic and musical impulses. Brave Old World also exposed Rubin to the immense variety of Yiddish vocal repertoire and the challenge of integrating it with instrumental music. In 1990, the band released the CD "Klezmer Music," a major step in the direction of bringing together the "chamber music aesthetic" with traditional Yiddish instrumental and vocal music.

At the same time, Rubin began working with author Rita Ottens, with whom he co-authored important books and articles and produced historical anthologies of Yiddish music recordings for more than a decade.¹³ This marks the beginning of Rubin's original work as a music historian and ethnographer. To mention only two of many examples from this period: Rubin's research with the Epstein Brothers Orchestra, the oldest surviving klezmer band in the USA, led to the documentary film, "A Tickle in the Heart," as well as two CDs, one of which featured Rubin performing with the band,¹⁴ and his research in the hasidic community in Israel led to the release

¹³ Including "Klezmer-Musik", Bärenreiter, 1999 and several CDs in the "Jewish Music Series" (Wergo Schott). For more information, see <http://joelrubinklezmer.com/category/writings/> and <http://joelrubinklezmer.com/category/recordings/> (Stand 7.2.2017)

¹⁴ "Joel Rubin with the Epstein Brothers Orchestra Zeydes un Eyniklekh (Grandfathers and Grandsons): Jewish-American Wedding Music from the Repertoire of Dave Tarras" Schott

of a CD featuring his own field recordings of Israel's preeminent klezmer clarinetist, Moshe Berlin.¹⁵ Parallel to this work, Rubin had begun to study ethnomusicology at the City, University of London, culminating in a Ph.D. with the publication of his dissertation in 2001, "The Art of the Klezmer: Improvisation and Ornamentation in the Commercial Recordings of New York Clarinetists Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras 1922-1929." This pioneering work was the first in-depth, music-theoretical analysis of the performance practice and musical language of individual klezmer musicians, placed in a rich ethnomusicological context that included history and cultural theory.

In the midst of his academic and ethnographic work, Rubin did not neglect his artistic career. Following his departure from Brave Old World in 1992, he formed a new duo with the classically-trained American composer, pianist, musicologist, accordionist and tsimbl player,¹⁶ Joshua Horowitz. With Horowitz, Rubin revived the duo format that had been a mainstay of his creative output since the beginning. Rubin and Horowitz focused on the older, European klezmer repertoire and produced one CD¹⁷ which set a new standard for a stylistically informed, chamber music approach to traditional klezmer music. The young Italian virtuoso accordionist, Claudio Jacomucci, a specialist in contemporary music, replaced Horowitz in 1994. With the addition of Hungary's leading cimbalom virtuoso, Kálmán Balogh, and his circle of Hungarian musicians, the Joel Rubin Ensemble was formed in Berlin in 1994. This larger ensemble, which included violins, trumpet, accordion and bass as well as cimbalom, offered Rubin a rich variety of sounds to continue developing a chamber music approach to klezmer music. Their first CD, recorded in 1997, turns away from the American klezmer tradition to embrace Eastern European repertoire collected earlier in the century by Ukrainian ethnomusicologist, Moisei Beregovskii.¹⁸ On this

Wergo, 1995 and "The Epstein Brothers Orchestra Kings of Freylakh Land: A Century of Yiddish-American Music" Schott Wergo, 1995

¹⁵ "Aneinu!: Hasidic-Orthodox Music from the Festival of the Torah in Jerusalem," Schott Wergo, 2008

¹⁶ The "tsimbl" is a small hammered dulcimer similar to the Hungarian cimbalom, and one of the oldest instruments in Yiddish instrumental music.

¹⁷ "Rubin and Horowitz Bessarabian Symphony: Early Jewish Instrumental Music" Schott Wergo, 1994

¹⁸ "Joel Rubin Jewish Music Ensemble Beregovski's Khasene (Beregovski's Wedding): Forgotten Instrumental Treasures from the Ukraine" Schott Wergo 1997

recording, Rubin is largely in a soloist role again, accompanied by a virtuosic ensemble that shows off the great, unbroken tradition of Hungarian folk music, creating a unique musical hybrid of Yiddish and Hungarian style. Over the next ten years, the Joel Rubin Ensemble performed throughout Europe, developing a unique style in which Rubin's vision of "chamber" klezmer music comes to fruition. The ensemble's second CD, "Midnight Prayer," is a masterpiece of virtuosic, spontaneous and flexible musical performance.¹⁹

Since 2006, Rubin has devoted much of his time and energy to teaching at the University of Virginia while continuing to follow paths he created as an artist, ethnographer, author and CD producer. His 2010 recording with Rabbi Eli Silberstein returns to the crossroads of klezmer and hasidic music,²⁰ and his 2011 recording with jazz pianist Uri Caine returns to the duo format for an experimental meeting of klezmer and jazz.²¹ In 2015 he revisited his musical relationship with former duo colleague Joshua Horowitz on a highly-acclaimed recording dedicated to Polish klezmer music.²² These is just a short selection from the broad palette of Rubin's recent activities, but for reasons of space, it must suffice. The reader is strongly encouraged to explore Rubin's website for further discoveries: www.joelrubin.com

¹⁹ "Midnight Prayer," Traditional Crossroads, 2007

²⁰ "Joel Rubin Ensemble featuring Rabbi Eli Silberstein, the Nign of Reb Mendel" Traditional Crossroads, 2010

²¹ "Joel Rubin/Uri Caine Duo, Azoy Tsu Tveyt" Tzadik, 2011

²² "Poyln: A Gilgul, Veretski Pass and Joel Rubin" Golden Horn Records, 2015

