Marching backwards up the hill to greet the Sabbath Bride

It began as a Hasidic tradition. Years ago, the mysteries of the march backwards were taught to a select few here at KlezKanada. The kavana, or intent, is to greet the Shekhinah, the Sabbath bride, by walking backwards into the village, never turning back on her, until she has arrived. In our tradition, we gather in festive dress, even with garish costumes and amusements. The band begins playing the nign (some say, only part of the nign—the rest has been lost), and we slowly begin walking backwards, joyously, singing and dancing and making music. The event is documented on film and video lest the tradition be lost. At the top of the hill, in front of the Dining Hall, we play a few more times, take the last pictures, then enter the dining hall.

A gutn shabbes!

A Gutn Shabes!
An Inside Look At Konsonans Retro

By Keith Wolzinger

Unless you’ve been hiding under a rock this week, you are no doubt familiar with Konsonans Retro, the brass band from the Odessa region of Ukraine near the Moldova border. They are here by means of the East Meets West program here at Klez-Kanada. This is their first visit to North America and I hope that they will return many more times.

The band is led by Trumpeter Vasya Baronovsky and is made up of six members from two sets of brothers (who are also cousins). Two years ago they formed a “concert band” version of themselves and added Clarinetist Christian Dawid, plus Drummer Guy Schalom.

In the region where they live there are several ethnicities, including Ukrainians, Moldovans, Russians, and Jews. Music is the common ground between these cultures, and when the band plays an event, the people want to hear not only their own music, but also the music of their neighbors. So the band is well versed in the ethnic musics of these groups and brings the energy and excitement of this music for us to learn and enjoy.

For us as musicians, having Konsonans Retro here in a teaching role has been a true joy. The repertoire is fun and exciting, and the speed of some of the tunes is challenging. We have even learned a song in their language, which will be performed at tonight’s concert. I would guess that they a sound that is rare among Trumpet players and has kept us in a state of awe, while we follow every movement of their fingers in order to glean some of the essence of their technique.

Vladimir plays the Accordion. Though not a brass instrument, it is the soul of the ensemble. As Vladimir says, “It enriches and illuminates the entire piece that we play.” Vasyl says “the accordion can play melody like the other instruments, but provides a special harmony, which enriches and beautifies the music. Without it, we wouldn’t be able to reach our audience in the way we do.”

Vitya is on Valve Trombone. The Trombone plays a key role in the group as the rhythm and counter melody instrument. Though Vitya has also played the Slide Trombone, the Valve Trombone allows him to play in ways that are better suited to the group. (It is also the first Trombone he could find to buy when he was younger.)

Sasha plays Tuba and is the heartbeat of the group. Sasha and Vitya play in a symbiotic way, similar to the two Trumpets. They will know just by looking at each other whether to play rhythm, melody, or counter-melody. It is an intuition that they have together. “It is not for nothing that we are brothers,” he says. “All the intuition and feelings we have for each other allows us to play the way we do. We don’t have to prepare and rehearse a lot because we know each others’ thoughts and ideas.”

Slava plays Percussion. He doesn’t consider the musicians as a band, but as a family. It is clear that the band acts as a family when they are together. He says “The Drum is important to the band because it holds all of the other instruments together.”

When asked about their impressions of KlezKanada and their first visit to North America, Vasyl said “First of all, I want to thank all the organizers.

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of this wonderful festival for putting together this extraordinary event. It is so wonderful that here at KlezKanada we could combine our creative work with recreation, with meeting with all these wonderful people, with the top musicians and specialists in their areas, that we can share our experiences, learn from each other, and play and spend time together here. I am very impressed with all the instructors who share their talent with the students and conduct master classes and share their art and knowledge with the students and help them to develop wonderful skills. We have tremendous experiences here all the time, every day, every minute.

Vasyl goes on to say “When the musicians play, they always use the three parts that every person has: their soul, their mind, and their heart. And when we play, we always give a little bit of these three parts to the people who listen to us. The listeners will get those little sparks of kindness and soul that come from the musicians. For me, being at KlezKanada will be one of those moments in my life that I will always cherish and remember.”

Another important aspect of coming to KlezKanada is that the music and songs of their grandfathers and fathers are not lost, abandoned, or forgotten. That are glad that they could bring them to other people and other generations. They are thankful that there are other musicians who would hold onto these traditions and pass them on. When at home, Vasyl enjoys making homemade Cognac and he likes to offer some to his guests when they visit. He also dabbles with homemade wine, which he also shares with his family and friends.

They say that they can’t just tell us about their traditions and family customs, that the best thing to do is to visit them in Kodoma and they will share their traditions and everything they have to offer. (Sounds like a great idea to me!) Slava suggests the possibility of organizing KlezKodoma! And perhaps even a “West Meets East” program. They also wish to commend the organizers of KlezKanada for their attention to every little detail of the logistics of their trip here, especially the interpreters provided, who demolished all the language barriers. Whatever was spoken in Yiddish, English, or French would be translated for them so that they would understand everything that was going on.

It certainly has been a great joy to have Konsonans Retro at KlezKanada. I think that we all will remember them and their beautiful and energetic music for a very long time. Safe travels home to all of you.

A million thanks to Larisa Pechersky for her invaluable translation assistance.
by Ari Davidow

One of the projects represented at KlezKanada this year is Alan Bern’s “The Other Europeans” project. In a talk on Saturday, Bern, along with Efim Chorny and Suzana Ghergus, with Zev Feldman and Guy Schalom, discussed the project. To make this last newsletter deadline I have reluctantly decided to subject my readers to my notes. I simply did not have time to make this shorter and more coherent. Many apologies to readers, and to Alan Bern, whose project is fascinating and deserves greater recognition (and funding!)

Please forgive errors in perception—they are mine, not the speakers. Likewise, these are not direct quotes. They are my shorthand of what I thought I heard. Since publication at KlezKanada, Bern has briefly reviewed these notes, so hopefully the most egregious misquotes have been corrected.

“The Other Europeans” touches some nerves. In 20th c. Europe, having a cultural identity meant being French, or Spanish, or Italian—a national identity. Since the EU was formed people are now asking what a transnational “European” identity would be. But, of course, there are two well-known transnational European cultures, those of the Jews and the Rom, who have long transcended national boundaries—they are the “other” Europeans.

First, some background. Brave Old World was invited to Weimar to give a workshop back in 1998. It was very successful, so the next year they did a whole week, a mixed instrumental and vocal workshop. There was a request for a week of singing after the year two workshop. Bern’s workshop model was like a holistic seminar: small group of students working on one subject together, with team teaching—also a forum where teachers could meet to exchange their research and ideas. Since then, new week-long workshops have been added (dance, learning by ear, theory), now Yiddish Summer Weimar is six weeks long.

In 2006, Bern & Stephanie Erben founded a non profit organization, “other music e.V.” to create projects and events with an intercultural focus, like Yiddish Summer Weimar. Coming from US, Alan knew about multicultural interthreading. In North America we create mishmosh of cultures (eg. Irving Berlin wrote “White Christmas”). In Europe, many people still thing of “pure” or “essential” cultural identities. The mission of other music e.V. is to help develop a critical, intercultural perspective. In describing this mash-up, Bern likes “intercultural” rather than “multicultural” as a term. Every culture is already intercultural, like a node in the midst of complex processes rather than a territory with clear borders.

The question in Germany is not so much how to make a bridge to other cultures, but how to recognize elements of other cultures already in the “home culture”. This is not new. In the 20th century, German culture was the definition of “high culture” but from the 16th century onwards, German composers travelled to other centers—France, Italy, and brought elements of those cultures back to Germany.

Yiddish Summer Weimar takes an intercultural approach to presenting Yiddish culture – in interaction with neighboring cultures, or even with itself (“traditional” vs. “contemporary”). So, now we come to “The Other Europeans” project. Other music e.V. won a major, two-year EU project grant which, however, is used up by covering costs of three institutions over two

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years, musicians travel costs, etc.
Zev Feldman and Michael Alpert were very important in the orientation of this project. This year Efim [Chorny] and Suzana [Ghergus] came to Weimar. [Alan notes that the correct categorization would not be “Jews” and “Roma” — more correct would be, say, “klezmer” and “lautari” but this is the terminology that the grant evaluators would not have understood.] For grant purposes, Weimar-based other music e.V. created a partnership between KlezMORE in Vienna, and the Jewish Music Festival in Cracow. The idea is to create two new groups of musicians, one playing Yiddish and one playing Roma music. What are the differences in style? Looking towards present day Moldova, klezmer and gypsy worked, performed and intermarried for many generations. “World music” markets exoticism and creates one pot of Jewish gypsy Balkan tango beat dance music. This isn’t necessarily bad, but the real relationships between the musics are obscured by world music marketing, Bern felt.

For orientation, Bern played the groups recordings of two groups of musicians from the 1920s and 1930s—Abe Schwartz and Harry Kandel, each of whom recorded music similar to the Moldavian music whence they came. Each instrument on these recordings has its own expressive role; the result is a minyan of different instrumental personalities.

For the first year, there are/were two separate tracks, one for each group, klezmer and lautar. By the second year, they will intermingle. On a theoretical level, the first year is about differences, the second about synthesis. But already, after the first set of concerts, when Bern tried to talk about two bands, Adam Stinga, trumpet player of the Roma band, insisted, “we are one ensemble.”

Results of project to date: 14 musicians who enjoy and respect each other, prelude coming conceptual jungle … where we are, what does music and playing represent.

The bands have different approaches. The Moldavian (lautar) band: they are not looking back, playing their own present-day music. By contrast, the klezmer band has a highly developed awareness of past. Also, under the Soviets, an official state musical style was created (“Kishinev school”) such that instruments all play the same ornamentation — they all sound alike, which takes an amazing amount of virtuosity, but also loses the individual voices inherent in each instrument. This is very impressive, but opposite to the idea of minyan of different voices. How much of this difference is Jewish vs. non-Jewish or West vs. East aesthetic is still an open question. There really was, after all, no way of asking a musician whether his style represents soviet socialist realism. But, actually, now that all the musicians know, trust, and respect one another, such questions can begin to be discussed.

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Zev: I am always caught between Jewish particularism and the European-ness of the Ashkenazic experience. For American and Canadian Jews it is hard to conceptualize. I inherited Moldovan heritage. My father came to America and was always very nostalgic. I spent time with old-timers. And the town where my father came from was an important place int he development of klezmer music.

I met Roma musicians from Kishinev and was stuck by how much they are NOT backwards looking. They don’t have the documentation, even, to look backwards.

So, the issue now is to what extent can our shared history be re-examined. There isn’t much that has been documented — the long history of Jewish and Roma musicians in Bessarabia — isn’t even in the Yizker biker — those writers were ashamed of klezmorim and gypsies, much less that they had intermarried, etc. For non-Jews, they have so assimilated Jewish culture that they are considered “Jews” by Southern Moldavians, and non-Jews in Northern Moldavia today, call themselves “klezmorim”. [Note: in the “Meet and Greet” with the Konsonans Retro folks later today, the band agreed that they described themselves as “klezmorim” — they hoped we did too]

My only regret is that I wasn’t able to do this project ten years ago. In Romania you can’t do the same kind of research. Different society, different evolution, different history. There, the Romanian culture is really dominant. And even though the population is mixed, Jews felt that they had to be part of the dominant culture; in Northern Moldavia Jews felt freer to express their own culture and it was the dominant culture.

Today, this is less true, especially as Moldavia develops as a country.

We have to frame these questions, as we explore Moldavia, to be inclusive. We aren’t there to go collect shards of Jewish culture and leave. We will be listening to what the current culture IS.

Alan: This is both a theoretical and a practical project. The EU grant is an arts grant, not a scholarship grant. The scholarship side is written into the grant as support for what is primarily an arts project. But, sometimes, the facts on the ground turn out to have really neat results. When I went to Kishinev with old recordings, the jaws of Moldavian musicians hit the floor because they had no idea that such recordings existed — were convinced that there were no such recordings — but I felt that they felt their grandfather or great-grandfather had walked into the room.

Something I have to say is that the Roma musicians that we invited to Yiddish Summer Weimar were so passionately engaged. [Side story, “only one ensemble” mentioned above]

Q: So, we are missing an older generation.

Zev: The people who lived this music are now in their 80s.

Efim and Susan [Did the research on the ground for musians who could

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THE OTHER EUROPEANS

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be part of the project and then spent an intense week together.

[Aside from Alan: confirmed that much of what Zev's has been writing and saying for years about this region is accurate—one musician in Moldavia said: “it seems like he’s been living in Moldova for the last 40 years.”]

For me, Klezmer Summer Weimar is like a cultural family tree. When I meet someone who lives in American or Canada, “my grandfather, grandmother is from Ukraine, Bessarabia, wherever … and it is for me deep research to those grandparents and what they knew, where they lived. You can see what dance, music were to your father, grandfather right there in Summer Weimar.

Alan: Interesting. About 90% of our students are not Jewish. So it is very interesting that you would say that.

Yiddish Summer Weimar shows ways of validating a way of working that is not usually validated in our current culture. It’s not about turning everybody in Europe into fans of Yiddish culture—that would be good, but is not necessary—but instead, there is a deeper political agenda in terms of how people approach their own culture that matters.

Efin: But, it isn't just Jews—also the Poles or Germans or whomever, also often had parents and grandparents from these areas.

Suzana: I have what to say, but Zev Feldman already said it.

What I want to say about my experience with that project is very practical experience. I was a residwent in art in one band at Yiddish Weimar. I saw one piece that was written as “Modavian,” but it was actually a Jewish tune. But, the goal was to try to create a Roma style. My feeling is absolutely Jewish and it was very difficult for me to see this, hear this, as a Roman piece. Finally, I had a discussion with one of the Roma musicians and began to recognize each other's perspectives, differences.

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Alan: “For me, there is no contradiction between free, avant garde improvisation and traditional music.” And it turns out that the same skills lead to a deeper sense of hearing and how we experience music, and away from what is simply on the page, such that the written score becomes much richer. (It is like de-anomie-izing culture!)

Intergenerational: other music e.V. just won the first prize nationally in Germany for intercultural, intergenerational music activity.

Q: difference between Jewish, Roma interpretation?

Suzana: It also feels different. For Roma musicians, they would say that the Yiddish music is more “soulful,” “sensitive”.

Alan: But, when it comes to technique and skill, they are amazing. I had to put down my accordion for two weeks after hearing Petar Ralchev play.

What is it that they are hearing in those old recordings that they don’t hear in new recordings? There is a quality in that old music that distills being Jewish for hundreds of years and powerless, of “begging, praying, powerlessness”. But, at the same time, there is also an unbelievably deep sense of “but this is the right way.” So, maybe religious consciousness is essential for playing the music correctly? Yes, it is essential to connect with that.

Sherry Mayrent: I think that there is a slightly different source. I find that there is a relation to Jewish Community, the way that we pray, this batting back and forth in discussion, even argumentatively. I think that klezmer comes from vocal styles—that it is all related to ways that Jews sing, daven.

Zev: I have to say that even listening to Alan's student ensemble playing at the end of Weimar, I had not heard such an authentic style.

Alan: And, I have to thank Hankus for working with those recordings already back in 1981 and involving me in the KCB.

Stu Brotman: As a secular humanist I would prefer the word “humility” to “begging”.

Alan: “Humility” doesn’t necessarily say, “I want something, I am pleading for something,” so I feel that “begging” is the better term. Also, each instrument has to speak in its own voice. Not only technically doing something different, but has a different expressive personality. Not just heterophony, but that the expressive purpose of the trumpet is different from the trombone or piccolo.

Hankus: This is part of what someone once explained to me. “It’s a Jewish song, because it asks, ‘why’”.

Alan: Why klezmer revival when it happened? We were the generation that felt that we were in danger of losing the Jewish soul in America.

Q: What about Israelis, who are the antithesis of this Diaspora position?

Zev: Israelis of a younger generation, 30 and below, and beginning to realize that they are missing something essential. [story: Zev talks about being with some people in Israel and realizes that Israeli Ashkenazim in the room had never met their grandparents; the Sephardim in the room had—not true of all Israelis, but is a telling marker.]

Q (me): So, what about the Meron traditions?

A (Zev): It isn't pure, it is a symbiosis with Jews and Arabs—there were Arabs who spoke Yiddish. [I had actually meant to get at this “humility” property of music. In later conversation with Zev, we agreed that it was something that should be studied. Zev also noted that Hasidism had changed radically in attitude since the Holocaust, so that quality, if it had been present, may be present no more.]

Q (Frank London): I was struck by the exclusion of women

A (Alan): I wanted very much to have women in this project, and many women musicians from North America could have been included. But the EU funding allowed hiring no more than 15% non-EU musicians, and between Dan Blacksberg, Mark Rubin, and the Moldavians, we were already over that limit.

For more information: www.yiddish-summer-weimar.de www.the-other-europeans.eu
Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot…

By Joyce Romoff

We generally sing that song at the (secular) New Year but, perhaps, it’s still appropriate now Rosh Hashana is nearly here. KlezKanada 2008 is almost over and, personally, I would like to thank and remember certain special people whom I’ve met and from whom I’ve learned.

Thanks, first, to Ari Davidow who, despite the Internet storms, gave this computer addict an outlet and a means to express herself. Ari taught me something about diplomacy in handling balky Internet connections as well as how to pacify people who want everything to be perfect. I’d also like to thank (is there another word? Where is the thesaurus on this program) Truda Bloom, photographer and person extraordinaire with whom I’ve spent great and happy hours as she edited photographs and I wrote. Good wishes also to her daughter, Julia, with our best wishes for her continued health, happiness and success.

Muchas gracias to Robin Young and Emily Socolov for their talents and willingness to share them, their patience, and unfailing humor. They’ve taught me the beginnings of mosaics, stained glass, and beading kippot. Yaasher koach to Rona, Donna, Julia and, especially Rebecca (live long and prosper) and the others in the Visual Arts workshop.

Special thanks to Elaine Hoffman Watts who showed that “girls” can certainly drum. I promise; I will count my tuchus off, keep my fingers together, drum softly and carry large drumsticks. I will also try to find out more about the Hoffman klezmer legacy coming from Philadelphia. The week was enlivened by Mary Rose and her daughter, Rebecca, Ruth, Douglas, and Sherry Mayrent. It was an honor to drum with you.

Kudos to Michael Wex who is one of the most witty people I’ve had the honor to hear. Still, I wouldn’t want to get on his “bad” side—if he has one. Kol ha’kavod to the other stellars I’ve seen but not met: Arkady Goldenshtein, Efim Chorney, Hankus Netsky, Joanne Borts, Susan Watts, Michael Alpert, Annette and Kurt Bjarling, and Christian Dawid. Of course, ya’asser koach to Avia Moore. Much success. Best wishes also, to the rest of the staff, fellows and scholarship students I didn’t mention and whom I hope to meet next year.

On to KlezKanada 2009.

KlezKanada on Facebook! Stay in touch all year on Facebook. Search groups for “KlezKanada” and join the “KlezKanada Connection.” Post photos, shmooze, get the news on ongoing KlezKanada events, and stay in touch with other KlezCanadians all year, right on Facebook.

Photo: Truda Bloom

KlezNews Staff include Ari Davidow, Joyce Romoff, Truda Bloom, Richard Kurtz, Elaine Cooper, Reuben J. Cohen. Photographs by Truda Bloom. All contents copyright by their creators, and all rights reserved by the creators.

A PDF copy of this newsletter will be available online after camp, and HTML versions of the stories and art will be placed online, along with additional materials, in a weblog format to permit comments and participation.

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This year’s “tag” is “klezkanada08”. If you are placing materials on Flickr, YouTube, etc., please use that tag so that people can find the items.