



Lowell Milken Center for
Music of American Jewish Experience

Klezmer: A Musical Expression of Jewish Identity

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סיפורי מוסיקה
Stories of Music



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Lesson Outline

- I. Prelude: Sholem Aleichem!
 - A. Why Klezmer Matters
 - B. What You Will Learn
 - C. What Is Klezmer?
- II. Historical Context: The Pale of Settlement
- III. The Voice of Prayer: How Cantorial Art Shaped Klezmer Expression
- IV. Oral Tradition
- V. Structure Within the Chaos
- VI. Early Klezmer Band Examples: Insights and Influence
 - A. Lt. Joseph Frankel's Orchestra
 - B. Abe Schwartz's Orchestra
- VII. Instrumental Klezmer in the Jazz Era
 - A. Molly Picon: Icon of Film and Stage
 - B. Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras: Rockstars of the Klezmer World
 - 1. Naftule Brandwein
 - 2. Dave Tarras
- VIII. Introduction to the Klezmer Revival
 - A. The Klezmer Revival: Personal Journeys of Rediscovery
 - B. Wave 1: Rebirth and Personal Preservation
 - C. Wave 2: Evolution and Personal Exploration
 - 1. Meet Loren Sklamberg
 - D. Wave 3: Innovation and Personal Reinvention
- IX. Coda/Outro

Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions

Enduring Understandings

1. Klezmer music is a living, thriving musical genre with hubs of performance and research around the world.
2. Klezmer music is a specific Ashkenazic Jewish instrumental tradition that emerged as a formalized guild profession in 1550s Moravia and expanded through Poland/Lithuania and the Pale of Settlement, historically functioning as accompaniment to Jewish weddings and in Hasidic courts, with distinct stylistic elements drawn from Jewish liturgical sources alongside Western music, local traditions, and Greco-Ottoman influences.
3. During the contemporary revival era, the understanding of klezmer has expanded beyond its historical boundaries to encompass Yiddish song and genre-blending approaches that balance preservation with innovation.
4. The klezmer revival in the 20th century helped preserve and expand the genre, blending it with other genres.

Essential Questions

1. How did klezmer music develop as a distinctive form of Jewish musical expression?
2. What are the distinct stylistic elements that define klezmer even as it evolves over time?
3. How did the klezmer revival reflect shifts in cultural identity and musical innovation?
4. What roles did klezmer musicians (klezmorim) play within Jewish communities historically, and how did these roles change over time?

I. Prelude: Sholem Aleichem!

SLIDE 1

Sholem aleichem (*The traditional response to the yiddish greeting “sholem aleichem” is “aleichem sholem”) and welcome to Stories of Music! With Stories of Music, you will be taken on an exploration of the various connections between American Jewish music and American history. Today we will embark on a journey into the vibrant and evolving world of klezmer music!

A. Why Klezmer Matters

SLIDE 2

Klezmer is more than just a musical genre—it is a bridge between tradition and innovation, rooted in the experiences of Jewish communities from Eastern Europe and reimagined by modern musicians worldwide. From joyous weddings in *shtetls* (small Jewish towns) to packed concert halls in New York City, klezmer has served as an expression of Jewish life, emotion, and resilience.

B. What You Will Learn

We'll begin by exploring the traditional roots of klezmer in Eastern European Jewish communities, delving into its stylistic elements, its connection to vocal traditions, and the roles klezmorim played in communal life. We'll then examine the klezmer revival of the 20th century, a cultural renaissance that preserved and transformed this genre, blending it with influences like jazz, rock, Balkan, Greek, and classical music.

This is just the beginning of a dynamic exploration—let's dive into the music, stories, and spirit of klezmer.

C. What is Klezmer?

Klezmer is a rich and complex genre, combining many different kinds of music developed over decades and centuries, but rooted in Eastern European genres, and Jewish musical expression such as Yiddish song and *Chazzanut* (*Chazzanus*—Cantorial Sacred Chant).

SLIDE 3

LISTEN to a classic klezmer tune, “Sam’s Bulgar,” written by Sam Musiker and performed by Dave Tarras (who we will learn about later) and the Musiker Brothers. While listening, imagine what are some potential cultural contexts (celebration, mourning, etc.) and what emotions it evokes. Write down a few words or phrases to help organize your thoughts.

Tips for Listening:

- ◆ Consider using descriptive language like light, dark, joyful, or melancholy.
- ◆ Focus on emotional or artistic impressions rather than superficial observations like fast or slow.

PLAY “Sam’s Bulgar” 

Pair Share

Quickly discuss your observations with a neighbor:

- ❓ **What words did you write down and why?**
- ❓ **Was anything interesting or surprising?**
- ❓ **Did it remind you of anything you’ve heard elsewhere?**

II. Historical Context: The Pale of Settlement

SLIDE 4

For many of you, this may be the first time you are listening to, or even hearing about, klezmer music. Klezmer is the traditional music of Ashkenazi Jews—those with origins in Central and Eastern Europe. While Ashkenazi Jews make up only a portion of the global Jewish population, they form the majority of American Jewry.

Before the Holocaust, 5 million Jews lived in a region called **the Pale of Settlement**, which stretched between the Baltic and Black Seas. In both cities and **small towns (shtetls)**, Jewish communities developed a rich and distinct culture that included language (**Yiddish**), literature, theater, dance, and, of course, music.

SLIDE 5

Yiddish was more than just a language—it was the foundation of a thriving artistic world. **Yiddish literature** ranged from folk tales and religious commentary to modernist poetry and politically charged fiction by writers like **Sholem Aleichem** and **Isaac Bashevis Singer**. **Yiddish theater** brought both high drama and biting satire to the stage, entertaining audiences from Warsaw to New York's Lower East Side. Dance, too, played a major role in Jewish life, from lively freylekhs and bulgars (colloquially known as *horas* in the Jewish community; joyful, celebratory songs) at celebrations to more theatrical choreography that blended traditional folk styles with modern influences.

In music, Yiddish song carries the same expressive and storytelling qualities found in its literature and theater. Rhythm often follows the natural flow of speech, creating a flexible, text-driven phrasing. Klezmer musicians reflect this quality in their playing, producing expressive, fluid melodic lines and distinctive rhythmic patterns. The best way to understand this musicality is through listening.

SLIDE 6

LISTEN: ["Vot ken yu makh, s'iz Amerike"](#) as performed by The Dave Tarras Band 

As you listen to “*Vot ken yu makh, s'iz Amerike*” as performed by The Dave Tarras Band with the great Yiddish performer, Aaron Lebedeff, pay close attention to how the singer's phrasing interacts with the melody. How does the natural rhythm of Yiddish shape the musical performance?

Discuss as a Class:

SLIDE 7

- ?
- What was your initial reaction to the sound of the music? Did anything surprise you?
- ?
- Why do you think klezmer music developed in the Pale of Settlement? What role might it have played in Jewish life?
- ?
- How do you hear the relationship between the language and the music?

III. The Voice of Prayer: How Cantorial Art Shaped Klezmer Expression

Beyond the klezmer music that filled the streets, another sound radiated from Jewish sacred spaces—the mystical voice of the synagogue. From Warsaw's grand sanctuaries, to tiny village prayer rooms, chazzanut—transforming ancient prayers into living song that cradled the hearts and souls of the Jewish people—came alive. In daily prayer, the Chazzan (cantor) lifted his community's spirits through his soulful voice and spirit. He was more than a prayer leader; he was the bridge between earth and heaven, carrying the hopes, dreams, and sorrows of his people to God through a musical language of extraordinary emotional depth. This was the cantor's gift—knowing exactly how to voice what others felt but couldn't express.

Cantor Jacob Mendelson, who studied with the great European cantors, calls this “the sound of davening” and points out the “bumble bees”—that rich hum of congregants praying together beneath the cantor’s voice, like a drone in sacred music. This communal undertone, once the heartbeat of synagogue prayer, is now found largely in Conservative and Orthodox contexts.

SLIDE 8

Despite what you may expect, the music of the Pale of Settlements was not actually called klezmer! In fact, prior to the middle of the 20th Century, a *klezmer* was a musician (plural: *Klezmorim*), not the genre of music.

The word *klezmer* has a long history. It originally comes from Hebrew, where *kley zemer* means “vessel of song.” The term *klezmer*—originally denoting a professional Jewish instrumentalist—appears in sixteenth-century Moravia, where klezmer guilds, regulated by the kahal (elected governing body of an Ashkenazi Jewish community) and often passed through family lines, were first permitted in 1558. Unlike the medieval *narr* or *shpilman* minstrel figures, klezmorim functioned as full-time professionals within a guild system. Then, in Eastern Europe, it referred to very skilled musicians who played at Jewish weddings and other celebrations.

Here’s the twist: when klezmer musicians came to America in the 1900s, people didn’t always respect them. The word “klezmer” was sometimes used as an insult, implying they weren’t serious musicians and had messy, unconventional lives. But over time, things changed. The klezmer style of music evolved and grew into a vibrant, creative musical culture. Today, “klezmer” is a term that celebrates this music and its energy, blending its old traditions with new ideas.

SLIDE 9

WATCH [this fascinating clip of the influential klezmorim, the Epstein brothers, addressing this very issue](#)

SLIDE 10

Discuss

- ?
- What do you think it means for a community to develop a “unique culture”? How might living in close-knit communities like shtetls contribute to this?
- ?
- What role do you think music, theater, and literature play in preserving a community’s identity?
- ?
- The clip suggests that “klezmer” became a derogatory term at one point. Why do you think this happened? How does language shape the way we value certain musical traditions?
- ?
- Today, “klezmer” is widely recognized as a musical genre. What does this shift tell us about how traditions evolve and get reinterpreted over time?

IV. Oral Tradition

It would be impossible to explore all of klezmer history in this lesson. But there are a few important key musical origin stories and topics worth exploring.

To understand klezmer, we must first grasp the concept of an oral tradition—a way that knowledge, stories, songs, or culture is passed down through speaking, listening, and hearing instead of writing it down. Think of it like a giant game of “Telephone” but with songs, myths, or lessons shared across generations. This method preserves history and values but inevitably leads to changes in what’s passed down. Klezmer is distinctive in that it relies on both oral tradition and written music: apprentices learned style, nuance, and repertoire directly from elders and bandmates, while also being trained to read and write notation. This dual approach—documented in Ivan Lipaev’s 1904 article and supported by the KMDMP corpus of handwritten klezmer tunes—underscores that klezmorim were systematically trained professionals, not merely folk musicians dependent on memory alone.

In klezmer, this tradition also made the human voice a central influence on instrumental music. For example, a clarinetist might mimic a cantor’s singing. You’ll now hear two recordings: one of a cantor singing and one of a clarinetist imitating that style. Can you hear the similarities?

SLIDE 11

LISTEN to the opening few minutes of this rendition of “Av Horachamim”  by Cantor Samuel Malavsky

Now **LISTEN** to this “Doina” (quasi-improvisatory solo)  performed by the great tsimbl player Joseph Moskowitz

SLIDE 12

So what is going on there? Various musical ornaments, slides, etc. are being added in, much like a singer might do. Klezmer clarinetist David Krakauer offers this fascinating explanation of what makes klezmer so unique.

WATCH this explanatory video from David Krakauer

V. Structure Within the Chaos

SLIDE 13

Though klezmer can be played by any combination of instruments, from a solo performer to a 100 piece parade band at a music festival, there are certain instruments that were staples in early klezmer ensembles. In the earliest forms, we hear instruments like the tsimbl (a type of hammer dulcimer), fidl (violin), flute, bass, clarinet, poik (drum with a mounted cymbal), and accordion. Over time, especially as klezmer found its way to America, new instruments—such as trumpet, trombone, saxophone, and even drum set—were added, reflecting the influence of American jazz and popular music.

SLIDE 14

To help visualize this transition, here are some of the traditional Eastern European klezmer instruments followed by those introduced during the American era. You can listen to examples of these instruments in action to better understand how they shaped the sound of klezmer.

Klezmer music is deeply intertwined with Yiddish dance traditions, many of which contribute distinct rhythmic patterns or “motor rhythms” that drive the music forward. These rhythms, often structured as ostinatos (repeating musical patterns), create a characteristic momentum that defines different dance forms. Just as the clave serves as a fundamental rhythmic framework in Afro-Cuban music or the backbeat anchors rock and roll, these ostinatos provide a recognizable pulse that both musicians and dancers rely on. Each dance type has its own unique rhythmic feel, providing both structure for musicians and a groove for dancers.

SLIDE 15

One of the most recognizable klezmer dance rhythms is the freylekhs, a lively, upbeat rhythm typically in 2/4 or 4/4 time. The freylekhs features a bouncy, driving feel that encourages exuberant dancing, often with line or circle formations. A related but slightly more syncopated rhythm is the bulgar, which became especially popular in American klezmer and Yiddish music circles. The bulgar has a distinctive long-long-short pattern, often felt as 3+3+2 (spread out over two bars of 2/4 or across one bar of 4/4), giving it an infectious, forward-driving energy. Note the differences between the freylekhs and the bulgar in the following two examples.

LISTEN to [“Freylekhs”](#)  by the London-based Klezmer trio, Loshn

LISTEN to [“Bukharester Bulgar”](#)  by the Klezmer Conservatory Band (KCB)

NOTE: These two styles, while distinct, are often given very similar treatments in performance

SLIDE 16

Other dance rhythms have a more moderate or introspective character. The *khosid* is a slower, march-like rhythm in 2/4 or 4/4 time, often associated with dignified Hasidic-style dances. The zhok (or slow hora, though distinct from the Israeli hora) is a rhythmically uneven 3/8 or 3/4 dance form, with strong stresses on beats 1 and 3. Notably, beat 3 is often placed early, creating a sense of push and pull within the rhythm.

LISTEN to [“Dem Trisker Rebn’s Khosid”](#)  performed by Dave Tarras

LISTEN to [“Der Gasn Nign”](#)  performed by Alicia Svigals (on lead fiddle)

SLIDE 17

Beyond these structured dance forms, klezmer also incorporates freer, improvisational rhythms, particularly in the doina. A doina is a slow, rubato-style solo improvisation, often played by a clarinet, violin, or trumpet, with the instrumentalist bending notes expressively, evoking the sound of a cantor’s vocal style. While the doina lacks a prescribed rhythm, it often follows common harmonic structures or progressions, providing a loose framework for melodic exploration. Performers build tension and release through expressive phrasing before transitioning into a more structured, rhythmic dance like a zhok, bulgar, or freylekhs.

LISTEN to ["Doina,"](#)  performed by the clarinet/tsimbl duo of Andy Statman and Walter "Zev" Feldman

These rhythmic foundations, drawn from Yiddish dance traditions, not only define the sound of klezmer but also serve as a bridge between instrumental performance and communal movement, making the music an inseparable part of Ashkenazi Jewish cultural expression.

VI. Early Klezmer Band Examples: Insights and Influence

SLIDE 18

A. Lt. Joseph Frankel's Orchestra

Joseph Frankel was born in Kyiv and trained at the Kyiv Conservatory, before going on to lead military bands and theater orchestras.

- Frankel made significant contributions to the evolution of klezmer music in the U.S., particularly through his famous composition "Yiddishe Blues" (1918), which combined klezmer melodies with ragtime—a quintessential American style.
- This blend of Jewish music with popular American styles is a prime example of how Frankel helped merge different musical traditions to create something new.
- Frankel's identity as a Jewish-American musician also played a key role in his music. After becoming a U.S. citizen, he served in World War I and used the title "Lieutenant Joseph Frankel" to signal pride in his American identity while still remaining deeply connected to his Jewish roots.
- His recordings not only helped preserve traditional Jewish music, but they also pushed the boundaries of klezmer by incorporating contemporary American influences.

LISTEN to ["Yidelekh Shimmy Tants"](#)  by Lt. Joseph Frankel's Orchestra

SLIDE 19

EXTENSION IDEA

Frankel's composition "Yiddishe Blues" is an early example of the mixing of distinctly American genres with klezmer. If time allows, consider listening to a portion of ["Yiddishe Blues"](#)  and a portion of a classic ragtime tune like ["Maple Leaf Rag."](#)  Take a moment to discuss their similarities and differences.

Discuss

- ❓ What do you think the title “Lieutenant” in Frankel’s name signifies about his approach to identity?
- ❓ How does this fusion reflect both Frankel’s personal experience as an immigrant and the broader cultural shifts of the time?

B. Abe Schwartz’s Orchestra

Abe Schwartz, a famous Jewish bandleader and violinist in New York, is often credited with helping to popularize klezmer music in America.

- ◆ Born in Romania, Schwartz brought with him a deep understanding of the various musical traditions in Eastern Europe, including Jewish, Roma, and Russian influences.
- ◆ His recordings helped introduce klezmer to new audiences, adapting it to appeal to American tastes while keeping its roots intact.
- ◆ Schwartz’s music also reflected the role of immigration in shaping American culture. By recording klezmer music and blending it with other popular styles, he ensured that the genre stayed relevant and fresh.
- ◆ His records were sometimes marketed as “exotic” or “Russian,” highlighting how Jewish immigrants navigated the challenge of introducing their cultural traditions to a new country.

LISTEN: “Lebidik und Freylach”  (Lively and Happy) by the Abe Schwartz Orchestra

The Abe Schwartz band was a crucial training ground for legendary klezmerim like Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein, providing them with early professional experience and exposure to a rich repertoire of Jewish music. Schwartz, a violinist and bandleader, not only hired these young musicians but also guided them in adapting traditional klezmer styles to the evolving American musical landscape. This mentorship was essential in shaping their musicianship, offering them opportunities to refine their skills, develop their unique voices, and eventually become leading figures in klezmer. In the music world, mentorship plays a vital role in preserving traditions while allowing for innovation, as experienced musicians pass down technical skills, stylistic nuances, and professional insights to the next generation.

Discussion Questions:

- ❓ How do you think playing in the Abe Schwartz band helped musicians like Tarras and Brandwein develop their own styles?
- ❓ Why is mentorship so important in musical traditions, especially in klezmer?

VII. Instrumental Klezmer in the Jazz Era

A. Molly Picon: Icon of Film and Stage

SLIDE 23

WATCH this performance of the song “Abi Gezunt”  from the film *Mamele*

You just watched a classic scene from the film *Mamele*, featuring the great Molly Picon. Picon and her long-time collaborator Abe Ellstein (composer for the film) were among the pivotal figures in the world of Yiddish theater and music, whose work laid the groundwork for what we now recognize as contemporary klezmer. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Molly Picon's contributions to the world of klezmer and Yiddishkeit. Molly Picon was a pioneering star of Yiddish theater and film, known for her comedic genius, dynamic stage presence, and ability to bring Jewish culture to life for audiences worldwide. Her decades-long career helped bridge the gap between traditional Yiddish entertainment and mainstream American theater, preserving and popularizing Yiddish performance art.

With films like *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, *Mamele*, and (later in life) an iconic performance as “Yenta” in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Picon brought Yiddish culture to life with her charismatic performances, blending traditional Jewish music and themes with modern theatrical styles. Abe Ellstein, a prolific composer, infused his music with rich melodies that drew from Eastern European Jewish traditions while embracing new influences. Together, their creative contributions helped preserve and evolve Jewish music, inspiring the vibrant klezmer revival we see today.

Molly Picon:

SLIDE 24

- ◆ Despite her small stature, Picon's influence on Yiddish culture was massive.
- ◆ Known for her acrobatic skills and ability to bring joy and humor to her roles, she became a beloved star in Yiddish theater and film.
- ◆ Picon grew up in New York's Lower East Side, an area known for its Jewish immigrant culture. She began acting at a young age and won a theater contest when she was just five years old.
- ◆ In the 1920s, Picon starred in numerous Yiddish theater productions, such as *Yankele* and *Mamele*, where she played both comedic and heartfelt characters, often bringing Jewish folk traditions to life.
- ◆ During and after WWII, Picon worked with refugees and entertained Jewish soldiers, making her a key figure in uplifting Jewish spirits through performance.

Both Picon and Ellstein played vital roles in adapting klezmer music for the American stage and screen. While Picon's acting and comedic roles brought Jewish culture to life, Ellstein's compositions and arrangements enriched the music that accompanied these performances, blending klezmer with theatrical and classical elements.

Picon and Ellstein were not only significant figures in Jewish theater and film but also instrumental in the evolution of klezmer. Their collaboration reflected how Jewish music and culture adapted and flourished in America, reaching beyond the immigrant community and influencing popular culture.

We will now watch a segment of *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, arguably the most famous work to come out of the Picon/Ellstein collaboration. *Yidl Mitn Fidl* is a 1936 Yiddish musical film about a young woman named Yidl (Picon), who disguises herself as a boy to join a traveling klezmer band. Set in Poland, the movie follows Yidl's adventures, the friendships she builds, and the challenges of keeping her secret while pursuing her love of music. The film is filled with humor, heart, and lively music, offering a glimpse into Jewish life and culture during that era. It's a story about resilience, identity, and the power of art.

SLIDE 25

WATCH [This clip from the film *Yidl Mitn Fidl*](#). In this fun moment Yidl (Picon) and another small klezmer group are having a musical dispute over busking turf. Listen how the music transitions from the simple klezmer melody on fiddle into something far grander, supported by Ellstein's composition.

LISTEN [to this recording of the song "Yidl Mitn Fidl"](#) 

B. Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras: Rockstars of the Klezmer World

SLIDE 26

In the Klezmer world of the early and mid 20th century, the greatest rockstars were undoubtedly Naftule "Nifty" Brandwein and Dave Tarras. During this time, clarinet was considered the lead instrument, like the electric guitar in a rock band. If you are wondering "why the clarinet?", there are several good arguments for the clarinet filling the role during this time period. It is an incredibly versatile instrument with a wide range and diversity of tonal colors. It can also play loud enough to lead a big ensemble which was very important, especially during a time of primitive, if any, amplification.

Naftule Brandwein

- ◆ Naftule Brandwein was a virtuoso clarinetist whose improvisational brilliance, technical mastery, and distinctive style helped define the sound of early 20th-century American Jewish Klezmer music. His work, particularly with Abe Schwartz, remains iconic.
- ◆ Born in Ukraine and later emigrating to America, Brandwein embodied the transnational journey of klezmer music, blending Eastern European traditions with American influences to create a new, dynamic sound.
- ◆ Known for his flamboyant and rebellious personality, Brandwein captivated audiences with theatrical performances, cementing his reputation as one of klezmer music's most colorful figures.
 - Famously, he was loved by the hitmen of the infamous Murder Inc. in New York and was often seen wearing a neon sign around his neck that (according to legend) almost caught his suit on fire during one particularly sweaty performance.
- ◆ Though he passed away before the on-going klezmer revival that started in the late 1960s, Brandwein's recordings and stylistic innovations became a cornerstone for modern klezmer musicians, serving as a standard for American Klezmer.

LISTEN [to Heiser Bulgar](#)  performed by Naftule Brandwein

Discuss

- ❓ How did Brandwein's immigrant experience shape his identity and career in America?
- ❓ Brandwein was known for his flamboyant personality and dramatic performances. How do you think this helped him stand out in the entertainment world?

Dave Tarras

SLIDE 27

- ◆ The Tarras family's multi-generational legacy of Hasidic klezmorim highlights the transmission and evolution of klezmer music within Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, incorporating influences from neighboring Roma musicians.
- ◆ Historically, klezmorim played essential roles in Jewish life, providing music for religious ceremonies, celebrations, and communal events. In the United States, Tarras extended this role into the immigrant community, performing for Hasidic groups and in Yiddish theaters.
- ◆ Tarras's work in orchestras, theaters, and recording studios reflects the expanding roles of klezmorim, adapting to the modern entertainment industry and immigrant life.
- ◆ Tarras's innovation in klezmer music demonstrates a fusion of traditional Jewish melodies with American popular music, exemplifying how the genre evolved in response to cultural shifts.
- ◆ His compositions and improvisation techniques illustrate the synthesis of diverse musical styles, from Eastern European dance rhythms to Middle Eastern traditional music, American swing, and even Greek songs (among others).
- ◆ The klezmer revival in the 20th century drew heavily on Tarras's recordings, preserving his unique style and inspiring a new generation of musicians to explore and innovate within the genre.
- ◆ Tarras's recordings across multiple styles, including Greek, Polish, and Ukrainian music, underscore klezmer's adaptability and its connection to broader musical traditions.

LISTEN to "Tanz! Bulgar" by Dave Tarras. Before listening, **NOTE** that this is late in Tarras' career and in comparison to other iconic klezmer recordings. For this reason, there is a strong American influence, most notably that of jazz.

Discuss

- ❓ Tarras incorporated elements from other musical traditions (Greek, Middle Eastern, swing, etc.). Can you think of examples in food, fashion, or entertainment where cultures blend to create something new?
- ❓ Even though klezmer music declined for a time, Tarras's recordings played a key role in its revival. Why do you think people return to older cultural traditions after they seem to fade? Is there anything about Tarras' music and/or life that made his music ripe for a revival?

VIII. Introduction to the Klezmer Revival

A. The Klezmer Revival: Personal Journeys of Rediscovery

SLIDE 28

Klezmer music, deeply rooted in Eastern European Jewish traditions, has experienced a powerful revival, beginning in the 1970s, driven by musicians who sought to reconnect with their own Jewish identities, uncover lost traditions, and breathe new life into a once-diminishing genre. Throughout this revival, individual artists have navigated personal and cultural rediscovery, shaping klezmer into a dynamic, evolving art form.

B. Wave 1: Rebirth and Personal Preservation

SLIDE 29

For the first generation of revivalists, klezmer was a way to reclaim a heritage that had been fading due to assimilation, Holocaust-era losses, and the rise of Israeli cultural influences.

- ◆ The klezmer revival began in the mid-20th century, focusing on preserving traditional melodies and styles. Key groups like the *Klezmorim* (1975–1993), *Ellis Island Band* (1970s–present), *Andy Statman* (active in Klezmer late 1970s–present), *Kapelye* (1979–present?) sought to reintroduce klezmer to audiences who had lost touch with their cultural roots.
- ◆ This wave prioritized documentation and performance of the music, ensuring it wasn't forgotten amidst cultural assimilation.
- ◆ Henry Sapoznik, a banjo player drawn to old-time American folk music, stumbled upon klezmer and realized it was part of his own forgotten heritage. His passion led him to study with older musicians and co-found Kapelye, one of the first revival bands.
- ◆ Andy Statman, originally a bluegrass and jazz musician, found himself drawn to the soulful wail of klezmer clarinet, leading him to immerse himself in its expressive melodies.

Pair Share:

- ❓ **What does it mean to reclaim a musical heritage that was never passed down to you directly?**
- ❓ **How did these musicians balance preservation with personal artistic identity?**

SLIDE 30

LISTEN: Klezmorim's rendition of "Yoshke, Yoshke" 

WATCH (If time allows) This video of Zev Feldman and Andy Statman  performing some of their early musical research

Discuss

- ❓ **How does this sound both old and new?**

Meet Lorin Sklamberg:

- ◆ Early Musical Passion—Sklamberg “sang before he spoke” and was largely self-taught on multiple instruments. He formed his first Jewish music group, Rimonim, with classmates at his Conservative synagogue in California.
- ◆ Diverse Musical Training—Before discovering klezmer, he studied Early Music, opera, folk, and Balkan traditions, performing in various ethnic music ensembles. He also worked as a cantor at USC’s Hillel House and Beth Chayim Chadasim.
- ◆ New York and Klezmer Discovery—A pivotal moment occurred when Michael Alpert introduced him to klezmer music, inspiring him to pursue it professionally.
- ◆ Co-Founding The Klezmatics and Cultural Leadership—He became a major figure in the klezmer revival, co-founding The Klezmatics and later working as a sound archivist at the YIVO Institute.
- ◆ Continued Exploration and Teaching—Beyond The Klezmatics, he collaborates on Jewish spiritual music projects and Yiddish-Irish fusion while educating others on Jewish music worldwide.

WATCH Lorin Sklamberg discuss his early experiences with Jewish music

WATCH Lorin Sklamberg discuss discovering Jewish identity in New York

Pair Share

- ❓ **Can you think of any early experiences in your life that were particularly influential and/or shaped your future pursuits?**
- ❓ **How did Sklamberg’s experiences shape his Jewish and musical identity?**

WATCH Lorin Sklamberg discuss the “Yiddish Revival”

LISTEN to “Man in a Hat”  by the Klezmatics

And (if time allows)/Or **WATCH** this live radio performance of the Klezmatics  (music begins at 1:04...and keep watching to hear Sklamberg talk about the tune)

Discuss

- ❓ **How does klezmer music bridge historical tradition with contemporary expression?**
- ❓ **How do the themes in the video clips connect to the broader klezmer revival movement?**

D. Wave 3: Innovation and Personal Reinvention

SLIDE 33

Today's klezmer musicians are not just reviving tradition; they are redefining it in ways that reflect their own complex identities. In this section, encourage you to break the students up into small groups for personal discovery and exploration of these different takes on contemporary klezmer and/or klezmer-related music. If the technology is not available for small groups, this section can be done as a whole class.

WATCH [this clip of contemporary Klezmer cellist Francesca Ter-Berg](#) describing how she arrived at klezmer in much the same way as those during the earlier part of the revival.

From hip-hop to electronic music, these artists take inspiration from their Jewish roots while shaping new, contemporary sounds.

SLIDE 34

Consider using the following activity: Break into small groups, each group picks one of the four artists, and browse their website and listen to their music, then share what they learned about each artist.

- ◆ [Michael Winograd](#) balances historical preservation with modern composition, ensuring klezmer remains relevant for new generations. His work with KlezKanada helps young musicians explore their own Jewish connections.
- ◆ [Zoë Aqua](#) travels to Transylvania to study Eastern European musical traditions, using fieldwork to incorporate authentic folk elements into her contemporary klezmer compositions.
- ◆ [Josh “Socalled” Dolgin](#) reinvents klezmer by mixing it with hip-hop and funk, reflecting his own multifaceted Jewish and musical identity. His work demonstrates that klezmer is a living, breathing genre, not a museum piece.
- ◆ [Lea Kalisch](#), self-branded as the “Rebbetzin of Hip-Hop,” fuses Yiddish music with rap, reggaeton, and pop, proving that Jewish music can be glamorous, bold, and modern.

LISTEN AND WATCH: SLIDE 35 Michael Winograd's [“Kosher Style,”](#) Josh Dolgin's [“You Are Never Alone,”](#)  **SLIDE 36** Lea Kalisch's [“Eshet Chayil of Hip Hop,”](#)  and/or [“In Vald Arayn”](#)  by Zoë Aqua. You may choose to listen to a clip or all of each, or pick a couple of examples to listen to.

Discuss in Small Groups All Together:

- ❓ **What elements of klezmer do you hear? What surprises you?**
- ❓ **How do contemporary artists like Winograd, Aqua, Kalisch and Dolgin navigate tradition and innovation?**
- ❓ **In what ways do their personal explorations mirror those of earlier klezmer revivalists?**

In this lesson, we traced the rich history and evolution of klezmer music, beginning with its roots in Eastern European Jewish communities and its preservation through early 20th-century recordings. We saw how influential figures like Abe Schwartz, Molly Picon, and Abe Ellstein brought klezmer to wider audiences, particularly in the United States, while clarinetists Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras shaped its iconic sound.

We also examined the three waves of the klezmer revival: the preservation of traditional melodies in the first wave, the blending of klezmer with jazz, rock, and classical influences in the second wave, and the innovative fusion of tradition with modern genres like hip-hop and funk in the third wave, led by contemporary artists such as Michael Winograd, Zoë Aqua, and Josh Dolgin.

Through these phases, we see how klezmer music has adapted and evolved, maintaining its cultural roots while continuing to inspire creativity and connection. Its journey reminds us of the power of music to preserve heritage, bring communities together, and adapt to changing times. Klezmer is not just a relic of the past—it is a living, dynamic tradition that resonates with new generations and bridges the old and the new.