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Musicians embrace heritage

Young klezmer players find outlet in Jewish folk songs

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The Journal News

MOUNT KISCO — Playing his violin atop a tall riser in a classroom at Bet Torah synagogue in Mount Kisco, Jonathan Zaidins, 11, evokes a classical musical image from the opening of "Fiddler on the Roof."

To add to the picture, Jonathan is wearing a large-sized Sephardic-style skullcap with colorful embroidery, and the tune he is bowing out on his grandfather's violin is a Yiddish folk song.

Jonathan and his twin brother, David, an alto saxophone player, and 14 other middle school students from four northern Westchester synagogues have formed a band exclusively playing klezmer music, folk tunes that originated in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

"We didn't like the music at bar mitzvahs and decided to make a band with lively Jewish music," David, a sixth-grader at Bell Middle School in Chappaqua, said during a recent rehearsal.

The group formed last year with seven members and has since doubled. They plan to play at a Bet Torah Open Mike Night at 8 p.m. Saturday at the Boys and Girls Club of Northern Westchester, at local song festivals in February and April, and possibly at an October wedding in Garrison. They have given concerts in local nursing homes to fulfill the community service requirement of their bar and bat mitzvah preparations.

The twins' mother, Mindy Herman, organizes music and schedules for the group. In addition to Bet Torah, band members come from Shaaray Tefila in Bedford, Beth El in Chappaqua and Congregation B'nai Yisrael in Armonk, but all attend local secular schools.

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Photos by Morris J. Kennedy/The Journal News

Top left: David Zaidins, 11, left, of New Castle, Adam Matsil, 11, of Mount Kisco and Eric Bailey, 12, of Chappaqua are members of Kenny's Klez Kidz, a klezmer band. Klezmer bands play a particular type of traditional Jewish folk music. This band is composed of children practicing at Bet Torah synagogue in Mount Kisco. **Top right:** Isaac Bernstein, 13, of Bedford performs. **Above:** Jonathan Zaidins, 11, of New Castle plays the violin for the band.

"It's a great way for the kids to have fun and really experience their heritage," Herman said.

The original klezmerim were professional Jewish musicians who performed at the festive occasions in their communities. The music ranges in style from exhilarating dance tunes to soulful, probing melodies. There's a definite flavor of Gypsy music and a reliance on harmonic minor scales.

Interest in the folk music tradition lapsed during the 1930s and 1940s as Jewish immigrants tried to assimilate into local cultures and bury the wounds of the Holocaust, said klezmer expert and music writer Seth Rogovoy, author of "The Essential Klezmer."

In the 1970s, American folk musicians inspired a resurgence in klezmer sounds, with Pete Seeger and Theodore Bikel making Yiddish folk songs and klezmer instrumental tunes a part of their standard performances, Rogovoy said.

Bands have formed on college campuses, he said, and classes have been held at Yale and Brandeis universities and Williams College.

It is rare to see young musicians getting into klezmer performance, said the group's leader, Kenny Green of Somers, noting that simplified sheet music and arrangements are hard to find.

"All of these kids have a thousand different responsibilities and commitments," he said. "Every bit of their time is spoken for, yet they are doing extra." A group of older teens plays in a southern Westchester band, Klezminors.

The musicians are highly motivated, Green said. He wants the group, known as Kenny's Klez Kidz, to come up with a new name, though.

"You can't have a Jewish group with the initials KKK," he told them, while popping in a compact disc with versions of songs the children are practicing.

As with many folk songs, there are multiple versions of the same song.

Four arrangements of "Lebedik Un Freilach" filled the air. True to its name, which means "lively and joyous," the song made the children tap their feet and rock back and forth to the sounds.

Brian Kohn, 11, of Chappaqua couldn't keep the tambourine in

stein, 11, of Chappaqua thumped his foot softly on the pedal of a bass drum.

Newcomer Isaac Bernstein, 13, of Bedford tapped his foot on the floor and bopped his head to the jazzy tones.

"I like the music," Isaac said after finishing his first rehearsal. "It has a Jewish context and is fun to listen to."

The music is more than just fun, said Lisa Mayer of Scarsdale, who helped create Green's group and manages an adult klezmer band, Oy Vey Klezmer.

"The music speaks to kids. They are discovering their roots early," she said.

The sounds recall Jewish history long before the state of Israel and modern Jewish traditions, she said, adding that it is a way for people to connect with their ethnic past but steer clear of current political events.

Audiences enjoy the music.

"It was marvelous seeing all the kids," said Lillian Kimmeldorf of Yonkers, who is undergoing rehabilitation for a broken hip at the Hebrew Hospital Home in Valhalla. As an in-patient, she heard Kenny's Klez Kidz perform last month during a Hanukkah event.

"It brought back memories of my mother and father," Kimmeldorf said, explaining that her father was a cantor and her girlhood home was filled with sounds of Jewish music. "It was really pleasurable to see the (children's) enjoyment and smiles."

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