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Jews With Horns

Thriving local klezmer group brings Jews of all ages back to their musical roots.

Erica R. Davis - Special To The Jewish Week

For the Horowitz family of Armonk, klezmer is a family affair.

Nina Horowitz, now 13, joined the Westchester Klezmer Program four years ago. Soon after, her mother, Lori, and younger sister, Sarah, signed on too.

"Unlike any other musical venture, it is the one that allows us to play as a family," said Lori Horowitz, 47, a violinist and a psychiatrist.



The Horowitzes aren't the only ones who have caught "the klezmer bug" as Kenny Green, the group's musical director, calls the revived interest in the Eastern European Jewish folk music.

Seven musicians comprised the Westchester Klezmer Program when it was launched in January 2001. Today, the program, which recently kicked off its fall season, boasts 80 participants, ranging in age from seven to 70. Those from Northern Westchester meet at Temple Shaaray Tefila in Bedford Corners, while those from Southern Westchester meet at Temple Beth Abraham in Tarrytown.

The klezmer players are divided into five, age-specific bands. There are separate Northern and Southern bands for the fifth- and sixth-graders; one Northern band for the seventh- and eighth-graders; and separate Northern and Southern bands for the teens and adults. Bands generally practice separately, but concerts—at local nursing homes, synagogues, or programs for special-needs children and developmentally disabled adults—are often played together.

The klezmer program began after twins Jonathan and David Zaidins, who were 10 at the time, went to a friend's bar mitzvah and disliked the rock music played by the DJ there. The boys decided that at their bar mitzvah they wanted to play their own music.

"My husband suggested if they're playing their own music, why not klezmer, because it was traditional Jewish dance and party music," recalled their mother, Mindy Zaidins, who lives in Mount Kisco and serves as the program's executive director.

Unlike the classical genre, where the music is highly notated so every player sounds the same, klezmer music—it gets its name from "kley-zemer" the Yiddish phrase for "vessel of song," or instrument—is written with only a basic melody. The result is an interpretive music that never comes out the same way twice, much like jazz improvisation.

The Zaidins boys ultimately enlisted five of their friends; their parents solicited a start-up grant from UJA-Federation of New York, and recruited Green, who runs several local children's music programs, to lead the group.

Green was caught by the "klezmer bug" in 1992, he said. He taught himself to play the music by studying independently and attending klezmer music workshop.

Though klezmer traditionally stars the violin or clarinet, participants in Green's classes can play any instrument.

"The most bizarre is the electric tenor ukulele," he noted.

Green requires Westchester Klezmer Program participants to be able to read music and have completed one year of instruction on any instrument. Each band rehearses an hour and a half every other week. In the interim, Green asks his students to play through the pieces. But above all, he urges them to listen to the music because, he said, "You learn proper inflection by hearing the stuff."

The experience of playing klezmer music has enthused Nina Horowitz.

"It helps me identify with my Jewish roots," the teen said, "but the part of Jewish culture that is cool."

Members of the klezmer program will play Friday, October 7 at 8 pm at Temple Shaaray Tefila, 89 Baldwin Road in Bedford Corners. Annual participation fees for band members are \$118 in Northern Westchester and \$90 in Southern Westchester. For more information about the ensemble or to join, visit www.klezkidz.org.

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