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WHO ARE YOU. HERR KLESMER?

by Mara Mauermann

"... Herr Klesmer being a felicitous combination of the German, the Slave, and the Semite, .."

(1)

Who is Klesmer? He is not - as Gordon Haight points out - Franz Liszt; he may be Anton Rubinstein (2). Has anyone, I wonder, thought about the possibility that he may be just what his name proclaims: Klesmer? A klesmer, that is.

Klesmer means 'a musician'. It is Yiddish and derives from 'klejsemer' - (3) musical instrument. The 'Klesmorim' were wandering Jewish musicians who played at weddings or on holidays like Purim, later also in public houses or on fair-grounds. They could play everything their audience demanded, from sentimental pieces to wild dancing tunes. Throughout the middle ages they had hard times avoiding the distressing restrictions of Christian administration like high taxes, persecution and prohibition. With the development of the cities some klesmorim settled down permanently - there have been some famous groups in Prague, Frankfurt and Berlin. The instruments they used varied - a description of a group in about 1800 mentions two fiddles, a clarinet, a cello and a dulcimer. Although Klesmerim will sometimes use elements of song, Klesmer music generally means instrumental music.

After the progress of Jewish emancipation throughout Western Europe the tradition of Klesmer music continued in the Eastern areas. The ancient musical elements of Jewish music (4) - already brought to a high standard by the Chassidic movement (5) - mingled with styles from many countries and developed the special Jewish-Chassidic sound that is so characteristic for Klesmer music.

Jewish emigrants brought Klesmer music to America, where it easily mixed with styles like Jazz. Modern Klesmer groups often present a happy mixture of Jazz and European folk traditions. Among the instruments used are clarinets, banjo and piano, saxaphones, trombone and percussion. They preserve that special Jewish sound, and above all this music often conveys a certain spirit of fun. It is true that Chassidic or Yiddish melodies can be extremely sad and melancholic, but there also is a strong element of wit, irony and satire. And the dancing tunes just carry you away!

Did George Eliot know about Klesmer music, and did she choose Herr Klesmer's name deliberately, as a kind of inside joke? (Where are those who maintain that her later novels lack a sense of humour?!)

I feel that she might have known. Someone who, according to Lewes was so profoundly versed in Jewish history and literature as only learned Rabbis are (6), and who, moreover, was deeply interested in music, must have been aware of Jewish musical traditions. Lewes himself mentions 'Jew-German', that is Yiddish, in his 'Life of Goethe' (7). Is it going too far, then, to presume that she might have known the word 'klesmer' and used it as a fitting surname for the formidable Julius?

So who are you, Herr Klesmer? Perhaps I may paraphrase another literary lady: A klesmer - is a klesmer - is a klesmer.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Daniel Deronda, Chapter 5. Penguin Edition, edited by Barbara Hardy (1973)
- (2) Haight, Gordon; George Eliot, (London 1968), Chapter 14.
- (3) Frankl, Hai & Topsy; Jiddische Lieder, Frankfurt a.M. 1981. The information on Klesmer music has mostly been gathered from this volume. The term 'klesmer' may also be written as 'klezmer', in fact I believe that in English this is the more common practice. But in honour to Herr Klesmer I have used the version with an 's'!
- (4) These elements derive from Babylonian, Persian, Italian, Spanish (=Sephardic) traditions; there is a Sephardic-Egyptian, later a Sephardic-Dutch, Sephardic-French and an Ashkenazic (i.e. German) tradition.
- (5) The Chassidim were a Jewish religious sect who in their ecstatic devotions used free improvisations of traditional music.
- (6) Haight, Gordon; The George Eliot Letters, (New Haven 1954-55; London 1954-56).
- (7) Lewes, George Henry; The Life of Goethe, (London 1875), Chapter 4.

DISCOGRAPHY

Good examples of modern Klesmer music are available on records. Unfortunately I can't quote the labels, just musicians and titles.

KAPELY, Future & Past; Chicken; Levine and his Flying machine.

GIORA FEIDMANN. The Singing Clarinet; Viva el Klezmer; To You!; The Incredible Clarinet; Nigunim of my People; Jewish Soul Music; The Magic of the Klezmer.

THE KLEZMORIM, Streets of Gold; Metropolis; The Klezmorim.

THE ANDY STATMAN KLEZMER ORCHESTRA, Klezmer Suite.



*The Klesmer statue in the Klesmer-Platz, Saltgitter-Bad, West Germany.
Photograph by courtesy of Saltgitter Civic Archive, Schmitt*