

## First School on klezmer music in Minsk (28 March, 2004)

### *The event*

On 28 March the first one-day school on klezmer music was held at the Minsk Jewish Community Center, becoming a remarkable event in the Jewish music culture of Belarus. About 60 musicians from numerous Jewish communities of Belarus arrived to participate, among them instrumentalists, vocalists, Jewish bands and band leaders. It is noteworthy that when the idea of such school evolved, the organizers expected not more than 35 participants to come. While their amount reached so big number, it was decided to invite virtually everyone who had applied. The school was generously supported by the American Jewish Joint Distributive Committee with solid assistance of the JCC, the Emuna Jewish Cultural Society, and the Hillel of Minsk.

### *Coordinators and instructors*

The school was inspired and coordinated by *Alla Dantsig*, leader of the Minsk Klezmer Band, *Dr. Nina Stepankaya*, Associate Professor of musicology at the Belarus State Academy of Music (BSAM), and *Dmitri Slepovitch*, B.A., leader of the Minsker Kapeleye klezmer ensemble, band director of the Simcha Jewish Youth Music Theater, post-graduate student of ethnomusicology at BSAM. These three were joined by two other instructors at the school, *Vera Gofman*, an eminent Yiddish singer, director of the Yiddishe Feygelekh choir of the JCC, and *Yaniv Itzhak* of the Jewish Agency in Belarus, a research fellow of the Jewish Music Research Center of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, specializing on the study and performance of music in the Jewish communities of Israel, Morocco, and Yemen.

### *What was inside*

The school was opened by a lecture given by Dr. Nina Stepankaya surveying Jewish musical traditions worldwide, focusing on the Ashkenazi communities. The audience was exposed to the history and structure of Jewish music, tracing the whole scale of its evolution through millennia. The lecture was illustrated by demonstrative audio examples.

Dmitri Slepovitch presented a large gamut of audio and video recordings of the klezmer music covering the whole era of Jewish music ethnography and recording industry, introducing a large range of Jewish music performers, from Goldberg, Brandwein and Schwartz through the klezmer revival in the US and contemporary klezmer stage across Europe and America. For many learning those recordings became a true breakthrough in their listening experience, mainly due to lack of such information in their hometowns.

The second part of the school was aimed at practical aspects of klezmer music-making. It was opened by the three classes given simultaneously in different locations across the JCC by Alla Dantsig and Vera Gofman teaching Yiddish song and piano accompaniment, Yaniv Itzhak instructing drum players, and Dmitri Slepovitch teaching all other

musicians various genres and styles of klezmer music and introducing them several Hasidic niggunim.

The master classes gave a perfect opportunity to the participating musicians to feel the very spirit of the klezmer music and Yiddish song, its specific expression and articulation peculiarities. In this way Alla Dantsig evidently showed how an initial melody of any kind of origin transforms becoming Jewish when adapted. In his class for the instrumentalists, Dmitri Slepovitch turned to pieces that represented different stages of the East European Jewish wedding, playing “kale bazetsn”, “kosher tants”, khosid, gasnign, all being colored by the specifically Jewish kind of humor, when joy is inseparable from tears. By the manner of Vera Gofman’s singing one could instantly feel the traditional flavor of each song.

A concert attended by a huge audience overcrowding the JCC conference hall became the final and probably the most vivid part of the school. Leonid Levin, chairman of the Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities, and Wolf Reznikov, chairman of the Minsk Society for Jewish Culture, presented their introductory greetings, emphasizing the exceptional role of the school in the Jewish cultural life of Belarus. The musicians made of the concert a real show offering the audience a true firework of Jewish music in various styles. Music pieces were intermediated with excerpts from Jewish poetry narrated by Dr. Nina Stepanskaya.

The school on klezmer music brought real joy and became a true revelation to its participants and guests, making the first and very firm step towards wide spread of Jewish music revival on the professional basis in Belarus.

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