

Ezekiel's Wheels Klezmer Band

Exploring Klezmer: Ashkenazi Music and Songs

Educational Guide, Grades K-12



About the Performance

This fun, upbeat, and interactive performance program introduces klezmer music, the Yiddish language, and instruments from three different instrument families. Klezmer music is Eastern European Jewish (Ashkenazi) secular celebration music. Students will have fun learning about different musical instrument families (woodwind, string, and brass) as they move and sing along to a lively set of traditional tunes played on clarinet, violin, trombone, and double bass. They will also enjoy learning about klezmer music and its significance in secular Ashkenazi Jewish culture both in Eastern Europe and in the United States as they define popular Yiddish words and sing along to songs with Yiddish lyrics.



About the Artists

Internationally-acclaimed Ezekiel's Wheels Klezmer Band brings passion, virtuosity, and contagious energy to every performance. They improvise with the intimacy of chamber music and the intensity of a rowdy dance band. At the 2012 International Jewish Music Festival, they won the the "Best Klezmer Band" and "Audience Choice" awards, and judges heralded them as "a true musical democracy". Ezekiel's Wheels features **Abigale Reisman** (violin, backing vocals), **Kirsten Lamb** (double bass, lead vocals), **Nat Seelen** (clarinet), and **Pete Fanelli** (trombone).

Program Learning Goals

1. To identify klezmer music and its significance in secular Ashkenazi Jewish culture both in Eastern Europe and in the USA.
2. To establish different musical instrument families and identify examples from each one.
3. To define popular Yiddish words and sing along to songs with Yiddish lyrics.

Essential Questions

1. What makes a culture unique? What keeps a culture alive?
2. What is the importance of music, dance, and language to a culture?
3. What is the role of klezmer music in Ashkenazi Jewish culture?

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Vocabulary

- **Ashkenazi:** a Jewish person from central or eastern Europe
- **Klezmer:** the celebration music of Ashkenazi Jewish people
- **Yiddish:** the language of Ashkenazi Jewish people
- **Diaspora:** a community of people who share a culture and traditional homeland but live in a different place either by choice or by force
- **String instruments:** musical instruments sounded by plucking, striking, or moving a bow across a string
- **Woodwind instruments:** musical instruments sounded by blowing air into or across a mouthpiece
- **Brass instruments:** musical instruments made of curved, brass tubes and sounded by buzzing lips into a mouthpiece

Key Facts and Cultural Context for Students

Europe and Beyond

Klezmer is the celebration music of the Ashkenazi Jewish people. It is secular (non-religious) music. It originated in central and eastern Europe in countries such as Germany, Poland, Hungary, and western parts of Russia. Many klezmer musicians came to the USA in the late 1800s and early 1900s, so modern klezmer is influenced by American jazz and other styles.



Instruments Featured in this Performance



Violin



Clarinet



Trombone



Double Bass

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Pre-Performance Discussion Questions

- What do you know about klezmer music? What would you like to know? How could you find out more?
- Why do people move from place to place, or country to country? What factors (positive and/or negative) might influence why someone moves away from home?
- What kinds of instruments do you know? How are they played? What type(s) of music do they play?

Pre-Performance Activity: Introduction to Klezmer

Learning Goals:

- To understand how changing political borders affect populations
- To observe how traditional music changes over time

Materials:

Maps of Europe:

- [From 1800](#)
- [From 1900](#)
- [From 2000](#)

Recordings of “Ch’sideshe Nigunim”:

- [Abe Schwartz](#) (recorded in 1927 in New York City)
- [Ezekiel’s Wheels Klezmer Band](#) (recorded in 2016 in Boston)



Directions:

1. Find the following countries on a modern map: Germany, Poland, Hungary, Russia.
2. Compare the modern map to a map of Europe in 1800 and a map from 1900. How have the borders of these countries changed from century to century? Why do you think the borders changed? How do you think these changes affected the people and cultures in this region?
3. Discuss how Ashkenazi Jews left Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Where do you think they went? What routes and what kinds of transportation do you think they took to get there? How could you find out more about the history of Ashkenazi Jews?
4. Listen to the two versions of the klezmer tune “Ch’sideshe Nigunim”, recorded almost 100 years apart. Think about the instruments you hear, the speed, the way the music makes you feel, etc.
5. Discuss the recordings. How are they different? How are they the same?

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Post-Performance Discussion Questions

- Why do you think klezmer music is so important to Ashkenazi Jewish culture? What role does it play?
- What music, dance, or language is important in your culture?
- How is your culture (music, dance, language, etc.) similar or different to Ashkenazi Jewish culture?

Post-Performance Activity: A Groom Without a Bride

Learning Goals:

- To explore a folksong in Yiddish
- To write an original story or poem with musical accompaniment

Materials:

Ezekiel's Wheels Klezmer Band recordings:

- Video of ["A Khosn On a Kale"](#)
- Original tunes:
 - ["Barry's Bulgar"](#)
 - ["Nat's Nign"](#)
 - ["Der Dreyendiker Khosidl"](#)



Directions:

1. Watch the video for "A Khosn On a Kale". This is a funny Yiddish song about a wedding. The title means "A Groom Without a Bride". Listen and watch for the word "oy" that you learned during the performance.
2. Talk about the story and meaning of the words in the song: At the beginning, the bride's family, the groom's family, and the klezmer musicians are traveling to the wedding and happily singing "oy, oy!" to celebrate. However, the bride is not singing because she is not happy about marrying the groom that her family chose for her. In the middle of the song, someone rides by on a horse and the bride gets very excited and sings "oy, oy!" because this is the person she wants to marry. The bride rides away on the horse and leaves the groom alone. Everyone sings a sad "oy, oy!" because the groom no longer has a bride.
3. Discuss how "oy" can be happy or sad depending on how you say it.

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Post-Performance Activity, continued

Directions, continued:

4. Write a short story or poem that uses the word “oy” as a happy word, a sad word--or both.
5. Listen to the three original tunes by Ezekiel’s Wheels Klezmer Band. Notice each one has a different mood. How does each one make you feel?
6. Pick one of these tunes to accompany your story or poem.
7. Read your story or poem for your class while playing the klezmer recording in the background!



Further Resources

- [Ezekiel’s Wheels Klezmer Band Artist Website](#) and [YouTube channel](#)
- [The Klezmer Institute](#)
- [Yiddish POP](#): Yiddish language cartoon with basic Yiddish vocabulary
- Videos:
 - [“Tradition” clip from Fiddler on the Roof](#): an example of Jewish life and traditional family roles in an Eastern European shtetl
 - [“Freylekhs Tutorial”](#) by Steve Weintraub: another dance style lesson
- Glaser, Linda: *Emma’s Poem: The Voice of the Statue of Liberty*, Clarion Books (2013)
- Marshall, Linda: *Good Night, Wind: A Yiddish Folktale*, Holiday House (2023)
- Sapoznik, Henry: *Klezmer!: Jewish Music From Old World To Our World*, Schirmer Trade Books (2005)
- Slobin, Mark: *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots*, University of California Press (2001)
- Strom, Yale: *The Book of Klezmer: The History, the Music, the Folklore*, Chicago Review Press (2011)
- Teis, Kyra: *Klezmer!*, Kar-Ben Publishing (2021)

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Curricular Connections

Arts Standards: Dance and Music

Creating

- Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. (D.Cr.01, M.Cr.01)
- Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. (D.Cr.02, M.Cr.02)

Performing

- Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. (D.P.06, M.P.06)

Responding

- Perceive and analyze artistic work. (D.R.07, M.R.07)
- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. (D.R.08, M.R.08)
- Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. (D.R.09, M.R.09)

Connecting

- Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. (D.Co.10, M.Co.10)
- Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. (D.Co.11, M.Co.11)

English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standards

Writing

- Write narratives to develop experiences or events using effective literary techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured sequences. (W.PK-12.3)

Speaking and Listening

- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. (SL.PK-12.2)
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. (SL.PK-12.3)

Language

- Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. (L.PK-12.3)
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings. (L.PK-12.5)

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Curricular Connections, continued

History and Social Science

K

- Topic 1: Civics: classroom citizenship (HSS.K.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: connections among places (HSS.K.T2)
- Topic 3: History: shared traditions (HSS.K.T3)

Grade 1

- Topic 1: Civics: communities, elections, and leadership (HSS.1.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: places to explore (HSS.1.T2)
- Topic 3: History: unity and diversity in the United States (HSS.1.T3)

Grade 2

- Topic 1: Reading and making maps (HSS.2.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography and its effects on people (HSS.2.T2)
- Topic 3: History: migrations and cultures (HSS.2.T3)
- Topic 4: Civics in the context of geography: countries and governments (HSS.2.T4)

Grade 7

- Topic 4a: Physical and political geography of Europe (HSS.7.T4a)

Grades 9-12

- US History I Topic 6: Rebuilding the United States: industry and immigration (HSS.USI.T6)
- US History I Topic 7: Progressivism and World War I (HSS.USI.T7)
- US History II Topic 3: Defending Democracy: Responses to fascism and communism (HSS.USII.T3)
- World History I Topic 1: Dynamic interactions among regions of the world (HSS.WHI.T1)
- World History II Topic 1: Absolute power, political revolutions, and the growth of nation states, c. 1700-1900 (HSS.WHII.T1)
- World History II Topic 4: The Great Wars, 1914-1945 (HSS.WHII.T4)
- World History II Topic 5: The Cold War Era, 1945-1991 (HSS.WHII.T5)

World Languages Standards

Communication

- Engage in, negotiate with, and improvise with cultural norms, etiquette, and nonverbal cues. (S.4.e)

Linguistic Cultures

- Analyze and evaluate variations among products and practices and how they relate to perspectives in multiple cultures and communities. (S.5.a)

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Curricular Connections, continued

World Languages Standards, continued

Linguistic Cultures, continued

- Analyze and evaluate the contributions of various cultural influences in the development of identity. (S.5.b)
- Investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of culture through comparisons of diverse target-language cultures and their own (S.6.a)

Lifelong Learning

- Apply cultural and linguistic skills to participate in the school, local, and global community (S.8.a)

