

THE BEAT GOES ON

Cellist on the Roof

Stephen Dankner composes a klezmer fantasy

BY SETH ROGOVOY

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, David Alan Miller, the music director of the Albany Symphony Orchestra, has wanted to expand the programming of the organization's holiday concerts beyond the tried and true Christmas tunes—partly out of recognition that a good proportion of his audience and the musicians, including himself, don't celebrate Christmas, partly to honor other seasonal cultural traditions, and partly to shake things up musically.

In the back of his mind, Miller had the idea of commissioning someone to write a new piece for orchestra and klezmer band. At the same time, Miller was eager to work with cellist Matt Haimovitz, a virtuoso player perhaps best known for traveling around the world playing Bach in alternative venues including bars and pizza parlors. Haimovitz actively commissions new works for cello and different ensembles, such as cello and big band, or cello and choir.

When it came time to choose a composer, Miller didn't have to think long and hard. "The one who immediately came to mind was Stephen [Dankner]," he says. "We've done several of his works, and he's local. He's a very versatile composer, and to me there's something so Jewish about his soul and style. Because he's so versatile I thought he could really capture the Old World klezmer style. My dream was to turn the orchestra into a super klezmer band. Not surprisingly, he features many soloists, really turning the orchestra into a klezmer ensemble."

The resulting piece, *Out of Endless*

Yearnings: A Klezmer Fantasy for Cello and Orchestra, will have its world premiere over the course of three days in December, with concerts in Saratoga Springs, New York (December 13), Troy, New York (December 14), and here in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, at the Colonial Theatre, on Saturday, December 15. Also on the program, entitled *Memories of the Old Country*, are Schubert's *Unfinished* Symphony, Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances*, and Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No. 1*, which the Israeli-born Haimovitz will also tackle in addition to Dankner's new work.

Dankner's assignment, however, presented him with some musical and conceptual challenges. For one, the cello was never the lead instrument of a klezmer ensemble. That honor devolved to the violin, and later on, beginning in the early twentieth century, to the clarinet. But Dankner found that the cello's lower register was perfectly suited as an embodiment of religious and cantorial chant, the source material for many klezmer melodies.

"I was just really impressed when I got the score," says Haimovitz. "The cello writing is virtuosic and beautifully written. I think Stephen's achieved something quite rare in the crossover world. He's actually taken traditional klezmer music and made

something new with it to a degree that feels authentic yet not imitative of the style."

Structuring the concerto was also no easy task. But Dankner found a solution in the historical manner in which klezmer itself would have been heard at a typical Old World wedding. As dance music, primarily, klezmer would be played in suites of tunes about twenty minutes long (corresponding to the average time people can sustain themselves on the dance floor). Twenty minutes was also, coincidentally, the length of time that Miller wanted the composition

to last. So Dankner approached the work as a "dance card of movements," going mostly from slow to fast, and including the main styles of dance tunes one would have heard at such a wedding.

The piece begins with a *doina* (a free-metered melody, in this case, for cello) played over a bed of harmonic changes. The *doina* then gives

way to a *hora*—not the upbeat Israeli folk dance of the same name, but more akin to a waltz. Dankner followed that up with a *khusidl* (a dance intended to evoke the dances of Hasidic Jews; the word literally means "little Chasid"), and then a *bulgar*, perhaps



Stephen Dankner

the most popular and recognizable style of klezmer. After a second *doina* recapitulates the themes heard throughout, the piece ends with a *kozatsky*—a wild, Gypsy-like dance.

Although as a young man he played gigs in the Catskills, Dankner never really played klezmer music, and threw himself into the genre through listening to dozens of CDs recommended by experts along with researching the history of the music at Williams College, where he taught in the 1970s. In 2000, Dankner and his wife, who were then living in New Orleans, where Dankner was composer-in-residence for the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra (where he also first met Miller, who was a frequent guest conductor with the orchestra), bought a condominium in Williamstown

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to use as a summer home and eventually as a place to which to retire. Hurricane Katrina put those plans on a faster track than originally planned, and Dankner now calls Williamstown his year-round home.

Dankner wrote *Out of Endless Yearnings* during a three-week stay at VCCA (Virginia Center for the Creative Arts), an artists' colony in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It took him nine days to write the melodies, and another nine to orchestrate the piece. The result—as heard in a very casual listening session in which Dankner plays the melodies on a keyboard and tries to give a sense of what else is happening with the orchestra—is at once very bouncy and light, yet full of Yiddish depth that will be familiar to fans of *Fiddler on the Roof* as well as hardcore klezmer junkies.

Haimovitz says, "When I first read through it, I liked that he was taking some risks with the instrument, not just keeping me in cello range. Occasionally I imitate other klezmer instruments, clarinet or trumpet or accordion. The treatment of the *doinas*, particularly the second one, is just a beautiful solo cello piece. The tunes are great. People will recognize it as klezmer. It will be great if they start dancing in the aisles."

Dankner says that while writing the piece, he had several "aha!" moments of recognition. "A lot came together," he says. "The religious, the cultural, the popular aspects."

As he nears completion of the demonstration, Dankner laughs, almost to himself, and in his inimitable, low-key, almost apologetic way, says, "*I'm* having a good time, anyway." **BL**

THE GOODS

Memories of the Old Country
Saturday, December 15, 7:30
Albany Symphony Orchestra
Colonial Theatre
111 South St.
Pittsfield, Mass.
413.997.4444
www.thecolonialtheatre.org

Seth Rogovoy is Berkshire Living's editor-in-chief and award-winning critic-at-large. He is the author of *The Essential Klezmer: A Music Lover's Guide to Jewish Roots and Soul Music* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2000).