James Skidmore
Today I'm speaking with Phil Alexander, author of *Sounding Jewish in Berlin: Klezmer Music and the Contemporary City*, published by Oxford University Press. Phil is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Reid School of Music, where he studies historical Scottish-Jewish musical interactions. He is also a musician who plays piano and accordion for Moishe's Bagel, a five-piece Scottish klezmer and world folk music ensemble. Phil, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

Phil Alexander
Thank you very much. Thanks for the shortlisting and thanks for having me today.

James Skidmore
We're happy to have you. Maybe we should start with basics. What is klezmer?

Phil Alexander
What is klezmer? klezmer, historically, is Eastern European Jewish instrumental folk Music. Listeners may have heard some klezmer more recently. It's kind of crept into the world music nexus, particularly with the activities of New York bands such as the Klezmatics and Brave Old World and these kind of people. But they're much more recent; they are what you would call revival bands. Historically, klezmer developed around the late 18th, early 19th century. Its heartland is probably what is now Ukraine, around Bessarabia and Galicia, and it would have developed in towns and also cities. It's music of Ashkenazi Jewish celebration, specifically instrumental music. The performers would have been all-male, dynastic, what's known as Kapelyes, which is Yiddish for ensemble, and they would have had their own repertoire, which was passed down from band leader through their children, normally, and grandchildren, and so that would continue that way. It covers all aspects of a Jewish celebration — and we're talking about a Jewish celebration at that point in history that a wedding of a wealthy family could have lasted anything up to about three weeks. And so there's a lot of different elements of the celebration, and that is often choreographed and structured through music.

Like many religions and many religious rituals, music is fundamental to Jewish practice. In Eastern Europe, the particular instrumental [inaudible 00:02:29] klezmer was important for that. So that's where it came from. And then, with the movement of Jews from east to west — from Russia and from the Pale of Settlement in the late 19th and early 20th century, principally to the States, but also to the UK, to Buenos Aires, to Australia, to Palestine and so on — we see klezmer also migrate. So around the 1920s, New York becomes the new home of klezmer music. And interestingly, then the music itself changes a little bit. It moves from the slightly more ritualistic, traditional sound to what you expect from New Yorker; kind of brassier, more brassy-influenced. The influence of the Jazz Age comes in there, into klezmer music. But it's still very much Jewish music, often for Jews and for Jewish celebration.

And then, just to complete the history while we're here, that continues until about the 1940s. And then, for a number of other historical reasons, we see klezmer kind of dip below the cultural radar of Jewish life, really, and it becomes a sort of heritage music for some time; until the early 1970s, when a group of second-generation Jews, largely in the States, building on the great musical explorations of the 1960s and also the rise in identity politics of the 1960s, retake klezmer music and imbue it with a newer and much more muscular sensibility, and it becomes much more of a contemporary music and a music of affirmation of contemporary Jewish identity — at which point we're also seeing a revival in the Yiddish language as well, which goes hand in hand with that. That's the story that I pick up on in the

book. So that's kind of the klezmer journey. And if you're listening out for klezmer, it's often very lively, very kind of dancey music. There's particular modes and scales which sound very evocative; some of them are from the synagogue and some of them are from Arabic influences, but they give it its particular flavour and its particular character.

James Skidmore
What I like about your description is that it shows the centrality of it, its very strong connection, of course, with Jewish culture. But that doesn't mean that it's impervious to other influences.

Phil Alexander
Absolutely.

James Skidmore
Like any music.

Phil Alexander
Like any music. People who have historically theorized klezmer music often make that distinction. So there are bits of the repertoire which are kind of core repertoire and, in a way, you can find those across different Eastern European communities with quite a large degree of similarity. And then you have co-territorial influences of neighbouring communities in particular geographical areas, which will influence klezmer in particular ways, yes. And also, I think it's important that historically, it's central to Jewish life — but nowadays, the Jewishness of klezmer music is very fluid. For some people, it's still very central, the Jewishness is very central. For others, many of whom are not Jews of course, it's tangential at most. Which is not to say that they're disavowing historical heritage, it's just that that is no longer necessarily a central paradigm of it. The music has moved in different directions, some of which retains the Jewishness and connects there, and some of which has gone elsewhere.

James Skidmore
Yeah. One of those localities or communities is now Berlin, where there's been a real increase in klezmer's popularity probably in the past 20 or 30 years.

Phil Alexander
At least, I would say. Yeah.

James Skidmore
Yeah. And of course, like all things in Germany, there's a debate about it. And I'm curious if you can sketch out the contours of that debate for us.

Phil Alexander
Yes, it's very interesting and it's kind of where my book starts, but where I didn't want it to linger too long because it's just the context rather than what's happening now. But it's important to note. Historically, before the War, before the middle of the 20th century, Germany's Jewish population was largely assimilated and actually westward-looking. And so the Yiddishness and the Eastern European elements of things like klezmer music and Yiddish culture, although they were certainly present in a city like Berlin from the early 1900s and 1920s on, was in reasonably strong enclaves. Generally, the current of German-Jewish society before the Holocaust was westward-facing rather than eastward-facing, if we can put it that way; kind of acculturated. And the music listened to could well have been

Wagner rather than Eastern European Jewish music, you know what I mean? I think the reason that's important is that we don't have a historical prewar presence of klezmer music in the city. It's a revival era-phenomenon, which means it's from the 1980s onwards. And what happens in the 1980s is— I'm sure some of you will be aware of the currents of philosemitism and various levels of working out and possible guilt and things like that that went on in German society once the Holocaust began to be spoken about a little bit more, incorporated with the national histories from the 1980s onwards. But what happened at the same time was that a klezmer had revived elsewhere in the world — I should mention that a lot of practitioners don't like that term, revival, but I use it because it's a shorthand. Some people claim that revival is a bit of a funny term because that means it must have been dead, whereas it wasn't dead but revitalized, shall we say.

So klezmer music had revitalized in the States and other bits of Europe, and a number of musicians came to Germany and in a sense brought it into the country. A couple are worth mentioning. One is the Argentinian-Israeli clarinetist Giora Feidman, who appeared at the time in a play by the Israeli player Joshua Sobol which was about concentration camp life. And then a number of American musicians came about the same time and essentially brought this particular version of Jewish music to Germany where it really hadn't been in any significant way before. So far, so good. It's terrific music, and these people bringing it were very charismatic and they developed a number of workshops and really ignited a spark for the music in Germany and particularly in Berlin. And because of the way that had come about, the vast majority of Berliners who took it up were young non-Jews. And this just gently started to raise some questions: what's going on here? And in its kind of worst form, people were saying, well, hang on, what is this? People playing the music of the grandparents that they got rid of? This kind of thing. I'm sure you can fill in the gaps in those kinds of arguments that were made. And it was kind of tricky, because very quickly a number of things about klezmer music and Yiddish music in Berlin became about ideology rather than about music. And this sparked debate. But it also annoyed quite a lot of musicians who were saying look, we're here. And actually most of the German musicians. There's a great band called La'Om [who are] not around anymore. They're all East Berliners and they released a CD in the late 90s, and in the line of notes, one of their sentences is: "as a means of dealing with German-Jewish history, klezmer music is completely inadequate." Which actually is right. You can't deal with that kind of history through a bit of dance music.

So what happened is that we have a debate that begins with klezmer's popularity in the 80s and particularly in the 90s, when klezmer becomes really party music and there's what's known as a boom in Germany in klezmer music. And at that point, the Jewishness of it in Germany sort of drops away. And that's the point, I think, when people start to question what's going on. Because surely, in a country like Germany with that problematic German-Jewish history, the adopting of a Jewish cultural form at that point starts to look suspect. And that's not suggesting any suspect activity on the part of anyone adopting it, because I've spoken to all these musicians and they loved it and they're great advocates for the music. But that's the debate that went on. Now what happened as a result of that, however, is that Berlin became one of the central hubs of klezmer musical practice. So it attracted a lot of other musicians from out of the city and out of the country even, from the States and from former Soviet states and this kind of thing, who merged and arrived in Berlin and then started creating a scene which I then write about in the book. So out of the controversy came a new space, I think, for the music which has then led onto a much more exciting and dynamic and fluid and politically and historically aware version of klezmer music now in the city.

James Skidmore

Right. As you pointed out, your book isn't really trying to dissect that debate or to clarify that debate, but that philosemitism or that philosemitic appropriation of klezmer is just part of that scene in Berlin, so you can't ignore it. But [with] your book, you didn't want to make that the central focus — and you don't. In your book, you're looking at klezmer now in the city, as it were, or in the past few years. And a couple of the ideas in the book are particularly noteworthy, I think. In one chapter, you argue that Berlin as a city, even its physical spaces, influences klezmer. And I'm wondering: how does it do that?

Phil Alexander
Well, I think it's really interesting. This comes from PhD research, this book; this was my PhD field work. I'm a cultural studies scholar originally, and then more recently a musician and a musicologist. And one of the new discoveries when I was doing the PhD, the reading before actually getting out into the field, was the spatial theory of people like Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau and then more recently people like Fran Tonkiss. The idea essentially is that space doesn't exist as a neutral category, that we just kind of move through spaces produced by our activities. And I got very excited by this. It made a lot of sense to me about the way I was thinking about musical practice, because I think the way that music inhabits space and dialogues with space is fundamental to the act of music making itself. You know, it doesn't happen in a cultural vacuum, it doesn't happen in a spatial vacuum.

So getting to Berlin and thinking about this raised some interesting questions. This is music that began hundreds of thousands of miles away from the city of Berlin in a different place and in a different time and now exists in the contemporary city. So what happens when those two things meet? When traditional music from somewhere else arrives in the contemporary city, especially a city like Berlin, which is so many different versions of a city and so many different possibilities there, what happens to this music and also what happens to the city? And what I theorized was going on with klezmer music is the bit I was mentioning before about the revival in Germany of the 80s and 90s, that it was initially characterized by quite a formal approach to the music. I suppose a respectful [approach] that engendered a certain degree of formality. And what I found more recently is there's a much more fluid and what I call "unofficial" approach to klezmer musical practice in the city. That has nothing to do with the quality and the training, as these are world-class musicians, but they're doing it in much more unofficial spaces. And that's where klezmer has kind of moved into. And that I found interesting because that is very different from the sort of ritualistic, formal way that klezmer worked historically in shtetls and towns in the Pale of Settlement, where it was very much for structuring particular ritual events, particularly weddings.

So for me, that's the way that the city and the music interact and the city influences the music. When the music moves into these unofficial Berlin spaces, then the musical practice itself changes. It becomes much more fluid. It becomes much more about temporary international communities. It also becomes more politicized, interestingly. It becomes much more aware of its own local communities, because a lot of this is happening now in Neukölln, which has been a hotbed of political activities of different sorts for some time now. And so those debates around city ownership are incorporated into the music as well, and people will play at benefits and things like that. And structurally then, the music becomes, I think, more open to different influences and looser and more fluid in its practice.

For me, the key way of thinking about this for the book was that Berlin is very much a city of bricolage in the Lévi-Straussian sense. Bricolage is like the opposite of an engineer having the correct tools for the job; bricolage is making it up with what you have to hand at any one point. And that's been Berlin for a number of years now. I would say even bits of Berlin before the war but certainly postwar, I would

say that's very much one of the Berlin ethoses. That bricolage nature I found tapped into musical practice and klezmer musical practice in terms of the groupings and the influences and particularly the spaces in which it happened, making it — and this is what I find so interesting — making it absolutely a music of the city. Music which is not of the city and not of that city, not even of the city generally, becomes a music that can speak the contemporary city. And that's really exciting. And by total serendipity, the time that I was there was exactly the time when that seemed to be taking shape. You know, I was at the mercy of that historical moment a little bit, but luckily I was at the mercy of a good one because that was the point where lots of new personal spaces opened up and lots of new groupings began. Certain [inaudible 00:17:43] and particularly jam sessions took off in a really exciting and new way for the city. So that was very much an influence on klezmer music. And because Berlin is a kind of transnational hub for the music and a lot of the people there are playing their klezmer music elsewhere, that then influences klezmer musical practice around the world; it becomes part of that transnational dialogue. So those are some of the ways that it does it.

James Skidmore
What's also interesting in your book though, is that you've flipped that argument as well in that you say [that] Berlin's bricolage, Berlin's adhocness, as it were, influences klezmer. But klezmer also influences Berlin in your reading of them, in your argument in the book. So how does that flip side of the argument work?

Phil Alexander
Yes, I think it can only influence Berlin so much, but I think it presents versions of Berlin which then feed it into a narrative of thinking about the city generally. There were a few artists while I was there and I had a great time — and we might talk about this in a second — but I had a year of playing and interviewing people, so I kind of got to know a lot of musicians very well, obviously. And there were a few people working there at the time within klezmer music who seemed to be presenting different versions of Berlin through their klezmer music, in the interaction of the city and the music itself. And that I found very interesting. And there were a few that are worth noting. There was a band called ?Shmaltz! which was made up of Berlin natives, and their version of klezmer music as produced through Berlin or the Berlin that their version of klezmer music was produced in is a very sort of fantastical space of the imagination. So it's that sense of the city. It's the city as a thousand multilingual, slightly zany possibilities, which the sound of klezmer music fits very nicely with because it has, to certain ears, a slight exotic sound and a fun sound; it can be a boom cherry sort of sound [or] a fairground-y sound. So it kind of works with that sort of thing. And also, the dropping in of the Yiddish language into klezmer music these days in Yiddish songs works well with the multilingual nature of so much of Berlin. There's so many conversations happening in so many different languages at once in Berlin, and so that fits very well there. It's a very optimistic and inclusive version of the city produced through that particular version of klezmer music.

Right on the other side [there is] the musician Daniel Khan, who is a singer-songwriter and a multi-instrumental. He's from Detroit originally but has been in Berlin for the nearly 20 years now. For someone like Khan, who is very much a Brechtian kind of scholar and very influenced by that and actually created his own version of what he calls "Verfremdungsklezmer," so alienation klezmer. So for Khan, Berlin through his klezmer music is explicitly a place of dark histories and unresolved conflicts and things buried beneath the surface physically as well as ideologically and historically that must be confronted. He said a great thing there one time, he said "I like to engage with history in my work, but I like to choose which histories I'm engaging with." And those are the particular ones that he picks. But

that also is kind of encompassed within the presentation of klezmer music within the city. So the city itself is kind of spoken through the music in its different incarnations.

And then just maybe one third one, which is not in Berlin but feeds back into Berlin, which is: there is a very important month-long workshop and festival series called Yiddish Summer Weimar, which happens in Weimar, which is a terrific place, wonderful centre of deep learning and exchange. And that way of musically being, when it comes back into Berlin, feeds into those networks as well. There's three, for example, versions of it. So I was very interested in [that]. Again, this is the thread through the book: that the relationship between traditional music and the contemporary city has to be a dynamic one and it has to have possibilities and articulate in different ways. And that's what keeps both of those two parts of the equation moving, really. So the different Berlins that are articulated through the klezmer I found really interesting.

James Skidmore
Yeah, that's so true. And one thing I felt reading the book and not having thought much about klezmer really, before reading the book, other than knowing a little bit about the debate about the appropriation and the philosemitism, but one thing that's so interesting about it and what you've just articulated here is— you know, we have a tendency of course, to say "klezmer sounds like this and only sounds like this," just as we do that with other kinds of music or whatever it might be. Especially when they have a cultural connection or a strong cultural bond with a particular culture, for example klezmer with Jewish culture and society. And what you've just been explaining shows us that klezmer can be all sorts of things.

Phil Alexander
Absolutely. You can move in many different directions. That does raise questions as well about roots and well, the two versions of it, roots and routes. Which one is it doing? [crosstalk 00:23:52] You're right, there is flexibility there. I think also it's worth pointing out, though, that all these people that I met who are pushing it in different directions are doing this from a position of quite profound knowledge of where it starts from. So they're not just kind of skating on the surface, they have thought about the roots and then thinking about the ways they would like to push out from them. Which I think is really the best way in any creative form, really, that one wants to push; is to know where you're from and then know where you might go from that.

James Skidmore
Yeah, they have a deep familiarity with the music. And you do as well. You're a musicologist but you're also a musician. And, as you pointed out, you lived in Berlin and so you've studied klezmer, but you also perform klezmer. Did that duality influence you in the study, in writing the book?

Phil Alexander
Yes, massively. I don't think I could have written the book that I did write without being a part of the scene as a player as well as an observer. Obviously, there's a bit of an "in" — if you can speak the musical language as well as the spoken language, you can get in quicker. But actually, everybody was extremely and unfailingly generous and supportive when I told them what I was doing, so I think I would have had access anyway. I think people would have happily chatted with me. But if you're researching, [then] you talk to people, you ask questions, you observe, you kind of see what's going on, you make field notes, you walk around, you get a feeling of it — you do all those kinds of things. But there is a sort of embodiedness about ethnography and about writing up ethnography and trying to

think about something like music as it operates in real time. And I think to be a part of that, embodying that myself, being a part of bands and being a part of jam sessions and things, I think that gives you a really important and necessary perspective when trying to think about it afterwards. I'm sure that people who are not practitioners of anything can write about things beautifully and convincingly; but it's different, I think. I think being in that has an effect. Obviously, in getting on now as a musician, I know the certain way, the physicality, that musicians work together and the way that we occupy space and the way that we occupy sound and the way that we communicate. Those are not universal, but there are certainly a lot of parallels with most musicians you might meet around the world, even if you never played a note with them before. And so, being able to kind of recognize those and understand them as shorthands of larger communication and cultural processes going on was really for me really useful and really important.

And I think the other thing is that on a kind of pleasure level, I guess, it can be sort of weightless being a researcher. You know, you're not grounded some of the time. You're sort of floating a little bit in a space, trying to get theoretical handles on things. But playing music is a very rooted thing to do, and so it was a very strong counterbalance, I think, to the weightlessness of being a researcher. That, and having a two-year-old son there at the time that was [inaudible 00:27:26]. Certain theoretical things have to go out the window when you've got to work out what's going on there. [laughing]

James Skidmore
I was just wondering if your son is becoming a klezmer musician as well, or is it too early to tell?

Phil Alexander
He's becoming a rock musician, actually. He kind of doesn't mind listening to the klezmer when I play it, but rock drums is his thing these days. So I think, yes, really massively important that duality. It can be a little odd, like any dualities. Sometimes you have think about which side of it you're sitting on closely; and be aware that that changes, of course. But really for me, [it is] really important particularly [for] something like musical ethnography to be able to be doing some of the musicing. And obviously, my academic training is as an ethnomusicologist. And that's a fairly fundamental tenet of ethnomusicology, really, is to kind of be in it, learn an instrument, learn a dance. Take part, I guess.

James Skidmore
Right, like any kind of ethnography. To be part of it.

Phil Alexander
Absolutely.

James Skidmore
The thing about books is they answer questions, but they also raise questions. So what questions does your book raise?

Phil Alexander
That's interesting. Well, actually, we alluded to it slightly before. In a general sense, I hope it raises the question: where will this go from here? Because I make the point at the end of the book that Berlin, like many 21st-century cities, is a very transient city these days in many respects. And already, some of the spaces that I was writing about had closed even before the pandemic. And after the Pandemic as well of course, who knows. So where will it go? And is this kind of version of folk traditional music in the

contemporary city sustainable, or does it have to find other ways of being? I think that's an important question which will be answered by musicians, really, in some form or other, and by musical networks. And the other thing, which is the bit we alluded to, is: how far can something like klezmer music strain and stretch from its traditional moorings? How flexible is that rope holding it to the shore of tradition? And what I found is that it is very flexible, but there's a point when it does snap. And I think finding that balance is always interesting, particularly somewhere like Berlin with this extremely charged history around it. There's a sentence I'm quite pleased about in the book, where I wrote that a city of Berlin approaches a music like klezmer paradoxically with the heaviest of baggage, but also the cleanest of slates. So it's bringing all that ideological baggage, but in terms of musical practice, it's actually kind of cut free — a bit like the city of Berlin itself since the late 80s and early 90s. And in a way, again, that's about that dialogue between city and the music. So this sense of trying on different versions of itself that happens in the city itself has happened within klezmer music. And I suppose that begs the question about how far can that go and still retain enough links to traditional Jewish instrumental fold music and maybe Jewishness for a lot of people as well.

James Skidmore
Right. Yeah, that's a marvellous way to express it. Speaking of books, have you read anything lately that you're really keen on?

Phil Alexander
I haven't had much time for any kind of theoretical stuff lately, but I read a book called A Gentleman in Moscow [by] Amor Towles. It's a little old now, it's just my partner passed it on to me and I read it. And it seemed to me wonderful on many levels, but particularly because it felt like a 19th-century Russian novel set in the 20th century in English. And I thought that dialogue with Russian literature, even though it was going on in English, was fascinating and very beguiling. So I've enjoyed myself with that on tour, actually; I just finished a couple of days ago. It's perfect tour reading.

James Skidmore
Because you're in hotels a lot. [laughing]

Phil Alexander
You're right, yes. I'm looking for the passkey. His hotel is much more fun than the Travelodge off the M6, I can tell you that. [laughing]

James Skidmore
I can imagine. [laughing] I've been speaking with Phil Alexander, the author of *Sounding Jewish in Berlin: Klezmer Music and the Contemporary City*. Phil, thanks very much for telling us about your book today. I really enjoyed that.

Phil Alexander
It's my pleasure, thank you for the questions. Very nice to meet you. It's been a lot of fun. Thank you.