

THE KLEZMATICS

November 10, 2021

Pasant Theatre

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.

THE BAND

Richie Barshay – percussion

Matt Darriau – kaval, clarinet, saxophone

Lisa Gutkin – violin, vocals

Frank London – trumpet, keyboards

Paul Morrisett – bass, tsimbl

Lorin Sklamberg – lead vocals, accordion, guitar, piano

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The Klezmatics are thrilled to be back on the road and to be playing at Wharton Center!

We'll be sharing some longtime favorites of the band as well as some great things we put together from home during the pandemic. In addition, we're celebrating the release of our new recording, *Letters to Afar*, a suite of music we composed for an acclaimed video installation centered around home movies made by Jewish-American immigrants who traveled back to visit Poland between the World Wars. Our ambient, evocative score is rooted in both the klezmer tradition and avant-garde experimentation, and we look forward to debuting sections of the score for you as part of our concert.

Tonight's program will run approximately 90 minutes with no intermission.

BIOS

THE KLEZMATICS

In the rich and colorful Yiddish language there are expressions that vividly convey virtually any emotion or action. One such phrase is *farshafn a sakh freyd un fargenign*, which means to give much joy and pleasure. *Farshafn a sakh freyd un fargenign* perfectly encapsulates the happiness that the Klezmatics have delivered to the passionate millions who have discovered their music since the band's formation more than 30 years ago. In that time, the Klezmatics have raised the bar for Eastern European Jewish music, made aesthetically, politically and musically

interesting recordings, inspired future generations, created a large body of work that is enduring, and helped to change the face of contemporary Yiddish culture. Not bad for a bunch of Americans who each came to klezmer music almost by accident! Often called a “Jewish roots band,” the Klezmatics have led a popular revival of this ages-old, nearly forgotten art form.

They have performed in more than 20 countries and released 11 albums to date—most recently the album *Apikorsim* (*Heretics*), produced by Danny Blume (who helped the band win a Grammy® in 2006) and the first of the band’s albums to feature only the six members. On their Grammy®-winning 2006 album *Wonder Wheel*, the Klezmatics set a dozen previously unsung Woody Guthrie lyrics to music, widening their stylistic base by largely diverging from klezmer. They have also recently served as the subject of a feature-length documentary film, *The Klezmatics: On Holy Ground*.

During their third-of-a-century existence, the Klezmatics have collaborated with such brilliant artists as violinist Itzhak Perlman, Pulitzer prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner and Israeli vocal icon Chava Alberstein, plus many other prominent artists working within multiple genres.

Today, with three original members—Lorin Sklamberg (lead vocals, accordion, guitar, piano), Frank London (trumpet, keyboards, vocals) and Paul Morrisett (bass, *tsimbl*, vocals)—still on board, alongside longtime members Matt Darriau (*kaval*, clarinet, saxophone, vocals) and Lisa Gutkin (violin, vocals), the Klezmatics are without a doubt the most successful proponents of klezmer music in the world.

The Klezmatics' music is rooted in, but is not a strictly traditional, variety of the klezmer genre. Rather it is a comfortable hybrid that appeals equally to those with no previous exposure to the music and those already familiar with it.

"Klezmer," says London, "is the unique sound of East European Jewishness. It has the power to evoke a feeling of other-worldliness, of being there and then, of nostalgia for a time and place that we never knew."

Although tradition is at the core of what they do, since the beginning the Klezmatics have adapted to the artistic sensibilities of a contemporary world. "Klezmer has everything you want, ethnically, and yet it's so intertwined with American culture," says Morrisett. "We want to make sure that we are part of a living tradition, and living traditions change; they don't stay in a pickled form."

Indeed, the Klezmatics are very much of the modern world. Says London, "By putting forth a consistent and coherent political and aesthetic Yiddish/klezmer music that embraces our political values—supporting gay rights, workers' rights, human rights, universal religious and spiritual values expressed through particular art forms—and eschewing the aspects of Yiddish/Jewish culture that are nostalgic, tacky, kitschy, nationalistic and misogynistic, we have shown a way for people to embrace Yiddish culture on their own terms as a living, breathing part of our world and its political and aesthetic landscape."

"People are quite detached from their Jewish roots," says Gutkin. "The Klezmatics fill an incredible void."

Formed in New York in 1986, the Klezmatics quickly built a devoted following that expanded outward once word spread about this exotic new band that was bringing klezmer back from the abyss. For some fans, the group's appeal went beyond the music itself. "People have a need for something to hold onto," says Gutkin. "They want to be part of something."

Throughout the years a wide range of lyrical ideas has inhabited the Klezmatics' songs, ranging from contemporary issues of global import facing each of us to matters of intimate love, and from leftist politics to age-old Jewish mysticism. "From early on," says Sklamberg, "even before we made a conscious effort to make the music our own, we decided that if we sang songs, they would be ones we believed in."

Live at Town Hall, the 2011 Klezmatics release, captures the group's March 5, 2006, 20th anniversary concert at the New York venue. Recorded in conjunction with the *On Holy Ground* documentary, the set features a cross-section of music from throughout the Klezmatics' history, and includes a lengthy list of special guests, among them previous members David Krakauer and Margot Leverett, who had never recorded with the band until this gig. The repertoire draws from the group's earliest days and material as recent as the Guthrie adaptations.

Says London, "We wanted to celebrate being together for so many years with everyone who has been part of our family."

The Klezmatics have always been as much about community as music. Says Sklamberg, "The energy and support we received from the local community fueled the band, rather

than it being a particular sensibility. At the very least it allowed us the freedom to be us." The Klezmatics remain committed to their music and to the close relationship they share with their fans. "In 1986," says Sklamberg, "I never imagined that preserving, disseminating and helping to redefine Yiddish music would become my life's work. I certainly don't think we sound like anyone else."

Indeed, they don't. Never have and—should the Klezmatics (hopefully) last another 30 years—it's a safe guess that no one else ever will!

RICHIE BARSHAY (*percussion*) Richie Barshay began drumming inside kitchen cabinets at an early age and continues banging on things worldwide to this day. Noted for his work with the Herbie Hancock Quartet ('03-'07), he's been dubbed "a major rhythm voice on the rise" by *Downbeat* magazine, and *The Guardian* (UK) praises "the arrival of a major innovator who also knows how to have fun."

Find Barshay on tour and recordings with names like Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Esperanza Spalding, The Klezmatics, Fred Hersch, Kenny Werner, Lee Konitz, Natalie Merchant, Bobby McFerrin, and Pete Seeger, among others. Since 2004 he has led outreach projects across 5 continents as an American Musical Envoy with the U.S. State Department. He can be heard on over 80 recordings as a sideman and on his two self-produced albums: *Homework* featuring Herbie Hancock (2004), and *Sanctuary* featuring Chick Corea (2014).

Based in New York City, Barshay is an AmSAT certified Alexander Technique teacher and maintains a private practice for performers and non-performers to learn better mind-body coordination and ease of movement.

MATT DARRIAU (*kaval, clarinet, saxophone*) Matt Darriau has contributed to the Klezmatics' music ever since they released their debut album, *Shvaygn = Toyt* (Silence = Death), in 1988, but it wasn't until 1995 that he became an official member, just in time for their fourth release, *Possessed*. Matt's full integration into the group was the culmination of a personal and musical journey that began back in Indiana, where he grew up "in an arty household where my father held international folk-dance parties featuring Israeli, Balkan, Greek and Scandinavian dance music." Although the elder Darriau came from French Catholic stock, "He loved and embraced Jewish and Eastern European culture," says Matt.

Darriau, who describes himself as a "musical polyglot," was a jazz fan first and foremost, but once he arrived in Boston, where he attended the New England Conservatory of Music's Third Stream program, he began looking to world music for new inspiration. "We spent a lot of time in the international sections of used record stores and passed tapes along to each other," he says. "It developed from there, with an intention of integrating improvisatory ideas with this music."

Klezmer, Balkan and Celtic music all gave Matt the creative outlet he sought, and even today, when the Klezmatics take a break from their busy touring and recording schedule, Matt keeps himself sharp by playing Irish, Balkan, klezmer and jazz and leads his own Balkan rhythm quartet, Paradox Trio. He has made music for dance, theatre and film, including a

recent commission from Chamber Music America for his avant-swing band, Ballin' the Jack. In addition to the Klezmatics, he has collaborated with Gunther Schuller, Elliott Sharp, Marc Ribot, George Schuller, Theodosii Spassov, Mark Feldman and many others.

Some of Darriau's other recent projects include Yo Lateef, a jazz quintet inspired by the music and legacy of Yusef Lateef, the Recycled Waltz Orchestra and Disastro Totale with Yuri Lemeshev of Gogol Bordello and Celtic Eclectic, with its original take on Irish music featuring uilleann pipes player Ivan Goff. He has also recorded and performed with David Byrne, Marc Ribot, Roberto Rodriguez, Itzhak Perlman, Ken Butler, Ben Folds Five and many others in the New York and world scene.

Matt Darriau was named one of the most influential jazz musicians of the past 15 years by *Jazziz* magazine for bringing Balkan rhythms and melodies into jazz.

LISA GUTKIN (*violin, vocals*) Lisa Gutkin joined the band on violin and vocals with 2002's *Rise Up! Shteyt Oyf!* album. She was brought to the group via early recruit Matt Darriau when the two musicians were playing together in a Celtic band called Whirligig. Darriau played Gutkin some old recordings of Jewish violinists, and "I flipped," she says.

The Klezmatics were a natural home for Lisa. "I grew up playing classical violin and then bluegrass, Irish, a host of other international styles and backing songwriters," she says. "I had made a pact to only play Irish music but the Klezmatics were such a fantastic band and these old recordings mesmerized me. So when the Klezmatics called me I decided to give it a try. I had an immediate feel for it,

but it took many years before I felt that I understood klezmer deeply.”

In fact, landing in the Klezmatics represented something of a personal sea change for Lisa. “I spent my summers in a leftist bungalow colony started by my grandmother, great aunt and their friends in 1929,” she says, “and my grandmother used to drag me to Yiddish singing sessions, which I simply hated. It was old people’s music, and it was too schmaltzy. Oddly it was my paternal grandfather’s more cantorial voice that I referenced in my head more than my maternal grandmother’s Yiddish singing when I was learning the phrasing and note emphasis.”

Born in Brooklyn to a musical family, Lisa was already playing in orchestras by age eight, and soon winning awards for her classical playing. In her teens she branched out into Irish, bluegrass and rock, and then went on to earn a Bachelor of Music degree in classical violin at the Aaron Copland School in Queens, NY. Her prowess quickly attracted the attention of the international and folk music communities, and Lisa began playing with a wide variety of artists, from the Southern Italian music theater group I Giullari di Piazza to Amigos del Tango, the Waverly Consort and, as part of the Fast Folk Collective, singer-songwriters such as Suzanne Vega, Shawn Colvin, and the Roches. Her diversity and improvisational skills have led her to numerous gigs with the likes of John Cale, Steeleye Span, Jane Siberry and the Irish artists Tommy Sands, John Whelan, Steve Cooney and Cathie Ryan. No less an icon than Pete Seeger called Lisa’s “Gonna Get Through This World” —one of two pieces she composed for the Klezmatics’ Grammy®-winning album *Wonder Wheel*— “a piece of genius.”

Most recently, Lisa has been co-composer, co-music director, actor and musician in the Tony Award® winning play *Indecent*, written by Paula Vogel and directed by Rebecca Taichman. Her previous Broadway experience was as a member of the band in Sting's production *The Last Ship*. She also composes for film, radio, television and theatre. She can be heard on two songs she composed for episodes of *Sex and the City's* final season, and she made a cameo on-screen appearance on the show (with the Klezmatics). She also accepted a composing commission for *Song For New York: What Women Do While Men Sit Knitting* and put in a stay at the MacDowell Artist Colony. She's worked with the Pilobolous Dance Company in the piece, "Davenen" (with the Klezmatics), Ralph Lee's Mettawee River Company, Pat Cannon's Foot & Fiddle Dance Company and the Phoenix Theater Company's *As You Like It*, and was music director for the Lincoln Center Director's Guild production *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, music director for the New York Renaissance Festival in Sterling Forest, NY, and co-orchestrator for *Song of Songs* by Elizabeth Swados.

Gutkin also leads fiddle styles workshops at folk festivals, as well as master classes and artist residencies for universities and folk organizations, and many of her private students are or have gone on to become professional musicians.

FRANK LONDON (*trumpet, keyboards*) The word prolific doesn't even begin to describe Frank London. Of course, there is the Klezmatics, which he co-founded in 1986. Frank plays trumpet and keyboard and sings with the group, and he's written many of the Klezmatics' most popular songs. But his mile-long resumé has also seen London adding virtuosity to hundreds of concerts and recordings by

everyone from John Zorn to They Might Be Giants, Mel Torme to Iggy Pop, Pink Floyd, Youssou N'dour, LaMonte Young, Allen Ginsberg and LL Cool J! Called the "mystical high priest of Avant-Klez jazz," Frank has made 30 solo recordings and is featured on over 400 CDs. His current projects include the dance theater work *Salomé, Woman of Valor* (with Adeena Karasick), the Yiddish-opera-in-a-Cuban-nightclub, *Hatuey* (with Elise Thoron), Astro-Hungarian band Glass House Orchestra, *Sharabi* (bhangra-klez with Deep Singh), *Ahava Raba* (with Cantor Yanky Lemmer), and *Vilde Mekhaye* (Eleanor Reissa + Frank's Klezmer Brass Allstars). He's a regular face on New York's cutting-edge downtown club scene and music festivals everywhere, and has written dozens of scores for theater, film and dance. He collaborated with Judith Sloane on *1001 Voices: A Symphony for a New America* for the Queens Symphony Orchestra and choir. He was music director for David Byrne and Robert Wilson's *The Knee Plays*, collaborated with Palestinian violinist Simon Shaheen, taught Jewish music in Canada, Crimea and the Catskills, and produced CDs for Gypsy legend Esma Redzepova, and Algerian pianist Maurice el Medioni. He was even featured on the soundtrack to *Sex and the City!*

Of course, London is mainly known for his contribution to contemporary Jewish music. When he first heard klezmer music, Frank says, "I was very blown away by the funky rhythms, the polyphony, the wild old-world, old-school ornamentation, the particular way it expressed its Jewishness and how the instrumental music was not at all kitschy or corny the way most Jewish music I had heard up to that point was."

Frank London graduated from New England Conservatory with a degree in Afro-American music. While living in Boston, he played with a host of diverse groups, from the Klezmer Conservatory Band (a founding member, playing on their first six recordings) to the Haitian band Volo-Volo to the salsa band Los Hermanos Pabón, Mark Harvey's new music big band Aardvark, the world music group Les Misérables Brass Band, and the improvisational Ensemble Garuda.

"Playing a genre or style of music is like learning a language," he says. "You need to know the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, content, history, idioms and inflections in order to become fluent. But improvisation is outside of style; it focuses on the sonic ontology of music. What is sound? What are the aesthetics of sound and silence? These questions are at the center of all my music."

After settling in New York City in 1985, London began working with the all-star ensemble led by auteur Kip Hanrahan (which also included Jack Bruce of Cream), and then started working with Hasidic wedding musicians and learning the style and repertoire of Jewish music, as well as becoming involved in Hasidic philosophy and community. He also became a member of Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy. Then, after answering an ad for klezmer musicians, Frank met Lorin Sklamberg, and the Klezmatics came to be.

Among London's other projects are the internationally acclaimed folk-opera *A Night In The Old Marketplace*; "Davenen" for Pilobolus and the Klezmatics; Great Small Works' *The Memoirs Of Gluckel Of Hameln*; and Min Tanaka's *Romance*. His Klezmer Brass Allstars CD *Carnival Conspiracy* was awarded the German Grammy®; the Hasidic New Wave's entire recorded oeuvre has been released as a

box set on Tzadik Records; he completed two commissions for Carnegie Hall and served as an artist-in-residence in Krems, Austria. *Green Violin*, his musical theater piece about the Soviet Yiddish theater written with Elise Thoron, won a Barrymore Award for best new musical. London is on the faculty of SUNY Purchase and is currently artistic director of KlezKanada. With each new undertaking, London brings his knowledge of the music's traditions and aesthetics with him, "showing a way for people to embrace Yiddish culture on their own terms as a living, breathing part of our world and its political and aesthetic landscape."

PAUL MORRISSETT (*bass, tsimbl*) When he's not busy with the Klezmatics, Paul Morrissett—who has been with the group since their first album—spends much of his time fiddling for dances. "I love dance fiddle," he says. "When people are dancing in front of the Klezmatics, that's always a high for me."

Morrissett is an avid collector and player of the instruments of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia and has studied with many masters of these traditions. In addition to the tsimbl, which is similar to the hammered dulcimer, he has recorded and performed on Hardanger fiddle, violin, nyckelharpa, gadulka, baritone horn, accordion and tamburitza. He has been on the staff of numerous music camps as an instructor, including Fiddles and Feet, Lark in the Morning, Buffalo on the Roof, Ashokan Northern Week and Balkan Music & Dance. Paul enjoys playing for contra and English country dances.

Morrissett has a long history with this particular art form. "It's my childhood music," he says. "I was an international folk dancer as a kid." While living in Colorado in the late

1970s, before he joined the Klezmatics, Paul, who also learned piano as a child, played for international folk dancing events. He attended graduate school for a couple of years and then moved to New York, where he started dabbling in different kinds of music, mostly Balkan, then Scandinavian. "All of this was essentially amateur stuff," he says. "Then I started playing bass and once people found out about that I got more work as a bassist. I ended up with a pretty good bass-playing gig!" he deadpans about his successful tenure with the Klezmatics.

That gig came about when the group's previous bass player decided to leave. Lorin Sklamberg, one of the group's co-founders, gave Paul the call. He admits he wasn't well-versed in the genre, but he quickly found himself immersed. "I had heard klezmer and was interested in it, but I didn't know anybody who was playing it. To me it's a flavor of something I'd been dancing to since I was a kid, the Eastern European modes, so it was not a stretch at all. I was fooling around with all these different ethnic musical genres, and here's one that has everything you want, including lots of people I already know discovering their own culture. And yet it's so intertwined with American culture."

LORIN SKLAMBERG (*lead vocals, accordion, guitar, piano*)

The legendary music critic Robert Christgau has described Lorin Sklamberg's voice as "transcendent, ethereal and sensual," while a writer for *Folkworld* gushed that the Klezmatics' frontman "brings tears into my eyes with his fabulous way of singing." Klezmatics co-founder Lorin Sklamberg has been on the receiving end of countless tributes of that nature; his crystalline, expressive vocalizing

never fails to have an emotional impact on all within its range.

Sklamberg, who says he “sang before he spoke” and taught himself to play guitar, piano and autoharp, has been involved in the world of Jewish music since he was 15 years old, when he co-founded a band, Rimonim, with three Hebrew school classmates at his conservative shul in Alhambra, California. After being introduced to klezmer, Lorin began to seek out songs within the genre, but it wasn’t until after he moved to New York in the early ‘80s that he was able to incorporate klezmer into the music he performed.

Prior to that move, Lorin attended two California universities and dabbled in early music, opera, American folk and pop and Balkan and East European musics, in addition to dancing and singing in four semi-professional ethnic song and dance ensembles. He studied voice, guitar, accordion and oud and served as the cantor at USC’s Hillel House and Los Angeles’s gay and lesbian synagogue, Beth Chayim Chadashim.

“It was through this last experience that I became part of a gay-Jewish-radical faerie folk duo, Pilshaw and Sklamberg, and traveled the country for a summer performing house concerts and shows in gay bars,” says Sklamberg. “We even recorded a commercially released cassette, *Bending the Rules*.”

While attending a Balkan singing workshop with Michael Alpert, the great Yiddish singer, Alpert “took me aside and played me a cassette of him performing a song on the seminal Yiddish band Kapelye’s then-unreleased first record,”

says Lorin. "That gave me the idea that this was something that I, too, could do. It was the moment that eventually led to me literally finding my voice."

But New York beckoned and Lorin headed east in 1983. Since the creation of the Klezmatics, Sklamberg has continued to find his voice and apply it to a number of disciplines. He has also worked for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research for almost 20 years, first as a jack-of-all-trades, graphic designer and Yiddish typesetter, and then as its sound archivist. For 14 years he was the coordinator of KlezKamp: The Yiddish Folk Arts Program, and co-founded Living Traditions, the nonprofit that sponsored it for seven of those years.

"The Klezmatics remain my primary musical outlet," says Lorin, "but I have a couple of side projects: one is an ongoing series of programs of (primarily Hasidic) Jewish spiritual music with bandmate Frank London; the other is an exploration of the Yiddish and Irish song traditions with Dublin-born vocalist Susan McKeown."

Lorin can be heard on some 50 CDs, and also composes and performs for film, dance, stage and circus, produces recordings, and teaches and lectures from London and Paris to Kiev and St. Petersburg. By day he works as the sound archivist for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

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