

Klezmer Bass: An Overview

by Paul Tkachenko, October 2009

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to point you, as a bass player, in the right direction. What I am not doing is dictating how things should be played. The stylistic traits of what has become known as Klezmer¹ are still evolving and differ depending on who you play with and where you play.

I have tried to keep the examples generic in order that they can apply to double bass and tuba (or any other applicable bass instrument). Be mindful that many sections may need to be moved an octave down, particularly in the case of BBb and CC tubas.

Main Literature

What I don't want to do is repeat work that has already been published. I would recommend that you obtain the following books:

Sapoznik, H. 1987. *The Compleat [sic] Klezmer*. Tara Publications. ISBN 0-933676-10-7.

Phillips, S. 1996. *Mel Bay's Klezmer Collection*. Mel Bay Publications. ISBN 0-7866-0841-2.

If you perform at a lot of Jewish functions, you would do well to have a copy of:

Pasternak, V (ed). 1997. *The Jewish Fakebook*. Tara Publications. ISBN 0-933676-69-7.

The Big Klezmer Fakebook, also compiled by Pasternak is useful.

I can also recommend:

Horowitz, J. 2001. *The Ultimate Klezmer*. Tara Publications. ISBN 093367631X.

¹ 'Klezmer' used to refer to the musician, not the style.

Cravitz, I. 2008. *Klezmer Fiddle: a how-to-guide*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-335584-2. (includes bass parts by Stuart Brotman).

The Main Dance Forms

You should familiarize yourself with the main forms, the majority of which are for dancing:

- Bulgar / Freylachs
- Sher
- Hora or Zhok
- Terkische
- Khosidl
- Doina

These are discussed in the introduction to Sapoznik (1987) along with the main Klezmer modes of *Freygish*, *Misherberakh* and *Adonoi Molokh*.

Bulgar

The Bulgar is in 4/4 meter. The defining feature of the Bulgar is the 8th note division of 3+3+2. The basic Bulgar beat is:



Fig.1 Underlying Bulgar feel.

This will be played by the drums and accented by many other instruments in the accompaniment (such as the accordion, guitar or *sekund* fiddle part) and reflected in the phrasing of the melody instruments.

Generally, the bass will NOT play this pattern and will instead play a simple root fifth alternating pattern in quarter notes. Here is an example, using the definitive bulgar, *Der Heyser Bulgar* (The Hot Bulgar), which can be found in Sapoznik (1987):

In the shout chorus introduction, I often run through the notes of the chord (to the rhythm indicated).

Some good Shers to learn are:

- Russian Sher #5 (Sapoznik, 1987)
- Rushishe Sher #2(A) (Phillips, 1996)

Note also that there are innumerable titles for the same tunes, which can be very confusing at times!

Hora or Zhok

In the UK, this dance tends to be called a Hora, and in the USA a Zhok. They refer to the same thing.

This refers to a Romanian style piece, usually written in 3/8. It is distinctive because the underlying rhythmic pattern lacks a second beat.

The bass plays a simple root/fifth pattern on beats one and three. The feel of this dance is distinctive in that it lies somewhere between 5/16 and 6/16, with the third beat slightly anticipated. The only way to get this right is by listening to a musician (drummer or accordion player is perhaps best) who has this feel perfected. It is important as a bass player that you help drive this and do not slip into a more Waltz like feel.

Some good examples to learn are:

- Moldavian Hora (Sapoznik, 1987)
- Oriental Hora (A) (Phillips, 1996)

Terkishe

This quasi-Turkish /oriental style form is often played at a moderate tempo and is not unlike a habanera:



Fig.4 Standard Terkishe Pattern

The notes are often played in quite a clipped manner, with the 8th note often delayed to make a 16th note.

Terkishes can be played in a lot of different ways and it is useful to know the Çifteteli (pronounced Chiftetelli) pattern, which is Turkish:



Fig.5 Çifteteli pattern

Note how the Çifteteli invariably starts on the 5th, moving to the root.

Good Terkishes to learn:

- Terk in America (Sapoznik, 1987)
- Terkisher Yale Ve-Yove (Phillips, 1996 & Sapoznik, 1987)

Khosidl

This is essentially a slower piece, in duple meter. A simple root fifth pattern is generally played. Some longer notes may be used to reflect the melody.

A few examples to learn:

- Baym Rebn's Sude (Sapoznik, 1987)
- Khosidl (Cravitz, 2008)

Doina

This is a freely improvised piece, led by a solo instrument.

Long sustained chords are played and supported by the bass. Be very careful to follow the chord instrument and do not be tricked into moving chord too early as the solo instrument will often hint at a chord change that may not happen until later.

Other forms

Many other forms are often performed by klezmer ensembles, such as Sirbas, Kopanitsa and other Eastern European styles.

Essential listening

Tuba

I would recommend starting with Eric Berman's playing with Kapelye, particularly the earlier recordings. His playing has been hugely influential. Then listen to Frank London's Brass All-Stars, particularly Brotherhood of Brass with Mark Rubin.

It is a good idea to be familiar with some of the Balkan material as well, such as Fanfare Ciocarlia and Boban Markovic.

Double bass

Stuart Brotman's work with Varetski Pass is a good starting point if you want to play in a more traditional manner, as is Budowitz.

For a more modern approach, The Klezmatiks have been instrumental in defining modern klezmer, as have the Klezmer Conservatory Band.

Conclusion

Please feel free to contact me at paul@tkachenko.co.uk if you have any comments or questions.

There are a host of great Klezmer courses around the world, such as KlezKamp (USA) and KlezFest (UK) if you want to develop your skills further.