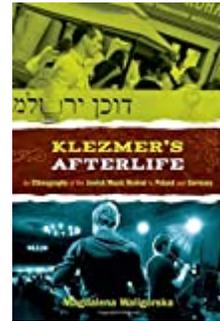




Magdalena Waligórska. *Klezmer's Afterlife: An Ethnography of the Jewish Music Revival in Poland and Germany.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. ix + 302 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-931474-4.



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Klezmer Tempest Post Revival

Since the mid-1980s the klezmer phenomenon has inspired hundreds of publications, therein a few dozen books that all scrutinize its different facets—repertoire and musicianship, cultural history, reception, politics, and more. The tempestification of klezmer research, if we might call it that, has recently culminated in studies that have expanded horizons to other phenomena related to klezmer beyond music. An object lesson is *Klezmer America* by distinguished literary scholar Jonathan L. Freedman. He uses klezmer as a kind of reading practice to construct alternative forms of meaning. It acts as a utopian space that derives from actual histories, and as metaphor for “relentless and even definitional hybridity and their ceaseless and even foundational revisionism.”^[1] Klezmer becomes simply another word to describe what has been variously called the “post-racial,” “post-ethnic,” “diasporic,” or “transnational” moment of the early twenty-first century in America; as such it is used to apply a distinctly Jewish perspective. Klezmer as music, it seems, has become less important for scholars. Magdalena Waligórska’s *Ethnography of the Jewish*

Music Revival in Poland and Germany is the most recent endeavor to attempt a broader reading of klezmer. Her 360-degree view around two scenes, Berlin and Kraków, in the early twenty-first century focuses on klezmer “as a cultural space where non-Jews co-create and co-perform Jewish culture” (p. 15). The reader encounters klezmer as an intersection for dialogue, as commodification, as re-definition of heritage, and as site of remembrance. Repertoires, performance practices—really relevant musical issues—are only presented in the form of a cursory survey embedded in the introduction, which largely relies on secondary literature and does not seem to provide new insights. Similarly, the beginning of the second chapter, “The Controversy: Appropriated Music,” and especially the third, “Meeting the Other, Eating the Other,” read too much like a literature review. Much of the information provided in the introduction never resurfaces to bolster the author’s argument, isolating it from the rest of the book.

Klezmer’s Afterlife is based on fieldwork and over eighty interviews conducted between 2004 and 2008 with

key players involved in the scenes of Berlin and Kraków. More conservative ethnographic methods such as long-term participant observation and musical analysis are absent. Still, Waligórska amassed a laudable amount of data that provides the reader with in-depth information on discourses pertaining to reception, transculturation, memory, and identity. As hinted above, repertoire discourse and analysis are absent. We learn what the scene is like, but we never learn what it *sounds* like. Klezmer is presented as a product, less as a process.

For a study so deeply embedded in cultural discourse, there is a surprisingly unnuanced usage of concepts and terms. And this from the outset. If the book's main title promises insights into *klezmer's afterlife*, Waligórska focuses rather on what she calls *revival*, a term applied to the klezmer phenomenon as early as 1980 (if not before). The introduction delivers no scrutiny of the concept, even though the recently published *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (its content was available online before the release of Waligórska's book) gives much food for revivalist thought.[2] In twenty-first-century Berlin and Kraków, it seems, klezmer has moved post revival in the aftermath of Germany's and Poland's vast and complex catharsis. In truth, the so-called revival started much earlier in Germany, as Waligórska lays out in the first chapter, *Genealogies*. It surfaced in the 1980s as a transnational phenomenon, with its primary hub in Berlin. Apart from this, the rather unreflective use of concepts such as *tradition* and *authenticity* might strike the critical reader's eye; and Jewishness largely presented and understood by Waligórska as an ethnicity is simplifying the issue of a more complex post-Holocaust identity.

Waligórska, a cultural historian, sells her study as ethnography. But at times her work would have benefited from a more informed historical context and an extended historical frame. One such instance is the section on Jewish communities in the chapter *Meeting the Other, Eating the Other*. The history of non-Jews contributing to the musical life of Jewish congregations and communities can be traced back to the Renaissance. This history certainly finds new meaning in postwar Europe. It would have been apt to place the twenty-first-century *contact zone* in this historical lineage to discern how klezmer has modified exchange and contribution. The lack of historical contexts goes hand in hand with a lack of documentation and reference; see for example Giora Feidman's *performance of Wagner in Auschwitz* (p. 81), a provocative and controversial moment in klezmer's history that begs for reference, if

not more factual documentation altogether. If *klezmer in Germany, from the very beginning, constituted a controversial case* (p. 59), the reader would want to know which beginning is referred to here (and which Germany for that matter). A similar lack of nuance can be observed in the whole section on Jewish communities (p. 98 onward). Given the vast amount of solid literature available (both in German and Anglo-American academia),[3] it is startling that Waligórska presents bold unsupported statements such as, *For many decades after 1945, Jewish communities in Germany perceived their role as only temporary support to the Jews who were, eventually, going to leave the country since there seemed to be no future for them* (p. 99). Not only is the function of the Jewish communities in the postwar Germanys (Occupied, East, and West) far from true, but between the 1950s and late 1960s, both East and West respectively consolidated. With restitution in place, Jewish congregations in the FRG also attracted a lot of remigrants and return migrants who (culturally) fertilized communal life. A deeper look into the Jewish community and what it entails might have also relativized Waligórska's claim that non-Jewish musicians are *stand-ins* for absent ethnic Jews (pp. 12, 123ff, and chapter 6). Another issue prevalent in the above-cited sentence is the treatment of *Germany* as monolithic, which in this book goes hand in hand with the similar treatment of Berlin as if its pre-1989 life had existed without a Wall. In today's Berlin after a cathartic new beginning the effects of the Cold War are still noticeable, a fact that receives little attention in Waligórska's book. More so, Berlin represents a unique cultural locale in reunified Germany, and it would have been interesting to learn its position in pan-national developments.

The strongest chapter by far is *The Grammars of Vernacular Klezmer*, which focuses on the different representations of Jews and Jewishness on the Polish and German klezmer scenes in the context of already existing paradigms. Waligórska's scope broadens to take into consideration music, iconography (musicologists's stepchild), and performance, thus rounding out the image of klezmer productions and not succumbing to the pitfalls of clichés, but rather acknowledging existing clichés that have made their entry into klezmer scenes and are often challenged by musicians. It is in this way that klezmer responds to the climate of the world music market rather than to Jewish currents.

What can we take away from this study on a larger scale? The insights provided into klezmer in Poland, a topic hitherto little if at all studied, are novel, informa-

tive, and comprehensive. The detailed cultural and social context provided here (and also in the sections pertaining to Berlin) allows the curious reader to situate the scenes in larger frameworks. The book thus becomes valuable for general audiences beyond the fields of musicology and cultural studies. The inclusion of a glossary at the end suggests broader readership as well. It is for those audiences that klezmer's recent tempest might be most valuable.

Notes

[1]. Jonathan L. Friedmann, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 18.

[2]. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[3]. For one of the most recent comprehensive publications, see Michael Brenner et al., *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart: Politik, Kultur und Gesellschaft* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2012).

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