**A Vessel of Song, or an East Berkshire Recorder Workshop**

This was East Berks Recorder Branch’s first day workshop, and what a great event it turned out to be. Stephanie, our branch secretary had had a Klezmer experience recently, and decided that we should all have a go. Roughly translated from Hebrew, Klezmer means “vessel of song”.

In fact, Klezmer is a musical tradition of the Jews in central and eastern Europe, popular in the 19th century and up to World War ll. It involved dance tunes, melodies and virtuoso improvisations played by instrumentalists using a variety of orchestral instruments, in small bands, for weddings and other social functions. There was a revival in the 1970s based mainly in the Jewish community in New York and again in central Europe. These days it is once more a popular folk music tradition used in Jewish and Yiddish communities.

Our workshop leaders were Szylvia Csaranko (piano accordion) and Susi Evans (clarinet), two lively classically trained, young musicians who had subsequently fallen in love with this form of music. They took us outside to familiarise us with the various Klezmer dance steps and rhythms. There we were, in a big circle, in the car park, between the Saltau church community hall and the graveyard, in the sunshine, hopping from one foot to the other, with Szylvia playing the tunes on the piano accordion, and Susi, Pied Piper like, leading us, sometimes in a circle, and sometimes in a snake.

Next, the serious stuff. Recorder playing. Szilvia and Susi wanted to listen to us play first, I guess, to gauge our competence as a group. We performed the Ukrainian national anthem that we had practised in our session two weeks previously, and they seemed sufficiently impressed and reassured!

Just as Klezmer music was new to us, a group of recorder players playing Klezmer was new to Szylvia and Susi. Generally, Klezmer bands are small, between four and eight players often involving clarinet, piano accordion, violin and double bass instrumentalists. Here we were, twenty of us making quite a different kind of sound.

The printed sheet music we had been sent was two part: a descant line and a bass line. So we chose to play either descant, treble or tenor recorders. The bass line was minimal, no solos, and no variety. In Klezmer music bass players take the responsibility for keeping the group in time, at the correct tempo, and taking the blame if things go wrong! Nobody volunteered, and we left it to Szylvia on her piano accordion.

As we went through a variety of pieces, our two tutors told us the secrets of Klezmer music, and if dear reader, you wish to sign up for a similar experience, here they are:

**The Modes:** there are four, major, minor, Freygish, and Misheberakh or Ukrainian. In the session after elevenses we were taught to play by ear using notes in a scale starting on E, and then F, G sharp, A, B, C, D, E this gives the music its distinctive Klezmer ring.

**Accents:** we learntthat you don’t play the notes as they are printed on thesheet music, stressing some and only lightly touching others, giving the music the distinctive Klezmer lilt.

**Improvisations and Simplifications:** for those of us for whom the speed of playing was sometimes a problem there is complete licence to simplify by cutting down four fast semi-quavers to two quavers. In fact, improvising was allowed across the board including fancy finishing notes, even a finishing scale up or down, when the length of the printed note permitted.

**Trills and Krekhts:** there were lots of trills, frills and spills, both on the printed sheet music, and further extravagances were encouraged. We learnt that a krekht was a “ghosted” note played with a kind of quick flick a semitone above the printed note and was another embellishment the instrumentalist can put in at will.

**The Pieces:**

Through the day we practised and then performed five pieces, Freyleks, Khasid U Rabin, Walachian Dance, Oriental Hora and Der Yidisher SoldotIn Di Trentshes as well as learning one piece by ear using the scale in E as described above. It was fascinating to learn that by adjusting the rhythms, time signature and pace of the Walachian Dance another slower dance emerged as the Oriental Hora using the same basic notes. As we went through these five pieces Szylvia and Susi introduced us to all the techniques and nuances outlined above. It was a great day, truly entertaining, but pushing us out of our comfort zones particularly when learning one of the pieces by ear; all enhanced by the quality of their musicianship and obvious delight at our response.

Susi said, “A lovely day! It was a very poignant way to start with the Ukrainian national anthem. Thank you! And thanks for trying out all kinds of new techniques!”

Szylvia commented, “This was the nicest group of recorder players I’ve ever met! A lovely day with lovely people.”

To sum up, and repeat! This was a wonderful day. It was the perfect mix of entertainment, hard work and learning, just as a good workshop/play day should be. Thank you Stephanie for organising it………..and can we have some more?