

Jewish Music Festival Nordhorn



In October 2014, the first Jewish Music Festival was held at Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn. I was there and this *Guitarity* recounts my impressions there.

Jewish Music

Duo NIHZ organizes their first Jewish Music Festival in Nordhorn, Germany. In the past years, their repertoire and their work in the field of Jewish classical- and folk music regularly brought me in touch with a number of musical aspects of Jewish culture. Yet it was not my first contact with Jewish music. If I start looking for memories, I land in my childhood years.

Memories make up history, they say, and history makes the music. Particularly the long and eventful history of the Jewish people determines the art and content of the Jewish music.

My parents originated from a Dutch Reformed family. Thus, as children we were sent to a school that supported the relevant Protestant denomination, in Holland these schools were called *School with the Bible*, to set them apart from the state schools. When I attended the nursery- and primary schools, lectures from the Bible and learning psalms by heart formed a fixed subject in the curriculum, every school day started this way, like a ritual.

Every school season the lectures started in the Old Testament with the first five books that are known as *Torah* in the Jewish religion. In this way, we heard the stories of the Creation, the Deluge, the patriarchs, the exile in Egypt and the long journey of the Exodus in the desert, the Ten Commandments, the Covenant and the promise of the land of milk and honey that would determine the history of the Jewish people until the present time.

Once the Promised Land was in sight, it was almost Christmas, so the teacher switched to the New Testament for some time, in order to revert to the Old after the dark days before and after Christmas had gone. Until Easter, Ascension Day and Whitsun were bound.

My main childhood memories of these stories concerned the travelling, the endless journey to a destination beyond the horizon, the uncertain journey of Abraham in blind faith, and the forty years of wandering the barren desert of the Sinai during the Exodus.

All these stories reflected the continuous struggle between homesickness for the lands of old and the hope to find a peaceful dwelling place in the future, in the Promised Land.

This struggle between homesickness, nostalgia and hope, that is the melancholy that appears in much Jewish music.

The Psalms of David, –*Tehiliem* with the Jews- were a special subject in this (religious) education. It was a remarkable thing that the poet, King David according to some claims, wielded the pen as well as the sword, but his poetry was not quite accessible for children like us. I guess that it was also caused by the stately and almost depressing seventeenth-century translation of the Hebrew in the then Dutch.

Every week we were supposed to learn a few stanzas of the psalms by heart in order to recite them in front of the class on Monday mornings, an experience full of stage fright, because if you happened to forget a few lines, you had to sing the psalm, an even more frightful experience with all of the class listening. I guess that as a consequence many a would-be young musician was demotivated forever to hit a stage again.

Quite striking in the text of many psalms is the note *For the Chief Musician*, an indication that the texts were sung in the time that they were conceived, so they were part of Jewish music.

The psalms often mentioned musical instruments. Trumpets, shawms, harps, lyras, flutes and a large collection of other exotic instruments. At least that was true for the joyful psalms, the sad ones just stuck to the depths of misery without a lot of music.

It appeared that the old Jews had a musical culture indeed, although the teacher never mentioned it and the melodies of the rhymed psalms were just heavy seventeenth-century West European melodies in long notes that had little relation with the Jewish music from for example the times of King David.

At home I got a different impression of Jewish music. My mother had a record of the soundtrack from *Exodus*, the well-known movie about the beginning of the State of Israel in 1948. Often she played singles of songs by Jewish artists, I remember the songs by Abbie en Esther Ofarim and the record of *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* , a song that would become

the battle song of the Six Day War, back in 1967. And what about Jewish songs like *Hava Nagila*?

The start of the Jewish music is tightly connected to the history of the Jewish people. In this history the *Diaspora*, the scattering of the Jewish people all over the world, plays a major role.

The Jews from the Exodus ultimately reached their destination, long ago a Jewish kingdom existed in Palestine, the Promised Land, with Jerusalem as political and spiritual centre, because the Temple was founded there.

Kingdoms emerge and go down, and the Jewish kingdom was no exception. As a consequence, the Jews spread in exile over the Middle-East, even though the Jewish kingdom existed again for a short while under the Hasmoneans. Later the destruction of Jerusalem by the troops of Titus Flavius in 70 AC presented a further breaking point: This event became a national trauma in the history of the Jews, at that date they lost the Temple, their spiritual centre, only the western wall, the Wailing Wall, remained. The sack of Jerusalem became an extension (some claim it to be the beginning) of the Diaspora, and the start of the decentralisation of Jewish religion.

The Jewish music travelled along with the various communities and developed within each community in its own way. Within the *Diaspora* a number of cultural-religious movements emerged, with the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim as their most important representatives. Ashkenazim used to live in the Rhineland in Germany, but migrated as a consequence of (r)emerging anti-Semitism to Eastern Europe and Russia and later on back to Central Europe and beyond –the United States became an important destination- and quite a lot landed in Holland. Sephardim used to live on the Iberian Peninsula, but were banned from there after the *Reconquista* in 1492 and migrated amongst others to Holland too.

The European Ashkenazim and Sephardim were both struck by a disaster that by far exceeded the earlier persecutions of the Jews in the Diaspora, the Nazi-engineered and executed Holocaust, the *Shoa*, one of the worst crimes against humanity in human history. Even in the *Shoa* the Jewish music travelled with the people, even inside the concentration camps.

After the Second World War, the Jewish state Israel was proclaimed in Palestine, in 1948. This marked the beginning of a tough battle for existence with various wars and armed conflicts that continue up to this day. Here the Jewish music settled in the Kibbutz, raised morale in the battlefields and took its place in daily life.

Five paragraphs of history reaching back almost 3000 years, also covering 2000 years of repetitive forms of anti-Semitism. I can imagine that historians do not get the most cheerful thoughts on humanity...

The Klezmer music has its roots in with the Ashkenazim, with songs often in Yiddish, a Jewish-German language. Also, the Sephardim have their own –less known- musical styles, with songs in Ladino, a Jewish-Spanish language.

Both genres were represented at the Jewish Music Festival, Duo NIHZ plays Klezmer style, the ensemble Savor de Ladino bring music in the Sephardic style.

Jewish Music Festival

Duo Not Dressed in Black (The Dutch translation for this is Niet in het Zwart, which abbreviates to NIHZ), consisting of Sanna Rootveld-Van Elst (recorders, melodica, vocals) and Bobby Rootveld (guitars, vocals) has developed into an important performer of Jewish music in various genres, from Classical to Klezmer.

Duo NIHZ organizes various music festivals in their Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn, Germany, amongst others a well-attended guitar festival and recorder festival. As a consequence of their involvement with Jewish music, they also had the idea to organize a festival dedicated to Jewish music, yet the occasion had not risen yet.

That changed when they met members of the just founded Swedish ensemble Savor de Ladino in Copenhagen. The ensemble was looking for concert opportunities for a European tour and Kulturhaus NIHZ has a good reputation. The agreement was made and the occasion for a Jewish Music Festival was created.

The first edition of this festival would last one day and include a Klezmer workshop, a competition for soloists and ensembles and an evening concert with Duo NIHZ and Savor de Ladino. A characteristic Jewish meal would be part of the deal.

The festival was well-organized and like with the other festivals in Kulturhaus NIHZ, a band of volunteers helped with the daily things.

Competition

The main requirement for participation in the competition was, that the music played was of Jewish origine, was composed by a Jewish artist or had a clear relation with aspects of Jewish culture or history. There was free choice in instrument and ensemble (of course members of ensembles have to share the prize).

The first prize consisted of two concerts and the recording of an EP with Ivory Tower Records/Samsung Productions. Prize winners would be surprised with a package of CDs too.

Three ensembles had subscribed. They were Uwe Heger's Klezmer Sax Quintett (consisting of Uwe Heger, Geertje Wumkes, Edeltraud Bode, David Bruns and Paul Bruns), the ensemble of the guitarist Jorrit Douwes and the singer Jacobine van Laar and finally the Duo Espresso (consisting of Uwe Heger on saxophone and Francien Janse-Balzer on piano). The observant reader will notice that Mr. Heger had two irons in the fire.

The Klezmer Sax Quintett made the start, and they did indeed! Five saxophones in a small concert hall, that's a room full of sound! It was a pity that the acoustics that are excellent for guitar concerts and small ensembles now presented one on the causes that the transparency of the voicing of the music was less optimal.

The band leader Uwe Heger took care for the solos and the characteristic sound of the wind instruments in Klezmer, his fellow band members did a fine job in support of their leader's tempo variations. In fast passages, you could notice that the timing of the notes required

careful anticipation to overcome the delay between the moment you blow and the actual tone has its full volume.

Besides “classical” Klezmer melodies, the ensemble played an arrangement of *If I were a Rich Man* (an old acquaintance from the well-known motion picture *Fiddler on the Roof*) and a slightly unbalanced version of *Bei mir bistu Shein* by Sucunda and Jacobs, the tune that made the Andrew Sisters world-famous.

After this hall-filling performance we were up to some more quiet material when the singer/guitar ensemble Jacobine van Laar/Jorrit Douwes hit the stage. They played a modern arrangement of four mediaeval Spanish songs that by the sound of them were of Sephardic origin. The songs were not quite joyful and their main mood was melancholic.

The guitarist appeared a reliable accompanist that skilfully filled in the solo room that he got in the songs. The singer showed that she mastered her instrument, a capella as well as in ensemble. As a special addition, she played a few phrases of the songs with the flute, a surprising contrast between the relatively plain sound of the flute and the vibrato in her vocal performance.

In the last ensemble Mr. Heger appeared on saxophone, together with the pianist forming the Duo Espressivo.

Two melodies from the motion picture *Schindler's List* were pleasant to hear, the balance between the accompaniment by the pianist and the solo on saxophone was very effective. *Meditation Hebraique* by Ernest Bloch was a première for the duo, but they did well with this quite melancholic, introspective and emotional composition. Fortunately, a joyful Klezmer melody made the conclusion that cheered things up.

Attending a guitar competition, I usually have my favourites, but today I had a hard time in thinking that way. So, it is a good thing that we have a skilled jury for this competition.

Concert Duo NIHZ

Duo NIHZ took the first part of the evening concert with a choice from their Jewish repertoire. Besides a few Klezmer classics they played *Veronika, die Klezmerim sind da*, music from the repertoire by The Comedian Harmonist, a pre-war Yiddish-German ensemble from Berlin, and their own version of *Bei mir bistu Shein* by Sucunda and Jacobs.

I have heard them playing this music on various stages in various places, but tonight it was something special. Possibly it was the home game effect, not only because they played in their “own stadium” in Nordhorn, but also because they played for people that had a special affinity for the genre.

The drive was tremendous, tempos were almost in the red and the effects by particularly Bobby Rootveld on guitar were more spontaneous and fiercer, yet they were perfectly tamed by the responsive play of Sanna Rootveld-van Elst in a balance that even more brightened the colours of the music.

The audience immediately sensed this energetic enthusiasm and responded likewise!

Concert Savor de Ladino

The Swedish ensemble Savor de Ladino appeared a sextet plus composer. The composer/lyricist Yair Sapir gathered a number of musicians in order to bring new life into Sephardic music in the Ladino language by means of his own compositions and arrangements of traditionals.

It was a little challenge to fit the musicians (Christopher Fossto, guitar, Zafer Demir, percussion, Johanne Hydén, cello, Tobias Allvin, bouzouki and mandolin, Johan Olsson, accordion, and the lead singer Sandra Marielle) on the stage, yet after slightly altering the stage environment all was set and everybody in place.

If you hear this music for the first time, the relation with the Iberian Peninsula is obvious by the language (Ladino has a firm relation with old-Spanish), by the sound of the Flamenco and by the traditional sound of the music with a clear middle-eastern flavour that is created by the percussion and the characteristic intervals. It did remind me of the sound of some songs by Loreena Mckenitt too, as a matter of fact.

It was a pleasant introduction to a genre that I had heard little of until now. A few songs told the myths of old, a few pieces were a Sephardic Song of Songs dedicated to a beloved and some compositions recounted tales full of humour and joy. The explanation of the singer Sandra Marielle was very useful to get an idea of the background stories.

Playing the music enthusiastically and adding some playful communication between band members and audience, Savor de Ladino quickly created an enjoyable atmosphere and a pleasant contrast with the Klezmer we had heard before. Two branches on the same tree that brought this festival to a very interesting end.

It was a good thing that they sold EPs, so we could take home some of this atmosphere.