

CD celebrates Yiddish in klezmer songs

Magillah, unlike most klezmer bands, has stepped from the safety of mostly wordless music-making and into the realm of Yiddish.

Founder and band leader Henri Oppenheim has been leading his musicians, joined three years ago by Yiddish vocalist Michelle Heisler, farther into the creative sea of the mamaloshen that now buoys them with a new album titled *Fotografie*.

Oppenheim calls the CD, to be launched next month, "a snapshot" of the band's four years of music-making. On the back cover of the CD case, beside the band name and above the track list, is, in large lettering, "Yiddish & Klezmer."

"I didn't hear Yiddish growing up in France. I heard Polish from my family, who were assimilated doctors and scientists, and I studied Russian. But Yiddish became

important to me because of the passion I developed for klezmer 20 years ago," says Oppenheim.



Heather Solomon

"Klezmer is the tip of the iceberg, in the sense that people know klezmer, but totally ignore what's behind it, the huge number of songs with words."

He moved ever closer to his roots after his 1997 arrival in Montreal with the establishment of successive and sometimes concurrent klezmer bands such as Kleztory, Montreal Klezmer Trio, Merovitz Project and Magillah.

What makes *Fotografie* even more special is the virtuosity of its instrumentalists who individually and as Magillah have been invited to play with symphony and chamber orchestras.

Oppenheim's nimble and pitch-perfect accordion, Julie Triquet's human-voiced violin that can let loose a dervish of sound,

Mathieu Deschenaux's mellow bass and double-bass, Andy Dacoulis' rhythmic guitar and Samuel Harrisson's danceworthy drums keep the 13 songs cooking.

Guest musicians on brass and specialized percussion flavour the mix. A 14th unlisted piece was added as "the cherry on the cake," the band's famous combination of a Quebec reel and the klezmer 7:40 *Train* that picks up speed and sweeps the listener into the stratosphere.

"That's the song we use to finish our shows. It connects Quebec culture to klezmer music. I think Yiddish music should reach a large audience and that was always my intention with klezmer," says Oppenheim, who believes the high production values of this CD, recorded and mixed by Richard Bélanger at Studio Planet, will boost his vision.

"In this album I tried to avoid clichés and I wanted to have fun," says the arranger. "We have a piece that is klezmer-blues, one that is klezmer-reggae, klezmer-bossa nova and *Ketsele Baroyges* that we turned into a disco tune, because I see it as a nihilist song. It has a man trying to seduce a girl by listing all his horrible relatives!"

There are traditional favourites as well, such as the instrumental *Odessa Bulgarish* that worms its way into almost every wedding reception. Morris Rosenfeld's dramatic gem *Mayn Ruhe Platz* memorializes the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in a sweatshop eulogy sung with exquisite eloquence



Henri Oppenheim
[Heather Solomon photo]

The vocalist swings off the traditionalist branch with a foot-tapping take on *A Yiddische Mame* that morphs from schmaltzy into an irreverent tarantella.

Thanks to Oppenheim's interpretation, she is the first to turn *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* into a feverish Peggy Lee-style come-on.

Bringing klezmer into the popular musical lexicon is one way that Oppenheim draws those outside the Jewish circle closer to its heart.

"To fight prejudice, people should see that Yiddish songs are universal," he says.

Another Magillah album is in the works, this one funded by the Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec and setting the words of 20th-century Montreal Yiddish poets such as Rochl Korn, Melech Ravitch and Chava Rosenfarb to Oppenheim's original compositions.

Oppenheim was inspired by Israeli singer Chava Alberstein, who wrote music to Yiddish poetry.

"The arrangements for the poems are more electro-urban modern than my previous music, but the violin will still give it a klezmer touch," says Oppenheim, who chose award-winning jazz and world music vocalist Karen Young to interpret the fresh sound and Yiddish lyrics.

"Karen is not familiar with the genre. It's a totally new experience for her, except that she is famous for being able to sing in any language. She has a Yiddish coach for the album."

Meanwhile, *Fotografie* is being distributed by Naxos and will be made available at major music stores and online at <http://>

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