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MUSIC REVIEW

## **Boston Modern Orchestra Project explores the contemporary state of classical klezmer**

By David Weininger November 25, 2019



BMOP presented "Klezmer Madness" with soloist David Krakauer./P  
OLIN MUSEUM/M. STAROWIEYSKA

The title of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's Saturday concert at Jordan Hall, "Klezmer Madness," accurately represented half of its program. That portion consisted of two recent concertos for clarinet and orchestra that were audibly steeped in klezmer, the folk music of Eastern European Jews. Both pieces also featured the outstanding klezmer clarinetist David Krakauer, an ideal guide to the contemporary state of klezmer, who brought their solo parts thrillingly to life in performance.

Bookending the concertos were two orchestral works by the Israeli-born composer Avner Dorman. They possessed their own virtues but had nothing to do with klezmer. Still, BMOP can be forgiven for this bit of false advertising given the typically ambitious nature of the program: four very different works given committed and energetic readings by this intrepid ensemble under Gil Rose's sure direction.

Opening the evening was Dorman's "Uriah" (2009), a terse, blistering tone poem on the biblical story of King David and Bathsheba from the point of view of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, who is sent by the king into battle (and to his death) after Bathsheba becomes pregnant with David's child. The piece begins with an outburst of dissonance,

and there is an undertone of violence even in its softer moments. Uriah's death at the hands of enemy soldiers is marked by grinding chords and percussion, but the piece is best heard not as a narrative but as a general indictment of the story's cruelty, which comes through in the anguished string melody that follows.

Almost as impressive was Dorman's "Ellef Symphony," named for the Hebrew word meaning one thousand. The first three of its four movements are based on war poems by Jewish poets from the previous millennium. A simple four-note musical motive knits them together. The music moves from foreboding to violence to elegiac sadness in a way that's more obvious (and slightly less effective) than in "Uriah," though it's orchestrated with punch and imagination. The fourth movement pulls back from the angst and offers a calmer space intended to represent the possibility of peace. Yet perhaps because of what's come before, and the present millennium's sorry track record in this regard, it sounded to my ears like an uneasy (and at best temporary) reprieve.

The two concertos were Mathew Rosenblum's "Lament/Witches' Sabbath" (2017) and Wlad Marhulets' Concerto for Klezmer Clarinet (2008). Rosenblum's work is grounded in his grandmother's harrowing story of escaping from Ukraine in 1919. The piece weaves together recordings of his grandmother, as well as field recordings of Jewish and Ukrainian laments, with the orchestra and Krakauer's clarinet. For good measure, there are musical references to the phantasmagorical last movement of Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique."

That's a lot of conceptual material for a single piece, and the musical surface reflects this, with so much information sometimes vying for the listener's ear that it can be difficult to absorb. Fortunately, the sound of Krakauer's instrument — keening, awash in bent notes and ornamentation — cuts through the texture at every junction, pairing brilliantly with Rosenblum's microtonally accented language. A blazing cadenza for the soloist unleashed a stew of sorrow and incantation: here was the madness advertised in the concert's title.

Marhulets' concerto is more modest in ambition, a three-movement work full of conventional klezmer-style melodies and rhythms. Marhulets' experience as a film composer is apparent throughout, and one cheesy yet entertaining passage sounds, in the words of the program note, like "the soundtrack to a '70s police thriller scene." It's not a particularly involving piece, but it's well scored and offered Krakauer the opportunity to put the soulful, lyrical side of his artistry on display.