



An Eclectic Musical Hevreh

"Between Worlds" has Hevreh Ensemble creating a kind of "world chamber music."

Hevreh Ensemble's new CD stretches the limits of Jewish music, blending everything from Native American to Baroque sounds.

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George Robinson / Special to the Jewish Week

On a casual hearing, one might be hard-put to describe much of the music of the Hevreh Ensemble as "Jewish music." Although the tunes on their new CD, "Between Worlds," have titles like "Lost Tribes," "Galicja" and "Negev Sunset," the elegant, restrained music that is fit to those names bespeaks a wide range of influences, and Jewish music is only one of them.

What does Jeff Adler, one of the quartet's original members and their very able reed player, call the subtle blend of Baroque, French Impressionist, Native American and other sounds that the band creates?

"The best thing I've come up with is 'world chamber music,'" he says. "It took me a long time to figure it out, but that is really what it is."

Indeed, "world chamber music" captures the complex, satisfying mix of sounds that characterizes the Hevreh Ensemble's work.

Not that they shy away from the Jewish music label. All four of the group's members are Jewish: Adler (bass clarinet, Native American flutes), his wife Laurie Friedman (clarinet, shofar), Judith Dansker (oboe, English horn) and Adam Morrison (keyboards). And the band took its name from a synagogue in Great Barrington, Conn., where they played one of their first concerts together, a dozen years ago.

It's just that between them the range of musical enthusiasms and influences is so broad and eclectic that they find it hard to rein themselves in, to serve one muse.

Adler, who writes the band's music, says, "I'd be the first to admit that it's hard to categorize our music. I don't like to be set in one category."

Sometimes we lean towards jazz or classical, but I love African pop, especially the music that came out of Senegal in the '80s and '90s."

That music, like the Ensemble's, was characterized by a unique combination of melodic sweetness and warmth and an unobtrusively propulsive beat.

"There's an ancient African tradition, in which everyone in a group plays percussion, each one of them plays a very simple line, but when it's heard together the result is very complex," Adler says.

"I'm writing more like that now," he adds. "But none of it is conscious. I love this, I love that, it's impossible not to be influenced by the things you hear, but it happens in a very subconscious way. I write the music that I hear in my head. I don't have any choice. I'm fortunate enough to [be part of] a group of musicians who like it and want to play it."

If the Jewish aspect of Hevreh Ensemble's sound is becoming more important, and Adler suggests that it has, that change may be attributed to several factors. The first was the addition to the band two years ago of Adam Morrison on keyboards, a jazz-trained pianist who emigrated to Israel in 1980 and has been an active part of the jazz scene both there and in the States. Morrison joined the group just before their first tour of Eastern Europe, and that experience, Adler says emphatically, was another element in the sea-change.

"It was a very moving and educational experience," he recalls. "When we played the Spanish synagogue in Prague, which is one of the most beautiful synagogues I've ever seen, the audience was in tears by the end."

He contrasts that with their experience in Krakow, which he likens to comments made by friends of his from the Cherokee nation, who have heard visitors to pow-wows reacting, "Oh, so that's what an Indian used to look like."

"In Krakow they have tour buses and offer 'the Jewish experience,' like a theme park," Adler says. "They treat the Jews like a museum piece."

Obviously, he preferred the Prague experience. (One of the tunes on the new set is 'Praha.')

"In concert, we seem to move the audience," he says modestly. "I think that in some way we inspire them."

"Between Worlds," the new CD by the Hevreh Ensemble, was released on July 17, and is available from CDBaby.com and Amazon.