

“Fon der Choope (From the Wedding)”--Abe Elenkrig's Yidishe Orchestra (April 4, 1913)

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Essay by Clara Byom (guest post)*



“Fun der Khupe” (orig. “Fon der Choope”) - Abe Elenkrig’s Orchestra

In the early twentieth century, Jewish American bands were thriving in New York City. The rapid development of recording technology, particularly the phonograph, and the invention of radio, quickly changed the industry for all musicians. Large Jewish ensembles, such as Harry Kandel’s Orchestra and Abe Schwartz’s Orchestra, recorded tracks of what would later be known as klezmer music, the secular instrumental wedding music of Ashkenazic Jews. These large American ensemble recordings maintained many characteristics of the Eastern European repertoire, but also incorporated instruments that were easier to record and more popular in America, particularly the clarinet and trombone.

Abe Elenkrig’s Orchestra released their first recordings after a session on April 4, 1913, in which this “Fun der Khupe (From the Wedding Canopy)” track was recorded. As was common during that time, the recordings made during that session, and the subsequent session on December 2nd, 1915, contained descriptive titles that did not specifically indicate to which dance genres they belong. Fun der Khupe tunes served a specific purpose in the wedding ceremony and were often a freylekhs or skotshne, although other genres may have been used for this purpose. These tunes were played after the breaking of the glass, as the newly married couple leaves the wedding canopy and leads the assembled company to the wedding feast. As Walter Zev Feldman says in his book, following the breaking of the glass “...the klezmerim played a freylekhs fun der khupe (a [happy dance] from the wedding canopy), which was generally a more elaborate form of the freylekhs dance with three sections, sometimes described as skotshne. It does not seem that people danced then, but rather processed gaily toward the wedding feast.”

Elenkrig's "Fun der Khupe" tune appears on the 1915 recording under the name "Die Zilberne Chasene" (Yid: "The Silver Wedding"), which it would be called by Abe Schwartz on his 1917 recording and by the many revivalist bands who recorded it. "Fun der Khupe" has become an iconic tune, largely due to its publication in the Kammen and Kostokowsky books, early sheet music collections available in the United States for musicians playing Jewish weddings. Iconic though it is, it does not have some characteristics that we might expect to hear in a typical fun der khupe tune.

While the "Fun der Khupe" recorded by Elenkrig's Orchestra is in three parts, they are hardly elaborate and the piece is more in the style of a bulgar than a freylekhs or skotshne. (Even Dave Tarras' "Fun der Khupe" recorded on the 1978 album was more typically a freylekhs than the bulgar melody we see in Elenkrig's tune.) Typically, a fun der khupe or skotshne will change keys multiple times. Elenkrig's "Fun der Khupe," however, uses D freygish almost exclusively, with the exception of the first six bars. The opening motive is in G minor and almost feels as though it is actually the second or third melody of one of the bulgars in the repertoire of Naftule Brandwein or Dave Tarras and their mid-century successors, rather than an early twentieth century tune. The second melody also seems to be an influential predecessor to the mid-century bulgar. Here an ascending D freygish scale is followed by sustained notes over chord changes that occur more frequently than would have been typical for the time period. The final melody is supported by a D major chord for its entirety and simply moves up and down the first five notes of the freygish scale in triplet patterns, which harkens to the sirba from which the bulgar genre is heavily influenced. (The transcription found in the Joseph Frankel collection in the Library of Congress has the triplets written as sixteenth-sixteenth-eighth, but the effect is similar.)

While many fun der khupe tunes are more elaborate, Elenkrig's "Fun der Khupe" is a charming and simple bulgar that certainly could have been and continues to be used, especially due to its publication in the Kammen folio, as the newly wedded couple departs from the khupe to celebrate with their family and guests at the wedding feast.

Clara Byom is an Albuquerque-based multi-instrumentalist, musicologist, and arts administrator. She serves on the Board of Directors for the Klezmer Institute, New Mexico Contemporary Ensemble, and New Mexico Folk Music and Dance Society and her primary area of research is American klezmer music during the mid-twentieth century.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.