

**THE KLEZMER TSIMBL (CIMBAL)**  
**KHEVRISA: EUROPEAN KLEZMER MUSIC,**  
**SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS, 2000**

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The *tsimbl* or *cimbal* (English cimbalom) is an instrument of the dulcimer family, a trapezoidal box with strings in courses of two to six, some of which are divided into fifths by a partitioning bridge.<sup>1</sup> The cimbaloms played by Jews in Eastern Europe—generally by the professional musician known as ‘klezmer’—had a range of two and a half octaves and were tuned chromatically; the metal (mainly brass) strings were struck with wooden hammers. Jewish association with the instrument was continuous from the early seventeenth century until the early twentieth century (Gifford 2001). In Belarus and Galicia it was an essential component of the *klezmer* band until the Holocaust; in Ukraine, in Bessarabia, in Russian Poland and Lithuania it has been replaced by the brass instruments by the last third of the nineteenth century. Most of the visual documentation of the klezmer *cimbal* comes from nineteenth century paintings and a few photographs; due to the changes in instrumentation mentioned above, and the widespread destruction during the Holocaust, very few actual examples of the instrument are extant.<sup>2</sup> The few pre-revival recordings of the Jewish klezmer performance style document mainly accompaniment usages—in conjunction with violin or wooden flute—in Galicia just prior to World War I (Feldman 2003).

The use of the term *cimbal* (from Gk. *kynbalom*, a type of metal percussion) for the dulcimer originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Hungary, where it had been used during the church service. Unfortunately the absence of any visual documentation of the instrument in this period does not permit us to trace which elements of the three dulcimer prototypes known in the broader region—the Turkish *santur*, the German *hackbrett* or the French *dulcimer*—may have played a role in the creation of the new type of dulcimer which merited a distinctive name. Klezmer musicians—using their musicians’ jargon—also employed two other terms; *hakhbreydl* (from German *hackbrett*) and *psantr* (from Hebrew *psanter*), in turn derived from Greek *psanterion* and cognate with Turkish *santur*.

By the early seventeenth century in Lwow in Galicia the *cimbal* was part of the trio ensemble led by ‘syrbska’ fiddles (*kemençe*) playing Balkan-derived music. The *klezmorim* (Jewish instrumentalists) in Bohemia apparently combined this with Western chordal practices, and it spread back to Poland and westward to Germany. The association of Jews with the instrument is found as far west as Holland and Ireland. It would seem that all East European dulcimers derived either from the Hungarian or from the Jewish model, or from a mixture of both. The Hungarian word *cimbalom* and the Yiddish *tsimbl* became the (plural) forms *cymbaly* in Polish, *tsymbaly* in Ukrainian and Belorussian, and *tambal* (*tsambal*) in Romanian.<sup>3</sup> The older Romanian form ‘timbelar’ for the performer derives directly from Yiddish ‘tsim-bler’. While the corresponding Turkish dulcimer—the *santur*—was apparently known in eighteenth century Wallachia, the cimbalom was introduced at this time by Jewish *klezmorim*

originating in Galicia and Poland. The most famous performer of the cimbalom then was Solomon Timbelarul, who entertained the Greek Phanariot Governor of Moldova, Constantin Mavrocordat in the 1740s. In the following generation Itsik (Icic) Tambalgiu accompanied the famous Barbu Lautaru in Iași (1780-1860). In Hungary, despite the old native development of the instrument as an accompaniment to singing, its appearance with a small ensemble led by a violin, seems to derive from klezmer usage in the eighteenth century. By the end of the century it had been adopted by Roma/Gypsy musicians. In Wallachia/Moldova (later Romania) the cimbalom retained its Jewish identification until the second half of the nineteenth century (Feldman 2008). The last major Jewish klezmer performer of the cimbalom from Romania was Josef Moscovici, born in Galati, who lived most of his life in America. Moscovici issued many commercial recordings of both Romanian and Jewish music, using the newly invented Hungarian concert cimbalom, which offered an expanded diapason and a damping mechanism, made necessary by the augmented size of the instrument. By the end of the nineteenth century both the traditional 'portable' cimbalom and the new concert cimbalom were taken up by Gypsy *lautar* musicians, and the older Jewish association with the instrument was largely forgotten.

Both early nineteenth century paintings and the lists of instrumentalists in musicians' guild documents suggest that the cimbalom was usually part of an ensemble led by a violin, but some famous soloists were known, such as the above-mentioned Solomon in Iași. In addition, the most famous klezmer musician of the nineteenth century, Michel Jozef Guzikow (1806-1837) based his concert performances in Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt, Paris and Brussels on solo cimbalom playing, using a novel type of cimbalom/xylophone made of canes, but struck with the traditional hammers (Poniatowska 1980).

It would seem that the *cimbal* of the klezmerim from Moldo-Wallachia was the origin of the "frenk santuru" adopted by the Ottoman court *santur* player Hilmi Bey around 1850, as during the first half of the nineteenth century klezmer and *lautar* musicians (especially from Moldova) were frequent visitors to Istanbul (Feldman 1996). This was the instrument used by Santuri Edhem Efendi (1855-1926) and by Santuri Ziya, although, as Rauf Yekta Bey had noted, it was not capable of performing many Ottoman *makams* with their proper intonation. Santuri Hüseyin—the famous virtuoso at the court of Sultan Selim III—had played the older Ottoman *santur*. The new type of 'santur' offered the advantage of a more convenient arrangement of notes, thanks to the bridges which divided the strings of the middle section into fifths, thus facilitating faster playing.

While also becoming obsolete after World War I, the memory of the Jewish *cimbal* in Lithuania and Belarus was preserved first of all in the epic poem "Pan Tadeusz" by Adam Mickiewicz (1834), one of whose major characters is Jankiel Cymbalist. Mickiewicz's poetic description of Jankiel's performance is considered a classic of the Polish language. In Mackenzie's English translation (Mickiewicz/Mackenzie 1964):

"At first he beat out a triumphal strain,  
Then smote more quickly like a storm of rain.

They were amazed—but this was but a trial,  
He suddenly stopped and raised the sticks awhile.

He played again; the hammers on the strings  
Trembled as lightly as mosquitoes wings  
And made a humming sound so soft  
‘Twas hardly heard....”

“He let his hands, then both together fall  
and smite at once, astonishing them all.  
A sudden crash burst forth from many strings  
As when a band of janissaries rings  
With cymbals, bells and drum.....”

Nearly a century later the Russian musicologist Nikolai Findeisen devoted an article to the Lepianski family of cimbalists from Vitebsk in northern Belarus, in which he testifies to the long Jewish association of the instrument in the region. Findeisen included a chart for the tuning of the Belarussian Jewish cimbal (Findeisen 1926). This chart is significant for it shows a chromatic tuning system that agrees in detail with the tuning of the cimbalom in such distant countries as Romania and Greece, as well as Turkey. Such unity in the otherwise highly variable issue of the note-arrangement on the dulcimer testifies to probable diffusion from a single source. Considering the social history described above, this would seem to have been the *klezmorim*, as they moved from North to South within Eastern Europe. The Lepianski’s had formed a five-man ensemble composed of four concert cimbaloms played by the Lepianski brothers and one traditional cimbalom, played by their father Iosef Lepianski, who performed the melody. Their contemporary, the painter Marc Chagall, who was also born in Vitebsk, frequently includes the cimbalom in his depictions of Jewish weddings and dancing.<sup>4</sup> The name Zimbalist (sometimes spelled as Cymbalista), or Zimbler appears in documents relating to Jewish klezmer musicians from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Bohemia, Poland and Hungary, and it remained a Jewish family name into the twentieth century.



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<sup>1</sup> A reliable source for the structure and history of the cimbalom and the wider dulcimer family is the article by David Kettlewell, "Dulcimer" in the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. By Stanley Sadie, London, 1980, vol. 5, pp. 695-707. P. 702 has a map with probable diffusion of the instrument type from Constantinople (where it was first documented visually in the 12<sup>th</sup> century), both eastward and westward.

<sup>2</sup> Several existing paintings of the cimbal from 19<sup>th</sup> c. Poland/Lithuania are reproduced in Walter Zev Feldman, "Music of the European Klezmer," in Khevrissa: European Klezmer Music. Smithsonian-Folkways, Washington D.C., (2000): 2-29.

<sup>3</sup> The preceding paragraph is based on the cimbalom section of Gifford, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See for example his "Russian Wedding" (1909) in Susan Compton, Chagall, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1985.