Cologne academy explores Jewish culture with klezmer music

Violin Professor Igor Epstein helped found the Academy

Cologne is home to an institution that is one-of-a-kind among German schools. The World Music, Klezmer and Aesthetic Academy there has been introducing students to Jewish music and tradition since 2005.

The young violinist Diana Markzitser has discovered traditional Jewish music for herself at the World Music, Klezmer and Aesthetic Academy in Cologne.

"I was born in Moldova, and my father is Jewish," said the 12-year-old pupil, who has attended the Klezmer Academy for four years. "Since one of my parents is Jewish, I really like playing this kind of music."

Since klezmer music was traditionally passed down aurally, much of the repertoir was lost during the Holocaust. Today's Klezmer incorporates a broad range of influences and may feature an equally broad range of instruments, including string instruments - especially violins, accordeons, and wind instruments like trumpets or flutes.

Becoming a part of history

The Klezmer Academy was founded in 2005, but is part of a longer tradition. Until 1933, Cologne housed a private Jewish art school. The founders of the Klezmer Academy wanted to compensate for the loss of the Jewish school and connect with its history.

"The most important parallel between the two academies is that only the instructors are predominantly Jewish in both cases," explained one Klezmer Academy co-founder, Alex Schneider, a musician and entertainer. "The students were not Jewish. The school offered them the chance to appreciate Jewish culture and teaching."

The new institution was organized for music enthusiasts of all ages, faiths and nationalities. There, the spotlight is on Jewish culture rather than religion. Classical and Klezmer music form the foundation of the school's curriculum.

Eclectic influences

Violin Professor Igor Epstein, also a co-founder of the academy, gives violin lessons. He grew up in a musical, Lithuanian-Jewish family and emigrated 20 years ago from Israel to Cologne.

"Klezmer is so multifaceted," he said. "The influence of many musical styles, like Russian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, German, Polish, Turkish and Eastern music can't be missed." Particularly in a country like Germany, noted Epstein, this kind of diversity is significant.

The Academy relies on established Russian-Jewish music teaching traditions. The individual development of each pupil's musical and technical gifts is emphasized. Highly qualified instructors from the former Soviet Union give the music lessons, and their presence has visibly strengthened the Jewish community in Cologne.

The Klezmer Academy also offers language courses as well as theater, dance and painting lessons.

Achieving lofty goals

Academy members hope the pupils will carry Jewish traditions into the future

"Right from the start, we set a big goal for ourselves - the preservation and popularization of Jewish culture. We've reached that goal," said Epstein.

However, the Academy will continue to develop. Its instructors regularly lead activities, offer public concerts and readings. Epstein, for example, organizes unique workshops like "Getting to know Klezmer music for newcomers," or "Klezmer music from the beginning to today."

The founders of the Academy hope to establish Jewish culture as a vital, perceptible part of the local culture. Since Cologne's World Music, Klezmer and Aesthetic Academy is the only institution of its kind in Germany, it is seen as playing a particularly important role.

"We set out to give Jewish culture a place in Cologne and allow people to experience its many facets," said co-founder Alex Schneider.

Of course, the students are key to the Academy's success, since they will carry on the traditions in the future.

"We must not forget the element of fun because learning to play and present this kind of art is tied with a profound pleasure," emphasized Schneider.

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