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Drumming up some recognition

By Mary Anne Janco
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HAVERTOWN - Elaine Hoffman Watts' father taught her to play klezmer music as a little girl, but no one else would hire the female drummer to play the traditional Eastern European Jewish folk music.

"It was a man's thing," she said. Not anymore.

The revival of klezmer music has brought some long-overdue recognition, say her fellow musicians, to Hoffman Watts, 71, a third-generation klezmer player and the first female percussionist to graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music. These days, she often shares the stage with her trumpet-playing daughter, Susan Watts, as part of the Fabulous Shpielkehs, a Yiddish brass band.

The Fabulous Shpielkehs feature the mother and daughter, trombonist Rachel Lemisch of Havertown, and Philadelphians Jay Krush on tuba and Katt Flagg, a folk accordionist. The band will perform at 4 p.m. today at Gratz College in Melrose Park.

Hoffman Watts still uses the snare drum that belonged to her father, Jacob, known as Jack, a percussionist and xylophonist who played with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Ballet Rouse and Doily Cart Opera, and had a nightclub act.

"He's the one who taught me how to play," Hoffman Watts said. Later, he played the xylophone and hired her as the drummer, she said.

At Curtis, David Grupp, timpanist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, was a great influence, she said: "He believed in me as a percussionist."

Hoffman Watts, an accomplished timpanist and drummer, played for the New Orleans Symphony, theaters, operas, the Ice Capades, and Disney on Ice but never played klezmer.

Klezmer died out with World War II, she said. "Everyone wanted to be American, to be homogenized," she said.

But her family continued playing the traditional music, handed down from generation to generation, in their living room, and she held onto the handwritten music of her grandfather, Joseph Hoffman, of the Ukraine.

Only a few of the songs written down in 1927 have names, she said. Joseph Hoffman learned to play the cornet in the Russian army, she said. He wrote songs for her and her sister.

"I kept the old books," she said. "This is the music we play. It's Jewish folk music."

Musicians traveled from village to village in the old country playing the happy tunes for weddings and other ceremonies, she said.

With the revival of klezmer in this country in the late 1970s and early 1980s, young musicians sought out older players to learn more about this music, said Hankus Netsky of the Klezmer Conservatory Band. Philadelphia has its distinctive klezmer tradition, he said, adding that Hoffman Watts' family was one of the main players in that world.

Hoffman Watts was awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts in 2000 to put that music onto a CD, produced by her daughter, Susan. It is called *I Remember Klezmer, My Mother the Drummer*.

Hoffman Watts is a role model for generations of klezmer drummers, said Aaron Alexander, who plays with Frank London's Klezmer Brass All-Stars.

"She's one of the last native speakers of klezmer," he said, explaining that since Hoffman Watts grew up hearing it, she plays it fluently and effortlessly.

Her playing, "the force of her intention and her clarity of phrasing, is a beautiful thing," he said. "It's very strong. It's very forceful. You can't deny it."

Netsky added: "She has so much technique on the drums. She plays the melody on the drums. She's phrasing the melody right with you. That's kind of rare. Within the beat, she'll be rolling. Her technical ability is so superior."

She is sought after at klezmer camps to teach young drummers. But her talent is not limited to klezmer, said Alexander, a klezmer and jazz drummer. At a recent camp, she started playing a swing tune, he said, adding, "She was slamming."

Her daughter, 37, who also teaches the repertoire of klezmer at such conferences as KlezKanada, has recorded with other top klezmer musicians and performed at world music festivals and will be performing in Holland later this month.

Trained at the St. Louis Conservatory of Music and Temple University School of Music, Susan Watts is the only female member of Frank London's Klezmer Brass All-Stars and is a member of Mikveh, an all-female klezmer band.

Alexander recalled a collaboration between the Frank London band and a top brass band in Serbia that led to an invitation to play in a remote Serbian village.

When Susan Watts took the stage, "they were skeptical... a woman on stage," he said. But, when she started playing, "they were amazed." The classically trained trumpet player gets standing ovations all over Europe, he said.

"She has so much power on the instrument," Netsky said. "She put everything into it. She's incredibly flamboyant."

The Fabulous Shpielkehs (*shpiel* means play and *shpilkes* refers to nervous energy) lean more toward an amalgamation of American klezmer, Susan Watts said. Their repertoire includes the traditional "Shalom Aleichem" as well as the crossover "Joseph Joseph."

Playing this music gives back to people a piece of their identity that they can enjoy and respond to, Susan Watts said.

"It's the same fabulous moving music that it was 100 years ago," she said.

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