

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## Cleveland brings out the best in a fiddler

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*Plain Dealer Reporter*

It takes a happy man to play a sad song like Steven Greenman. Or a joyous, soulful, comical or happy one.

"Sometimes it's all at once," he said of his music. "It's the full range of human experience."

Greenman is a violinist, which is a bit like saying LeBron James is a basketball player. Greenman, a full-time, free-lance musician who performs, composes, arranges and teaches, might even have more moves.

On New Year's Eve, the classically trained virtuoso played the best party in town for the seventh year as guest soloist with the Cleveland Pops Orchestra at Severance Hall. On Mondays, he performs with accordionist Walter Mahovlich at the Velvet Tango Room in Ohio City. Next month, he'll play a couple of concerts in Holland with Khevrisa, the ensemble he co-founded.

Greenman, 36, who lives in South Euclid, is one of the world's leading practitioners of traditional Eastern European klezmer violin. Klezmer, he explains, is instrumental Jewish folk music that was played by professional musicians beginning in the 17th century. The name, from Yiddish, means "vessel of song."

This week, he is literally in the middle of a recording project that has temporarily shifted the center of the klezmer universe from New York and Europe to Cleveland.

The music has undergone a revival in recent years, going elec-

tric and merging with other styles in swirling, rowdy rhythm. But Greenman's music, in traditional style using violins and cimbalom — a hammer dulcimer — has the hauntingly folk-tinged sound of a classical chamber ensemble.

"I always liked Jewish music as a kid growing up in Pittsburgh," he said. "I was infatuated with 'Fiddler on the Roof,' and I remember begging my parents for a violin. I started taking lessons at 7 or 8. By the last couple years of high school, when it was clear I wanted to go into music, I was starting to collect Eastern European folk music."

His focus was classical in 1985, when he came to the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in violin performance. He attended classical music festivals every summer, and his focus shifted at an opera fest in Austria in 1989. Street musicians were playing klezmer and gypsy music he found irresistible. He and his friends struggled in broken German to speak with an accordionist who laughed at their efforts.

"Why are you speaking German?" he asked. "I'm American like you guys!"

Greenman, at first reluctant to play for the crowd, joined in when another violinist didn't get it quite right.

"We played until twilight," he said. "It was beautiful."

He became a regular. Back in Cleveland, with Walt Mahovlich and other classically trained

musicians, he formed Harmonia, a band specializing in ethnic music. By 1993, he realized his calling was not to be a classical symphonic player, but klezmer.

Shuttling between Cleveland and Europe, he began transcribing recordings, collecting, teaching and writing, joining New World and Old World musicians who were feeding from and nourishing traditional streams. He toured with the famed Klezmatics, and he founded and recorded with Khevrisa and other ensembles.

His new project, "The Dream of Stempenyu," is an album named after the legendary Jewish violinist of the 19th century immortalized in a novella by Sholom Aleichem. The first-ever album of original klezmer compositions in traditional style, it should be available this summer.

The music is all by Greenman, who also handled the logistics of bringing in leading klezmer musicians from as far as New York, San Francisco, Texas and Israel to record at Summa Recording Studios in Painesville.

"But this is a Cleveland project. The community is supporting it," he said, giving particular credit to the Ohio Arts Council, Sam and Maria Miller and the Workmen's Circle for their backing.

"I'm thrilled with the sounds we're getting," he said, though warming up took longer than usual last week.

"My fiddle sounds better in summer when the air is wetter. Next time," he joked, "I'll record in Miami. No — it has to be here."