

On September 13, 2009 at the Eldridge Street Synagogue in Manhattan's Lower East Side I had the opportunity to listen to an aural feast. Gene Marlow's Heritage Ensemble performed their repertoire of Hebrew and Latin music fusion in the sacred space of the historic synagogue.

All the melodies they played (arranged by Gene Marlow) were either Hebrew liturgical music or folksongs, so there was already a spiritual element built in. The Latin American styles – such as the Afro-Cuban rumba, the Brazilian baion and the Puerto Rican seis chorreo – melodically and harmonically have roots in the Middle East. The minor tonality inherent in Hebraic cantorial songs lent the compositions to being adapted to a traditional jazz idiom as well as Latin American rhythms. It was a natural combination and the Heritage Ensemble explored these connections in various ways.

In one piece they took a liturgical song, Hinei Ma Tov (“Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity”), and adapted it to a blues with swing rhythm; another cantorial song was adapted to an Afro-Cuban bembé. Marlow's vision is unique both on a spiritual and musical level, as he takes Hebraic melodies and gives them an even deeper musical meaning by showing the common thread in all music that represents Soul.

The interaction among multi-Grammy nominee guest artist drummer Bobby Sanabria, percussionist Cristian Rivera, saxophonist Michael Hashim, and acoustic bassist Frank Wagner, along with Marlow on piano indeed demonstrated how the polyrhythmic nature of Latin music blends with the Hebraic. Highlights included a finale when Sanabria and Rivera exploded in a flurry of rhythmic virtuosity. A blues-tinged piece, Heivenu Shalom Aleichem (“Peace Unto You”), showcased



Marlow and bassist Frank Wagner in a pure, straight-ahead jazz context—the melody was Hebraic, but the playing was drenched in the blues.

All music is a fusion of ongoing cultural forms and styles, and New York City is definitely the vortex of cultural fusions. So it was an extraordinary experience to hear Gene Marlow's Heritage Ensemble in the heart of a New York City neighborhood that represents this coming together of cultures.

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