

Giant Steps and *Dreydlekh*: Formulaic Improvisation, Ornamentation and Cyclical Forms in Klezmer and Jazz

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This paper examines commonalities in musical philosophies of improvisation and formal structure between jazz and klezmer musics. Originating on different continents, klezmer and jazz have vastly different histories despite sharing some important musical philosophies which have yet to be explored in the academic literature. This paper delves into the performative and philosophical commonalities between historical klezmer ornamentation and formulaic jazz improvisation focusing on cyclical forms and the use of formulae for improvisation.

In klezmer circles, the ornaments that adorn melodies are called *dreydlekh*, from the Yiddish word *dreyen*, “to turn.” These “turns” can be interpreted in two ways, both of which bear a striking resemblance to concepts of formulaic improvisation in jazz, which, in this paper, will be represented by John Coltrane’s improvisation on his composition “Giant Steps.” The first “turn” is represented by “turning around a melody” using improvisation and ornamentation while the second refers to both musics’ cyclical forms. This paper draws from literature published both in the fields of jazz and klezmer as well as my own 15 years of performance, analysis and fieldwork in klezmer to examine the commonalities between the philosophies of both musical systems.