

Interview with Beth Cohen, player of many bowed stringed instruments, ,
10/16/00 and 4/19/01

Fieldworker, Kathy Neustadt, at her home [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[See also KN-01-1-C1,2 & 3 and KN-01-1-CS1-17]

As I would later write in my support letter for an MCC Artist Grant (attached at the end of these Notes), I had heard about Beth Cohen long before I met her. And it was always from musicians, too, telling me if I really wanted to hear great versions of their music (the context was often Greek, but also, Armenian, Balkan, even Celtic), I should hear Beth Cohen. The name never went with the ethnic tradition being discussed, and, so I was alternately puzzled and then convinced that she was somehow a phony (beware the jaded snideness of any professional!). Beth Cohen couldn't be playing Greek (Armenian/Balkan/Celtic) music properly, I would think, or else her real name wasn't Beth Cohen. As it turned out, I was wrong, but my initial reaction is part of the story.

In any case, I finally decided I needed to meet her and find out what the real story was. Most currently, Peter Kyvelos and Chris Pantezelos--two Greek instrument makers and musicians--had been raving about her, and since they aren't ravers by nature, I was impressed. So I called her up, and we met in Watertown, on Mass Ave, at the new coffee shop, On Common Grounds (which is a pretty great name, if based only on the number of people from other cultures that Beth describes as living "just around the corner, in Watertown").

We talked there for awhile, and she told me about her family: her father's Arabic Jewish side and her mother's Ashkenazi/European Jewish side, and about the lively (and musical) family gatherings of her youth. We retired to her house--literally just around the corner--to talk more. In her third floor apartment, one whole room is given over to music, in the form of instruments and tapes and CDs (hundreds of them, probably

thousands): this is also where she teaches her music students (of all sorts). It's a very exciting, creative environment,

We talked at length about her musical career, from childhood and classical music training through her discovery of the world's musics, to folk musical traditions particularly, and into the present, when she is beginning to want to make her own music, drawing on all that she has been exposed to and learned. (Unfortunately, the plug of the tape machine's microphone was not connecting properly, so this was not recorded. In a 2nd interview, we were able to recapture most of it.) She was very animated, articulate, and full of enthusiasm for all the amazing possibilities for musical exploration and discovery she perceived to exist.

As she talked, Beth would pull this instrument and that from the wall to illustrate her points. She knows so much about the musical traditions (repertoires, theories, etc.) AND she knows how to play so many instruments--it was thrilling to watch. The instruments themselves, of course, are also incredible specimens of culture, in their shapes, their handiwork and decorations, not to mention the concepts that are embedded in them. The idea of music as having a grammar with different voices and languages felt so right, and being in the middle of the lexicon was exciting.

Beth has a lot of plans and ideas for getting the world's musics heard and saved; broad as her interests and activities are, the projects she works on--and wants to work on--are well-thought out and do-able. I found myself wanting to help her achieve some of them, and wanting, in turn, for the MCC to be a vehicle for this. Her idea to document the remains of the traditional music of Greece is a case in point of something worthwhile and viable--and also unlikely to happen without funding (with quite serious results if not undertaken soon--the classic folklorist's lament, isn't it?). Similarly, her idea to introduce children to a kind of musical anthropology, a musical relativity.

The enclosed Support Letter covers much of what I think about Beth's work and goals. The MCC Artist Grant seemed worth pursuing

because Beth faces such difficulties securing funding: her work tends to fall between the category cracks. For one thing, she plays traditional music but isn't an ethnic musician, though she is becoming more of one as she explores her Arabic heritage (the person who travels around the world before rediscovering what s/he was after is in their own backyard may be the hero/ine in folk tales, but they would find it harder to apply for funding). An additional contradiction of the ethnicity factor, particularly as it relates to matters "folk"; if Beth were a master Chinese hammer dulcimer player, for example, the fact that she was Chinese would be enough to get her into a "folk" category even though the music was classical (similarly, if she were Turkish).

At the same time, the deeper she goes into the traditional musics of other countries, the less she can maintain her position as a classical musician. The more knowledge she gathers into her head and her fingers (and her soul, she would say), the more she gives up the safety of an elite identification and status. If some of the instruments she has learned to play are looked down on for their folk roots, you can figure the music itself is even more controversial. The fact that she's an American, she's young-ish, she's been trained professionally as a classical musician, but she's interested in music from around the world and wants to share it publicly end up being strikes against her rather than for her.

But this is only part of the story. What interests me most is this woman who is dedicating her life to learning about and playing traditional music from around the world, some of which may not survive much longer in situ. Her interest renews dedication by the players, in many cases; through her work, much of this music is being heard by a wider audience, which she is educating and in which she is developing a taste for the musics. These in themselves are valuable contributions to preserving musical culture. That she plays the instruments and learns the music well enough to be considered by those inside the culture--her teachers, other musicians, and audiences--to be one of them (Greek, Turkish, Romanian, Hungarian, whatever) is the judgment that impresses me most: it is the good/bad aesthetic scale that matters most. I can't help wanting to help her.

To: Massachusetts Cultural Council, Artist Grant Program
From: Kathy Neustadt, Ph.D./Folklore
Re: Support letter for Beth Cohen, applicant for an Artist Grant
Date: 12/16/00

To the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Artist Grant Program,

Although I have heard her name over the years in passing, I first became acquainted with Beth Cohen while doing fieldwork for Maggie Holtzberg, MCC's Folk Arts and Heritage Manager, in 1999. I had begun my work in Watertown in the Armenian community, and, in conversation with local Armenian folk dance specialists, Beth's name was mentioned in relation to the best source of folk music. Shortly thereafter, while working with some Greek instrument-makers in Belmont (the Greek-Armenian connection is very strong in the Boston area, especially in relationship to music), Beth's name was mentioned again--and again and again, by the instrument specialists themselves in direct, laudatory terms, as well as by many of the instrument owners (of varied ethnic backgrounds) who dropped in and just happened to have heard her play recently, for example, or were discussing her latest projects. Beth Cohen was the proverbial household word in the ethnic-music community.

When I later attended a gathering of the Greek Music Society of Boston, a grass-roots organization that meets at the Hellenic College (a Greek Orthodox seminary) in Newton, I encountered the same phenomenon. Everyone mentioned Beth Cohen as a matter of course, almost as if a discussion of Greek music in Boston would have been incomplete without her. In addition, however, it was clear that she was admired for the work she was doing beyond the limits of Greek music--studying Turkish music in Turkey, people mentioned frequently with admiration and respect--and the versatility and knowledge that she added to any discussion or playing of Middle Eastern music. That she wasn't Greek (or Turkish for that matter), was of no consequence whatsoever--indeed, not worthy of mention.

Inspired by all that I heard, I did go on to spend some time with Beth herself, interviewing her about her background, her musical training, her many projects, and current activities. I was deeply impressed with all that I learned and by her many talents and accomplishments (which I assume are reflected well enough in her application that I do not need to reiterate them here). I also had the chance to see some of her vast collection of musical instruments --bowed, stringed instruments in all shapes and sizes and a multitude of tones, all of which she plays (and plays extremely well, I suspect, despite her protestations of "I'm still learning")--her home, like her life, totally dedicated to the music she loves.

Beyond the enormous range of her talents and interests, I think the thing that most impresses me about Beth Cohen is the degree to which she transcends the categories and boundaries that would limit her art. Trained as a classical musician, she nonetheless comes from indigenous, folk musical traditions that she has pursued throughout her life, actively seeking out not only her Ukrainian and Syrian Jewish roots but the traditional musics of a variety of other cultures. In the way she approaches music, she is both scholar and practitioner; she sees and feels both history and soul; an established teacher and eloquent speaker, she is also a remarkable guide.

Moreover, in a world where so many boundaries are blatantly obvious and restrictive (national-political, religious, and gender-based distinctions, to name a few), Beth simply rises above the limitations. In the doing, she makes a woman playing the Greek lyra seem completely usual (it is anything but), a woman alone studying from a master in a foreign country both reasonable and acceptable (as it should be but is not, generally), or an ensemble of Jews and Christians and Muslims playing music together an obvious answer to so many problems. In this respect alone--among the many other impressive facets of her life's work for which you might achieve some positive affiliation--Beth Cohen would make a wonderful emissary/spokesperson and representative for the Massachusetts Cultural Council. I can recommend her without reservation.

In the past, I fear, the cost of this versatility, openness, and transcendence has been that Beth does not fall easily within the boundaries of conventional support and funding. As a result, she has had to underwrite all of her own projects (through teaching and playing music), which has limited what she was capable of doing. It has certainly curtailed the length of time she has been able to study with musical masters in Turkey and Greece; it also keeps her on the road performing when she might otherwise be preparing for the solo concert that would allow her to bring these various musical "languages" together with her own personal music.

Many of the projects for which she is uniquely, impressively qualified and which call to her--conducting World-Music workshops with students of all ages and at every level, for example--await the time and money to make them happen. Her plans to travel more extensively throughout Greece, recording traditional musicians for archival and educational purposes--a project that promises to have an enormously creative impact on the local Massachusetts Greek (Armenian/Turkish/Middle Eastern) community--is a similar significant piece of work on hold. In my estimation, Beth has the knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm to produce any number of great, valuable works in a vast array of media for as many people as possible (such is the nature of her artistic generosity). Adequate funding seems like the least that the rest of us can offer her. There is much to be gained, and along with so many others, I look forward to her labors bearing fruit.