

TAPE INDEX KN-01-1-C1

BETH COHEN, player of stringed instruments from around the world

Interviewed by Kathy Neustadt, Monday, 10/16/00

at her home in Watertown:



[See also KN-01-1-FN, CN1 & 2, and KN-01-1-CS1-17]

17 ... [plays traditional Greek fire walking song, called Mandilatas] she was given an instrument by Bob Cohen with charring on the bottom from fire walking. He told her the instrument was too weak to play; hung it on the wall. Listening to some similar music, had to try it out and it held. Learned fire walking song and recorded on WGBH (did pre-concert concerts regularly). Working with Christo, who would listen to music with and say, Oh [like let's play this one] and be in agreement; unusual.

68 Big Question: would like to go around Greece and document the violin traditions, like I started to do: went to one guy in one site and asked for all the repertoire from weddings, and what's played at the bride's house before and etc.; we did it on video and had it translated. Been to Sifnos, Kiknos, and Andros. Met a guy here, around the corner; played for him and he invited me to Andros to stay with his family and play gigs with him; did it 2 summers in a row. He's a fisherman--and when would I ever meet such a person otherwise?. Nobody's really taking the care to do that.

94 I would do the Greek music 'cause it feels the most endangered, and I know the Greek music, and I know the people and connect with them easily. But, look, I went to Turkey and I sat with a lot of players--kemancha players, tambour players, and this summer, this violin player, who I would love to document, and other people like him. "Cause they're on their way out. These people--here as well as there--aren't cared for, aren't treasured and valued. My friend Tamar, who's doing a thesis on Roma Gypsy urban Turkish music breathed life into a lot of people because she was so interested--that's what happens. The Greek guys got all excited because I was

excited--"If she likes it, it must not be so bad." So that's what I would definitely like to do. My thought isn't to make money--release it as CDs--so much as to archive it, have it, have people have access to it to learn from (you can learn so much easier from videos than tapes). You're right there; it's like you're with the person.

126 In Gimesh, Hungary, they found out after years of going there and taping the music--and the people in Budapest would learn from the tapes--somebody sat down with a film and decided to transcribe it with bowings and fingerings, and she discovered that they never use the 4th finger: you couldn't know that from the tape! And then everybody had to suddenly change their playing in Budapest--that was fascinating. You get so much more information from a video. [Concept of folk learning from tapes]

166 I'm realizing that when I have all these recordings, I have lots of people to play with. It's not the same things as having them in the same room, but the fact is I've been learning almost everything now from listening and playing with the tapes. It's the way you learn with somebody: you sit beside them, and you either play before or after them, and it's the same thing--so I said, okay, I'll do it here. And it's a wonderful, wonderful tool. But besides the learning, a moving visual image of somebody playing a musical instrument tells you 1,000s of things more than a tape, whether you're learning from it or not. But then again it's available to study. I've done this on my own, but I can't afford to do it as I want to because I have to make money to live; but I would like nothing more than just to go and do it.

186 I'm also in the part of my life where I'm starting to pool all of these things and make something of it--to share. For a long time I was studying, I was collecting information, in different branches--the Hungarian, the Greek, the Turkish, now the Arabic [and before that Celtic and classical]. It was all scholarly: it was all just to learn the languages. Now I know a lot of these languages, and now I want to present it in different ways. I would like to: 1) go around to schools, all levels--elementary, musical conservatories--not only in this state, all over the country, maybe all over the world--and do a lecture-demo: bowed string instruments from around the world. I don't play all of them, but I play a lot; enough. And just perform and talk and show and answer questions and have people try things. I think it's an important education in the same way that I think all people on the planet should be versed in different musical traditions as they're growing up, just as we do with foreign languages.

Absolutely; it shouldn't be just about getting new CDs from Tower Records. It's very important that we learn it and it's very great. It's not being taught, and neither-- though this is a different topic--are we taught to deal with emotions: we need skills with that, too [or parenting, etc., and some philosophy about this...]

227 Also want very much to perform and put on concerts, not only solo--would like to do that, too, with my echo-plex, my dubber/lubber--but also with a cast of traditional players, as I did at Longey and at Paine Hall for the Bunting, where I did a presentation of the bowed string instrument through the traditional music of Morocco, Hungary, Turkey, and Greece; the last tune was something that was in every tradition but Hungary--Uscadar; Eartha Kitt sings it. We practiced it in the Middle East [restaurant] with the Greek band--it's an island song--and these Arab guys say, Hey, that's our song, and they sang it in Arabic. So our encore was somebody singing it in Turkish, Arabic, and Greek. And that, again, is the message: we have all this diversity, but we have all these ways of connecting. And I also think Greek and Turkish music, Jewish and Arabic--people should be on stage making music together: that is so important, and I've done that, too. I did an Arabic concert many years ago at Longey, and the darbuka player is Syrian Christian, and I'm Syrian Jewish, and he said, "I want to be on the same stage with you, Beth." I think it's really great.

256 I have a lot of ideas about connecting. Some are maybe scholarly things: I'm studying Arabic music in a certain way so that I can say Here's something Egyptian--like this guy who was born in Aleppo, Syria (he's like my father, in a way) playing classical Arabic taxim--and something Turkish from the 1920s and something modern Greek. And I can play all of them--I have the chops and I have the ears and I've studied it--and I just want people to hear the stuff, because it's cool. [radio ideas]

273 Have done lots of radio [I talk about an ongoing show; travels by ear] Was asked to be a host for what Richard Nizely is doing now: they wanted to expand it. And I've been on Chamber Works--it keeps changing it's name--since the 80s, always before I do a concert. A lot of people know me from that. Just read about a new show in New York on NYC called New Music, every night at 11...

296 You know, when I lived in NYC, I was really just a full-time musician; I didn't teach, there was no need to teach because I was free-lancing all the time. And when I came up here I don't want to run around free-lancing, playing other peoples' music

all the time; I don't to waste my time. But to teach is an honorable thing; I can really help open people up to things. At the same time I can keep my art separate and keep it preserved, so it doesn't have to be in the marketplace. I don't have to play a certain way so I could eat; that's ridiculous. I wanted to have freedom. Now I'm at the point where I would love very much not to teach. ...

309 I teach right here; I used to teach in a lot of schools and I just decided this is more fun and more money and I prefer creating an environment for my students. I love to show them all this stuff. So I create my own schedule. It's mostly violin (I was teaching a little Cretan boy the lyra) and I teach a lot of people Irish fiddle—a lot of people like Irish fiddle—and I'm teaching a few people Greek music exclusively. One guy came to me for Hungarian/Transylvanian music, but we turned it into classical technique because he wanted to work on that. So basically, all the things I do, people can pick and choose. I teach beginning kids from the age of 5 up to beginning adults and everybody in between: people who are professional players who want their chops, all sorts of people. I teach by ear, and I teach Greek, Turkish, Hungarian, Rumanian, and Celtic music, some that way. And I also teach in Mendocino every summer, Balkan music and dance camps for a week long: I teach Greek violin and Transcarpathian ensemble, which was only Rumanian, but I expanded in The Carpathian mountains there are a lot of cultures there: Hungarian, Rumanian, and Klezmer I put it, because there should be a Jewish presence at this camp, so that's what I put in. It's a big ensemble, like a village orchestra, and I get everybody playing; it's really beautiful.

334 Then I just came back last weekend from World Music and Dance Camp, which I'm doing every year—Columbus weekend on the Cape. A guy named Akhmet Yulogi (?); he's in Somerville; he's a Turkish folk dance teacher; and Joe Graziosi, who's a Greek-American Greek dance teacher: they started together—Joe teaches there; he doesn't run it anymore with Akhmet. But my group Zia, from the West Coast, comes there every year, so I teach there—I play and teach there. So I teach a lot. The private teaching, I'm teaching 3 days a week about 6- 6-1/2 hours a day straight: that's too much. And then I travel on weekends: I travel all over to play. This group Mazzamezzeh, they play in Toronto, they play Arab and Greek music—they know me from the stuff I've done; and they got a grant to bring me there to teach them a whole program of Greek music and to play with them; that's happening at the end of the month. They don't really do Greek music; there's one Greek in the group, and the

rest of them don't really want to be a traditional band, so they don't really know the language; they don't get down to it well enough. But they want to go deeper. That's exciting, because I want to be playing with them.

355 I really want to travel around and teach large groups, ensembles--I did a residency at Cal Arts last year, and there's someone who wants to bring me back again to teach a Greek violin class and, again, maybe a big ensemble. See, I can teach Eastern European music and Greek and Turkish music in ensemble, soon Arabic. I think that's really good because then people get an experience of playing the music like they never would any other way: if they read it from the sheet music, forget it. I can show them those things. I had a plan that I could go around and do these kinds of ensembles in universities and schools, do a solo concert: like a whole package, a weekend--and collaborating with local musicians I might know there. And then maybe private lessons. Because I don't want to be stuck here; I feel like it's time for me to be out in the world.

367 I was spending time in California--my group is there recording--and then I met some other people playing Arabic music--I want to be freer to go, to go to Turkey and stay with this guy and study; to go to Montreal and stay with this guy Midhar Rashiti and get what he has to offer (he's also an older man), to go to California and be with my group practicing, and then this other group practicing. And there are other people who want me to play some more Turkish music, and then there's a singer--and I'm all over the place, and I can't do it. And then there's another group in LA, and they're doing Greek Sephardic music, which is really gorgeous. And it turns out there's no one in Boston that I'm really playing with now; the groups that I had, I'm not in anymore--I've left them, they've left me, whatever. I want to live in New York, I want to live in San Francisco. And I thought, god, this is my total dream: if I could get funding for a year to live--enough money to live and to do some travelling and some documentation--I need to make a solo recording, because people say, "What do you do?" You know, I can do a million things, but I just have recordings with these 2 groups I'm in, so I could make a solo recording.

386 I want to go to Hungary to record because I've already asked my friends there to record some Hungarian music with me: those are the best players; I can't find them here. Go to Greece to record. And then start putting together a new career, like a solo career performing, where I can also generate enough money, maybe get a

booking agent, to really find players with me. Also, like the concert at Paine Hall and the one at Longey, I really like the idea of me being the organizer--the artistic director--but bringing in other artists and especially the older ones, There's a guy, Ilias Kamizides, who also won one of these National Heritage Awards--he should be heard; I would give him a solo. [Buena Vista Social Club as model for renewing interest]. Hankus Netsky, dir. of Klezmer Conservatory Band, getting his doctorate at Wesleyan on the Philadelphia Klezmer scene: he's interviewing these old men who don't play anymore, and they're going out and buying instruments. Every time you show an interest, you stimulate and make it happen again.

410 [In 1974, at Center for World Music in CA, you were wanting to bring people there; now you're talking about going out to them instead: different vision?] If I can't go to one place, I'll have to go out; it's kind of like that; there's also no substitute for going to the places. I want to go out because the people are there and I have easy connection, and I'm ripe. I'm able to learn and I want to learn from them; I want them to share. At the same time, I know there's a great need for a place where musicians can come together: Bob Labery, in the Eurasian Ensemble, plays the Ottoman harp and other things, teaches at NE Conservatory, Turkish music and other things: he has something called the Intercultural Institute. He went to World Music the year after me, so he's got that model in his head, too--interesting. But he wants to do it through the institution--NEC--and it was once a year but they lost funding so now it's every other year. He did something 2 years ago--I don't know what's going to happen cause he lost funding, which is tragic--but he had Issan Ertzgan from Turkey come, he had Hankus Netsky, and they brought 2 Klezmer musicians from Eastern Europe, which nobody even knew there were anymore (Moldavia and somewhere else), and some Americans who played Indian music. And they had a dialog one day--especially the Klezmer and the Turkish--where one of the musicians said, Issan, tell us--we're going to play the doyna for you (like an improvisation)--what makon is it? we want to know. And they had this dialog back and forth, and Bob and I looked at each other: That's the ticket; that's what we want.

437 Everybody I know would love to go to a school where the finest musicians and artists come and they can get residencies or they can be there and they can bring people for concerts, they can bring people for special conferences and workshops--what an amazing thing that would be. And I would want it to be a little bit outside the city, where it's rural and beautiful, and there would be recording space and studios--

you know, the dream that everybody has. Community spaces but separate houses. Yoga studio, meditation hut; organic gardens. Great food; a little cafe where you can hang, if you need to—all those things. I think it would be very useful now, and I think it would be a good time for it. [World music?] It's a sad thing that it's happening at the end, right in the death throes.

450 I also had an idea a couple of years ago, which I keep coming up with and not-'cause I'm doing this anyway, I thought, What a great project it would be to make a book/CD/and concert series: go around do different countries (and because it's my project, I guess it would be the countries I'm interested in) and target 1) the old-timers or the people who carry the tradition--carriers of the tradition; 2) the young people who are actually picking up on it, because there are; 3) the people like myself outside the culture who are devoted and doing everything to be there as much as possible and spending time doing that--and really focus on all of those 3 and really pay honor to all of them, by interviewing, by photographing, by filming, and then by producing them in concerts, by helping them record. And then, of course, there would be this network around the world and start bringing those people together (there are a lot of World Music concerts, but not enough). I would LOVE to do this; I think I'm so ready for a shift, where I'm not sitting here teaching Suzuki violin, you know, enough. I'm starting to pool it altogether.

467 [work in MA] The idea of lecture/demo-ing the bowed stringed instruments around MA, I could obviously do that. Certainly producing concerts where I could bring in local artists (there aren't enough for me, but there are some, and I could maybe bring somebody from out of state if I had to)--definitely I could see that. Three, there's always my own work that I could do right here in MA, that I really need to do. I don't have the time to do the kind of practicing I need to do to do the performance that I need to do. That's a huge thing for me; that is the thing I would give anything for because you can't do it without that. And if I'm running around and trying to do all the work that I have to do to make a living, that's really hard. So those three. I know that there are older players I would like to work with--there are people, but there are lot of people but a lot of them have died or gone. And there's a part of me that would very much like to do--and I should just do it on my own--Greek violin classes, like I do at Balkan camp (14 people come, 20 people come) at the Hellenic College. In all these Greek communities--people know me in the Greek

community—I should be teaching the kids. But again I don't want to do that too much because I really want to play more than teach now.

492 Big, big, shift. Even my parents are upset; they want me to be playing [reference to her having played with Yitzak Perlman]. Because they've seen me do all these concerts where I've brought all these people together, and they think this is my contribution, and they know that I want to do solo stuff. ...

499 END of TAPE 1, Side 1

4 ...it's like having a palette of colors, now when am I going to start painting; it's that. Come on already, give out. Learning is taking in, and performing is taking out. And I'm still learning. I'm obsessed with it. I have a student I had in camp, and he did Greek violins for 1 week, and 3 months later, he had business cards--Greek, Klezmer, Rumanian, Turkish, Hungarian--I though that was just horrifying. I don't even feel right saying I do this. I would feel very funny putting out an album of Greek violin playing by Beth Cohen; It just doesn't feel right. Which is one reason I want to play Arabic music and Klezmer because I feel, finally, it's mine; I can draw on the genetic memory and all of the experiences in my life that connect to it. So, yeah, it is a long time, which is why my parents are saying, Come on, hurry.

44 Armenian stuff: Julia Sarounian (Sarkis is her husband) and she does Armenian troubadour stuff, and I've played in many concerts with her around the area and Canada. It kind of fits; I'm actually playing in New York with a wonderful Armenian oud player--we're playing Turkish music, also Armenian Greek music--and I've talked to him about how the kemancha has gotten very Westernized and very tempered (because when I play with Julia, it's piano and electric guitar and drum--not drum set, but drum, and to me that doesn't appeal; I cant bear it, in fact; I don't want it). And I'd love to get, in fact, to get a kemancha and go to Armenia, study with somebody of that tradition. I'm holding off because it's too much; already I feel like an idiot because I'm doing so many--I'm suspicious of people who say they do all these things, so what about me? But I have to say that I really do put in my time: I spent 5 years solid on Hungarian music and didn't do anything else. And Greek music since 83; that's almost 20 years now. And Turkish music since 89.

81 [Being from outside the culture/tradition] For the Greeks, first of all, I have to be good enough to convince people, obviously, and maybe there standards aren't so

high, but I've played for Greek musicians, and they say, I close my eyes, and you're an old man from Knossos. That actually a man said to me, a Cretan musician who I thought was great, so I thought that was pretty cool. One, that I have to be good, and this is my own standards anyway, and from a classical tradition, that's where it helps. Number two, I have Greek friends who are wonderful musicians, and when we play in the Greek community, Greek people don't think that much of them, but me-- because I'm not Greek; somebody outside can play so much like a Greek--that's even better to them. You know, for what that's worth. Or spending all your money till you're broke going, they say, Oh, my god, you really care for this, otherwise you wouldn't put yourself out for this. Why do you want to learn this so much?

120 Being a good musicians matters totally, and being a nice person or just connecting with people really helps. And as I said, going to these places and waking people up--the players themselves--is really a great thing, too. I have issues about it, too: it's nice to be a talented visitor, but when I started playing with Klezmer Conservatory and they announced my name on stage, and my name fit the ethnicity of the music, you don't know: it felt so good. Beth Cohen. And the Arabic, it's the same thing, although I'm a Jew, and my name doesn't sound Arabic--you know, I'm thinking of changing my name. My grandmother's named Bahiya, and I was named after her, so in some ways I feel like I should change it: Bahiya Cohen--it would fool with people's minds because Cohen sounds Ashkenazi even though it's not--it's all over the world--but Bahiya is definitely Arabic. So I think I like the idea of Bahiya Cohen, because people don't think I'm Arabic, and I don't like to say, Listen to me, this is my music. But I don't want to be a talented visitor for Arabic music, because it is my music: I grew up hearing it, immersed in this music.

154 [Long route from classical to Indian music to Celtic to Hungarian, Turkey, Greece to come back to Arabic music] That's the best way. Never even caring if I got back to it. Just like letting go of the violin, I'm letting it go completely, and I want to know the real reasons for anybody to play classical music, and if I'm convinced, I'll do it. Much to my parents' chagrin. Let me try it out: I'm not going to be a violinist in the world. Because I was so tied up with the identify and all the stuff.

172 [Problems with being taken on as a student] Generally no. I've had many teachers in Turkey of different instruments and the theory, and people are really thrilled; it's an extraordinary experience. And in Greece, too. It's beautiful. And

now the Arabic ones. And I feel that everyone of them is my grandfather, saying, Welcome, honey. And that's the thing: learning and teaching are 2 of the most sacred acts; I want to always be doing both. It's very important if you teach to also learn, of course. But what an amazing thing to be doing. [Must be a kick for them to teach her] And they don't forget me for years; they'll ask, When is Beth coming back?

196 The other thing I want to say about being outside the tradition--this is the most important thing; it's another offering I want to make--for me to say, Oh, I'm not Greek but I can sound Greek; I'm not Hungarian but I can sound like I was born in Transylvania, what does that say? It says, if we open our hearts to people of other cultures, then we can be part of them. It's the biggest act of love that I can think of. I'm erasing, in some ways, my accent: I want to know your accent. It's like empathy to the highest degree. [Relationship of music to cultures] Ah, it's such a gorgeous thing, it's kind of like there are frequencies I would never experience, and some of them are literal with these micro-tones--that I would never have a chance to touch or immerse myself in, and I get to. It's like different energies [so if you play Russian music, do you get more morose?] ...or more passionate? or more dramatic? or more stubborn? I think so, especially if you do it in the context that the music's played in. Then you'll eat, you'll drink, you'll dance, you'll talk, you'll hang out in those ways. In Turkey, classical music is very formal; it's a whole different culture, and to get involved in that, you have to do it in order to play the instrument and the music with that feeling. I do believe that music is an expression of a cultural psyche, for sure. And to immerse in it is a great learning experience, and I feel like all parts of me are awakened because they've been stimulate, they've been woken up. Because otherwise I would never touch those things.

234 Just like when I was going to music camp when I was a kid and I'd be in the orchestra and chamber music, come home and Oh, we played the Brahms Hungarian dances in orchestra or Beethoven's 4th Symphony or Third Symphony. And my father would say, Go--to the big shelf of records--and I'd pull them out and I'd find them. Oh, my god, you have this? You have Afternoon of a Fawn by Debussy? And I'd put them on and I knew it so well because I had lived it, and it came alive to me, and it wouldn't;t have been alive if we had just put it on and listened to it. I was inside it--music can do that--and once I was inside it, it became a part of me and it was like my life. Yeah, that's an amazing thing about music--so powerful.

250 [MCC matters] Apprenticeship issue: it's a sad thing when I go to Greece that I can't even find traditional musicians except maybe at wedding; it's not all gone, but it's going. There was a women's society that hooked up kids with the old musicians, in Sifnos, and they actually paid for them to take lessons, just the same thing. And they had a contest where they had the kids compete, and the winner got a new instrument, so there were incentives--they had the right idea. That's the only way it's going to happen because that's the way it's always happened, from the older person to the younger person. I thought, Oh, I want to help with that; maybe I can help organize that all over Greece... Asia's next. Well, here's what's happening: Arab, North African, Tunisians, Algerian, African border--that's an amazing border, African and Arab; those border cultures are fascinating--and then down into Africa. West African music and dance, I've always loved that, and I've always loved African music and I've listened to it a lot, but I haven't really done it. It's really great stuff.

295 Then this year, I've started studying the rik. In Turkish music, they play the bendir--these big frame drums--and in the ensemble, I wanted to try them. Then I found a teacher, who wasn't Turkish, a kid who graduated from Berkeley, and he taught me the frame drum [she plays some]; then I got really excited about the rik, which is Arab tambourine. With my new equipment, I can lay down a percussion track for myself, I can lay down some kind of melodic thing on the violin, then I can solo on top of it [she plays the rik: drumming and rattling]. It's new; I've been doing this year; I have an Egyptian teacher right around the corner, Karim. I'm in love with. Then I went to New York and took some lessons--I know, I'm a perpetual student.

334 [The ^{Central} World Music ~~Institute~~ ⁷⁴, where she studied in 69] You can't just pick up the stringed instrument; you have to take a singing class every day; we'll get up at dawn if you want to practice--a teacher actually offered this--and then we'll practice in the afternoon in our class--very rigorous. And we had to learn the whole rhythmic system [she demonstrates one, soukatou]: they learn it before they learn to play the drum: the drum syllables. But I always kept away from the drum because I had enough to do with the bow. But when I decided to be a One-Woman band, to go on the road, and I could loop myself: how great! Even if it's simple--it doesn't have to be virtuosic--I'll learn that; I can even do 3 layers of percussion and play the violin on

477 Glen Valez, a percussionist who's drawn from Indian and Arabic and Italian folk traditions, and yet he's done his own thing. He's my next step; I can see him; I went to his website, I took a lesson with him; he was at the Arabic retreat. He goes on college residencies; he has a whole method of teaching that incorporates South Indian drum syllables and some walking, some movement. He did a CD a few years ago called Rhythms of the Chakras--each chakra has its own rhythms and colors--so he's into that end of things, too; Sounds True records him. He collaborates with musicians from all over the world and performs with them, and he teaches when he's in town. That's what I want to do, and it's so nice to have a model embodying it. It's a fascinating thing just to follow the stages, let them lead. [Closure] In 1974, when I thought I would make a recording, I thought it would be jazz, because that's what was hip then and I was studying it--and that was the only improvised music that I knew of; I was ignorant, I didn't know. And how ironic that it's not going to be jazz at all.

501, End of TAPE 1, Side 2 and the interview