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Tim Kupsick Photographer

Assistant Professor of ethnomusicology Mark Levy teaches his class about a popular urban music developed in Greece called Rebetika on Tuesday, May 1.

Professor shares love of ethnic music

Mark Levy calls on visiting musicians and his own performances to enrich his students' musical insight

By Natasha Chilingirian
Pulse Reporter

University music professor Mark Levy has devoted his life to expanding his learning of music from around the globe, and found that each culture's music is just as unique as its languages and customs.

"I don't believe that music is a universal language," Levy said. "It's a universal phenomenon."

Now, Levy not only shares his knowledge of ethnomusicology with University students, he also takes his expertise outside the classroom. He organizes three foreign-music performances in the School of Music's World Music Series every year and regularly brings in guest musicians to work with his students. He also plays clarinet in a Balkan-style band, "Trio Slavej," with graduate music student Kalin Kirilov and his wife, University anthropology and folklore Professor Carol Silverman.

Levy's journey through a world of music began with piano lessons — which Levy admits he "wasn't that enthusiastic about" — when he was 8 years old. In middle and high school, he played clarinet in the band and violin in the orchestra, which he said he enjoyed mostly for the social aspects.

Influenced by his family, Levy started at the University of Chicago as a pre-medicine major but quickly decided to follow his passion and switch to music. He became swept up in the folk dance movement of the 1960s, falling in love with the music and dance of the Balkan regions, especially from Bulgaria and Macedonia.

One summer, Levy went out dancing every night. Combined with a sparked interest after taking an introductory ethnomusicology class, the folk dance craze caused Levy to focus on what he now teaches — world music.

After graduating from the University of Chicago, he worked with visually impaired children in Los Angeles for five years. Levy then pursued a masters degree in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles, with a focus on North Indian and Bulgarian music. While completing his seven years of study — from 1972 to 1979 — he played the gaida (a Bulgarian bagpipe) and clarinet in a Balkan and Middle Eastern style musical group, "Aman," and spent his summers traveling to Bulgaria and Macedonia, where he experienced the cultures' music firsthand.

"I would fly to Europe, buy a used car for a few hundred dollars and drive to the Balkans," he said. "There, I would sleep in campgrounds. The locals were very hospitable. I had the chance to spend time in villages and see how music fits into daily life."

It was during one of these visits that Levy met his wife. He first crossed

paths with Silverman, a New York-based teacher of Balkan singing at the time, at a folk music festival in Bulgaria. They met up every few years at various music events, and eventually married. They lived in Bulgaria from 1979 to 1980, then moved to Eugene when Silverman was hired to teach anthropology and folklore at the University. Levy worked his way up to his current University position, beginning as an outreach coordinator in the Russian and East European Studies Center, then working in the Office of International Programs and finally teaching at the School of Music in 1991.

Levy said he emphasizes hands-on work in his courses by bringing in visiting musicians, which he discovered was a useful learning method while in graduate school. Last year, he brought in a Javanese performer to make use of a number of Javanese instruments that had been donated to the School of Music. He also said he shows videos to turn classes into virtual travels. Music Graduate Teaching Fellow Kurt Doles, who has worked with Levy for five years, said Levy goes above and beyond the duties of a teacher.

"He works harder than anyone else in the music school," Doles said. "He puts out effort to bring in new performers and styles and does work that he doesn't necessarily have to do. He makes class meaningful and interesting for students, and we have had feedback from students who said he has changed their perspective on the world."

His trio (which features vocals from

Silverman, clarinet music from Levy and accordion and keyboard music from Kirilov) plays around Eugene at venues such as Cafe Paradiso and Cosmic Pizza, while also performing nationally. Silverman said because of Levy's performance experience, he brings an enriched knowledge of the type of music he teaches to his students.

"He brings an understanding of the music and the expressive qualities that it should have," she said. "Some people teach who have only listened to the music, but he has actually played it. He brings in the point of view of a practitioner."

Levy said he plans to continue strengthening the School of Music's ethnomusicology program, and he has already made a significant improvement. Last year, he initiated the requirement that all freshmen music majors complete an introductory world music course. He said he would like to begin a course in music of the African diaspora, which includes genres triggered by Africans moving to new parts of the world during slavery. He said teaching gives him the opportunity to keep learning.

"It's really mind-broadening to realize there are all different kinds of music, and different views of what is beautiful in music," he said. "My courses are a trip to these places. Music is a window into other cultures."

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