

#RevelsConnects: Musical Connections Episode 6

Beth Bahia Cohen - A Life Story Through Strings

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Maggie: Not many musicians are equally adept at performing with major symphony orchestras, Broadway shows, and traditional Greek, Turkish, and Klezmer ensembles. Meet Beth Bahia Cohen, born of Syrian Jewish and Russian Jewish heritage, she grew up immersed in a mixture of Arab music, Klezmer tunes, and Yiddish songs as well as western classical music. Inspired at a young age by the music she heard at family gatherings, weddings, and bar mitzvahs, she went on to seek out and study with master musicians in Greece, Turkey, Hungary, and the Middle East. Today Beth plays the violin, various Greek lyras, Turkish bowed tanbur, and more. In addition to being regarded as a highly gifted performer and scholar, she's on the faculty of Berklee College of Music, Tufts University, and has a private teaching studio. Beth Bahia Cohen, welcome to Musical Connections. Great to have you!

Your musical story begins at home in the New York City area, tell us something about your parent's cultural roots.

Beth: Ah, ok! I felt like I was traveling in some very different worlds from my friends that I was growing up with. I grew up mostly in Queens, and then Long Island. I think the most exotic for me was my father's family who was from Aleppo, Syria. And every time we would gather, which was often, we'd gather in Brooklyn together, my father was one of eight so we had a lot of relatives. We had eight aunts and uncles, grandparents, assorted... My grandfather's brother was always around and some of the older relatives as well, and twenty-five first cousins basically on that side. So every time we would get together, it was a big party! It was literally a party! And there were fifty people in a one-bedroom apartment on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, basically. And I'll never forget this, we would park our car on Ocean Parkway and we would go up in the elevator in this building, and as we got up to the 5th floor, we could hear the din of people talking, shouting, whatever. And it was my family and we walked down the hall and the door

was partway open. We'd open the door and everybody would shout, "Aboosa" in Arabic and they'd say "We're so happy to see you!" and they'd hug us. But my grandmother would have a ritual where she would have a plate of kibbe, I don't know if you know kibbe...

Maggie: Tell us!

Beth: It's a food from all over the Middle East and even in Turkey I saw kibbe. In Lebanon they're flat. They make it in a pan. In Syria, they have them like little football shapes. And bulgur and water make the outside, and the inside is a mixture of meat, pine nuts, and spices, onions. So delicious! And deep-fried. So it was a delicacy and if she left them out, they'd be gone. So she would come to the front door with a big platter, and only the kids, each of us, could take one. Then she'd put it back in the closet for the next family. Anyway, the beauty of it really was that there was a lot of love, a lot of relatives and there was always Arabic music playing on records. They had a big record changer stacked and it was just all day long, and everybody was speaking Arabic, the older people were speaking Arabic. One big thing for me was when I met some Greek musicians here in Boston, and I went to one of their houses for Christmas. We did the same thing, we had a meal, everybody speaking Greek in this case. And then after the meal, just like with my family, they'd clear away the tables, they'd fold up the tables. In my family, they'd fold up the tables and come out with a big platter of fruit and dried fruit and nuts and dates, and turn up the music, and then everybody would dance. So that happened at my Greek friend's house too. And then I said, hey there's something really connected here. Not only culturally but also musically as well that I realized, as I discovered as I got deeper into Greek music. Anyway, it was an amazing experience, and as I said in my concert, there was always live music at big events - the Arabic music. And there was always a violinist, oud player, kanun player, darbuka player, a singer. So this is the music that I grew up hearing all the time. And then my mother's family from Russia and Ukraine. And there was always music among my aunts and my mother and my grandmother, and they would sing a lot of Yiddish songs. And we had the Kammen Folio which was, I don't know if you know it, but it's like a Jewish wedding book. Because I remember playing at a Jewish wedding years and years later and I

brought the Kammen Folio and there was an older musician who said, "That's what we used all the time at Jewish weddings." So there's a couple of volumes of them, it's all this Klezmer music, so I used to play this with my mom.

Maggie: That sounds wonderful! I was actually intrigued by sort of the bilingual nature of your early music education. Can you describe for us, first becoming aware of how different the violin sounded in Arabic and Klezmer music that you were exposed to versus the western classical violin that you were formally studying?

Beth: The biggest difference, and I'm going to talk mostly about the Arabic violin, because that was the biggest difference. I think the Klezmer violin has its own style and its own ornaments. And it also uses a series of scales or makams that's used in a lot of Eastern music. I didn't realize that all the eastern European music also uses makams. I didn't realize it until years later when I studied and learned and had been immersed in all these different traditions that I realized, my god, they all have the same melodic vocabulary in common. Why is this? This was later, because then I would find one Greek tune, a Turkish tune, an Arabic tune, a Klezmer tune, etc., that used the same scales, basically. I think it's because of the Ottoman occupation throughout all of this big area for so many hundreds of years. I think that's what the influence was -these scales. But anyway, in terms of the Arabic violin, there were microtones. That's the biggest difference. And the microtones, the quarter tones of Arabic music, are different from the microtones in Turkish music. But same family... but different... the pitches are placed in different places, the names of the makams are a little different - not exactly equivalent.

Maggie: I was wondering how you got into the subtleties of those pitches, learning that. Or is it just an aural experience of picking it up?

Beth: It's totally aural. Because you could read the notation of an Arabic tune and not play it right. Or anything. Right? It's a language.

Maggie: And I'd love for you to talk a bit about how Western violin is taught, versus Greek, Carnatic, Turkish, Klezmer, which again is by ear. And it's almost like a different part of the brain...

Beth: It is! I think it is a different part of the brain. I think it's definitely left-brain right-brain difference for sure. Yeah I mean honestly, as a European classical trained violinist, we never really learned things by ear, or different from what the notes said on the page. You can't add notes. You can't take notes away. You can't ornament them in your own way, it's just not really allowed. So there are other ways in European classical music to express yourself and be who you are, right? But not in that way. So, yeah I think it was probably from this Irish fiddler, actually British but from Dublin, Clive Collins, who was here for a while in Boston. He taught me a bunch of tunes totally by ear. He didn't read music. And it didn't matter, even if he showed me... "Oh in this book there's that same tune, let's play it." Because of the ornaments. And the pitches. And when I meant microtones before, I want to make it clear - some people who aren't musicians don't know what microtones are. So I would kind of characterize it as all the notes between the keys of the piano that are not on the piano. You can't find them. And I think that's a whole world in itself of microtones. For example, an Arabic microtone is the quarter tone, although I know that in Arabic music there are more pitches than just the quarter tones. But the quarter tones are literally half of a half step.

Maggie: Well another way to say it, because you have this piano behind you... it's like not making any more notes, except that in between the white to the black key, there are four notes. It's hard to get your head around. So you're learning this stuff by ear. What I loved is you mentioning, cause I also study classical violin, and I don't remember my teachers saying, "go home, listen to this... go out and listen to this music." So I loved when your father said, you came home from orchestra practice, probably in high school, and you were excited about working on this Beethoven symphony... And he said to you, "Go over to the shelf, and grab the LP" to listen to it and you said, "Oh we have that?" It was like he was making a connection, it sounds like, of the importance of listening. Not just studying off the page and trying to reproduce it. But listening.

Beth: I love that, Maggie! I don't even remember that I said that, but I'm really glad you brought it up cause my father lived to 100 and a half. And the week before he passed, he was giving a friend a lesson on how to listen to music. He did not play anything, but he should've been a musician. He was deeply in love with it. And he played a late Beethoven string quartet for my friend, and she wrote the notes for it, it was beautiful. And he said, "Now, we listen to it, quietly, calmly, we're not talking, we listen. And now what you need to do this week is listen to it every day until maybe by next week, you can start singing the main themes of this." I thought, wow that's what a musician says! He just understood... He learned music by ear obviously, because he didn't play anything or read music. Yeah, so I think that listening is where it's at for sure... and as you said, as a classical violinist, I wasn't told to listen to different versions of the Beethoven violin concerto. There was a fear of getting into imitating, but honestly, that's the only way, I think, to really learn different ways of playing something. Right?

Maggie: Yeah I guess the middle ground might be jazz... The way people learn jazz improvisation. Between this Western thing and the totally aural tradition, say of the South Indian... or right when you're sitting at the feet of a guru and you're imitating, you're playing back and forth but it's just all with an ear-training type thing.

Beth: Yeah, it's also passing on a tradition aurally, that's how it's done. It's not done with the printed page, it's done that way. And the most important person I learned that from was TN Krishnan, who was a South Indian violin player and I studied with him. And I'll never forget our first lesson and I said, "Can I notate what you teach me?" cause I saw there was no music anywhere... written music... And he said, "Absolutely not! That's an insult to our tradition!" And I said, "Ok, can I record it?" And he said yes. Sadly I don't have many of the recordings from that... but it was all by ear! He sang, he played, he clapped, and I played... and that's it, that's the way to learn! And the other time I also learned about that was when I was playing Hungarian music. So I was playing Hungarian music, I learned from Ökrös Csaba, a violin player from Budapest, for many years actually. He was my guru of that music. And he used to write down everything. He transcribed. And they didn't have what we had - we had tape recorders that went half-speed. Marantz, Superscope - they did that. An octave lower, this is the pre-digital

era. And they didn't even have that - they had turntables that went to speed 16. About halfway. So I can imagine what a mess the records were - up and down and up and down - to write everything down. But that's how he did it, and he wrote down everything - every ornament, every time through, it's different. And that's how I learned Hungarian music which was heavily, heavily ornamented. But then I realized, after I started learning Greek music from Greek musicians who didn't write anything down, didn't even read music, that when I played the Hungarian music, I was reading it. I stopped listening. I was referring now to my transcription. And I was memorizing it. Then I realized when I got into Greek music, no, no, no. And so I asked my friend, Christos Govetas, how he learned music. Because he didn't read. And he told me, "Well I listen to something, I fall in love with it, I listen to it constantly." (like that's what happens when you love music.) "And I don't touch an instrument. After about a week, two weeks, I can sit down and play it on any instrument." And he played lots of instruments. And he could sing it. So I said, let's do an experiment, and I wanted to wean myself off of the printed page. And we chose 10 tunes, we put them on, we made duplicate copies for each other. We said, "Ok now the rule is no playing these tunes until we meet again for this purpose in two weeks. So we did, I just listened, listened, listened, I ended up singing in my head or out loud these tunes. And then when we got together two weeks later, we started the beginning of each tune so we could remember it, and then we played it and it was kind of miraculous cause all the ornaments were there. It was effortless. We didn't try to get all of these ornaments. We let it just come into us. And that was my big lesson about how to learn by ear.

Maggie: That's so fascinating, the difference... I have so many questions I want to ask you. First though, just to follow up on that, I wanted to delve into a bit about learning a music that's from outside your culture and tradition. And my question is, how important is it to learn the cultural context in which the music is traditionally played. Or can one just pick it up by watching a YouTube video?

Beth: Such a timely question! Because when I was doing this there was no YouTube. There was no way to communicate with my teachers. I still think about the teachers that I went to in Turkey, Hungary, and Greece and learned from. And I haven't really been in

touch with them to thank them. I mean, the phone connections weren't good, they didn't read English. It's so much easier now and it's easier to access music. However, I really think it's important to smell the air, to eat the food, to hear the language, to just be there. And I liken that to my experience on Ocean Parkway because my experience with Arabic music is infused with everything - it's so multidimensional, it's love. It's my aunts and my uncles, my cousins, my grandparents. The sound of my grandmother speaking in English and Arabic together, she would go back and forth. That's actually music. I listened to an interview recently with her, Bahia, and it's so musical it just amazes me. Yeah so I think that all of that stuff is deep and rich. However, that said, I was very interested in learning the Rajasthani ravanahatha, which is on my wall hanging there next to the Egyptian rababa. And it's a similar instrument. Do you remember the movie Latcho Drom?

Maggie: No, I don't think so.

Beth: Oh well, Latcho Drom I recommend to anyone who's interested in world music, but also this is a musical documentary of the migration of the Roma.

Maggie: Oh yes, I've heard of this.

Beth: Yeah, it's really wonderful. So it kind of shows the music and dance of the Gypsies as they left India and went west. So I realized one day, because in this movie they go from Rajasthan to Egypt to Istanbul to Eastern Europe: Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania. Then they do France, and then they do Spain and end up with Flamenco. And all the way through this there's this thread. In fact, when you look at the Flamenco dancers and you remember the beginning of the movie, in Rajasthan, they look Indian, these people. But I realized I do a lot of that music but I didn't really do – I did South Indian violin, a little bit, and I want to return to it. But I didn't know anything about Rajasthani music. And I found, through some connections, I found some instruments, some bowed instruments. And one of them is the ravanahatha.

Maggie: That's fascinating!

Beth: And I'm not sure why I started that story...

Maggie: That's ok! Now that we've dissed Western classical violin training a bit, I want to go back and ask you... what your training in Western classical violin does contribute to your interpretation of all these non-Western repertoires from around the globe?

Beth: Ok, and I also remember what I was going to say. What I was going to say was I learned some Rajasthani ravanahatha pieces on YouTube. I couldn't get to Rajasthan, I still haven't been able to get there, I'd love to go! A lot of the musicians who play this instrument are street musicians, and I would love to get some more repertoire and learn just directly and be there. But it was possible to learn on YouTube.

Maggie: It's possible, but you also have incredible training and background and exposure that would make that a little easier than someone who had never studied any of these other ways of playing. I think... you know - person to person.

Beth: Yes! And to answer your question about what are the benefits, or the fruits of being European classically trained. I say that because there's Turkish classical music, there's Indian classical music, there's Arabic classical music. So European classical music... One of the things that, after I studied with TN Krishnan, I got very inspired to spend the rest of my life really, traveling around the world, being a student of... at that time I thought it was just violin players, because I was interested in how the violin was played in different places – master violin players... but before I did that, I felt like I needed to get my technique better, because I had a lot of tension in my playing, and I wanted to be just a clear channel, when if somebody in some country tells me, play this, or play something for me, and I had trouble physically doing it, that would be not good. So I headed to New York City and I found an amazing teacher by the name of Gerald Beal, who was amazing. And he taught me how to play with total ease and lightness, and using weight and motion instead of tightening and pressing and squeezing and all those things. It was just really really wonderful. Anyway, he was a classical player and he helped me with that.

Maggie: Right, did any of these other teachers that you were learning from in Greece or Turkey or the Carnatic Indian - did they ever talk about how you hold your hand? Or... you see what I mean?

Beth: Ok, so in terms of Indian music, both North and South, you sit on the floor cross-legged and you put the scroll of the violin on your ankle, basically. So that was very important, we didn't do that any other way. And actually, that freed the left hand, so you didn't have to hold the violin up. I think Western classical music is the only tradition where violins and violas are in this position. Honestly, there's nothing else.

Maggie: What position, because we're basically audio no visual, so what you're doing is holding your left hand and wrist up in the air sort of at shoulder level. Which is actually sort of an awkward thing. I've seen the Norwegian fiddle too, where it's in a more relaxed position where it's against the body, or when you see a fiddler in New England or down south, often it's against the chest, and sometimes it's because there's a notion of being able to sing or call a dance to.... Well I'm wondering, do you find it challenging to switch from, say, Bach and Beethoven to Klezmer and Carnatic and Turkish music? In your head when you're... I mean you probably wouldn't do a concert with all those things in the same hour.

Beth: I did! I just did with The Revels! But I don't do it all the time.

Maggie: Cause, thinking about the audience, is that hard to do? Is there something like, do you get into a different headspace?

Beth: You know I think it's just like people who are multilingual, I feel like if you spend enough time in each language, then it's just part of you. So I don't find that. Sometimes maybe an ornament from this tradition leaks into that, but generally, it's not. Also, in terms of the technique of holding the violin we were just talking about... I have a great story. When I first met Ökrös Csaba, he did with his band a week at MIT from Budapest and they had the first night a lecture demo, they all played together in one room... and then they separated into separate rooms so all the violin players who wanted to take a

group lesson with Csabi went into this room, all the bass players into that, the contra viola into that. So I went into the violin room and I saw Csabi play, and I said, man, I need to tell him he needs a shoulder rest, number one. Cause if you don't fill in the space between your shoulder, then your shoulder hunches up to close the space and there's a lot of tension. And he actually bent his wrist backwards, and that was a no-no in Western classical music... Oh my god don't do it! And also it's not great cause you're pulling on the tendons. So as soon as he started talking to us through a translator, cause he didn't speak English at the time, he said, "The first thing I want you all to do is to take off your shoulder rests, and put your hands backward like that." And I said, "Ok, I'm not going to say a thing to him," because clearly this was on purpose, and he was doing it because he was not a village violin player from Transylvania, which was the music he was playing and teaching us. He grew up in Budapest and... whatever. So he actually went out of his way to do that because the way the fingers come down on the fingerboard is they're coming down in different places. And it really makes it microtonal. Not in any formal way. And that's true with the Greek violinists - a lot of them, I know, also hold their hands back.

Maggie: Right, so interesting! I mean that's like when you're taking violin lessons here in the States in classical programs, like, "Oh my God, your wrist must not be bent, it must be completely straight." But yes, I've noticed this too in Appalachian fiddling... and you can reach differently on the fingerboard. You know I've noticed whenever you're playing, whether it's a Klezmer freylach or a Romanian hora or a Greek skaros, that you are able to embody the very soul of the music. And I'm wondering, you know, how does one learn to speak someone else's language, basically without an accent? It's a real skill... do you have any thoughts on that?

Beth: Wow, I mean that's the most important part, I think. So for me, I really wanted to learn and still am learning these different musical languages on the violin so I could basically show other people who don't have access to it, who aren't in that place, in that culture. Even within those cultures and countries, a lot of this music is gone, or it's endangered, and a lot of people from those countries don't even know that music necessarily. So it's not only just for Americans. So in order to do that, I feel like I need to

learn the musical language as well as possible, so I can really do that without an accent. I don't know if I do that, but I try to do it as honorably and as honestly as possible. So I think it's...I don't know how I do it! I just immerse... Each of these traditions I spent years doing exclusively. Like the Hungarian music: I would not play anything else... ANYTHING else for a total of 5 years solid.

Maggie: Wow, so you would just concentrate on that?

Beth: I wasn't interested. There was even a concert where I was playing Hungarian music and somebody says, "Let's play a couple of Greek tunes!" And I said, "No way!" I hadn't even started on Greek music at that point. Ironically, I've been playing Greek music for a long time... but at that point, I didn't even know it. And I refused, I didn't want to go there. I just felt I had to just be doing one.

Maggie: Yeah, no, I get it! You get mastery in one before you mix it up with something else. And it seems like in addition, this thing of seeking out these master players in these different traditions, along with that it sounds like you did some extraordinary ethnographic fieldwork. For instance... I wanted you to talk about documenting traditional Greek violin playing. And I think there was something about Greek firewalking songs?

Beth: Oh yeah that's right – Anasthanaria. Yeah, there's a pagan or pre-Christian tradition, although it's mixed with Christianity because they carry icons of saints across the burning coals or the embers. There's a tradition that's still existing, and it's once a year on the Saints day of Kostandinos and Eleni. And now it's happening in Greek Macedonia... Ayia Eleni is the name of the village; it happens every year. And they spend many days making a big fire in the middle of the village and having it die down over days, and during those days they're playing this lyra, Thracian lyra, which I have a couple of. One of them I have is actually charred at the bottom, I feel like it must have been part of the ceremony and it got burnt. And they also have more than one lyra at a time, and they also have these big drums called daouli, big, big two-sided drums with a big beater on one side and a very thin dowel stick on the other side. And there's a big

repertoire of music that they use in this. So yeah! I was interested in how the violin was played in Greece, but then I found out that there were all these bowed instruments called lyras that happened, and some of them are gone, and some of them are still happening and I started collecting them and learning them and going to Greece to learn them. I have a Cretan lyra from the Island of Crete. And I have a Thracian lyra from the Anasthanaria or from Thrace. And also a Macedonian lyra. And then there's also a Pontic lyra from the Black Sea of Turkey. There's a Greek tradition and there's a Turkish tradition - similar instrument, slightly different size, and different repertoire, different dances, but very connected. And that instrument is amazing because it is tuned in 4ths. And so you play parallel 4ths and stuff like that. I just got really interested in all this, and what really helped is I started with my friend Christos Govetas and three other friends on the West Coast a group called Ziyia. In 1990 we met at Balkan music and dance camp. And we realized, oh my goodness, we put ourselves together and we cover all the regional styles of Greek music, of which there are many. There are like different countries even in one. So we started playing for Greek communities all over the country, as well as a big annual Greek dance competition, which is strange to have a competition of Greek folk dance, but that's what it was. The churches would submit their dance groups to perform. We used to play for the parties. But then we started playing as well for their competitions, so they would each have a 15-minute suite, a dance suite from a certain part of Greece, so from the Island of Samos, from Epiros from Thessaly, from Thrace. And it was amazing for us because we had all this very specific regional music to learn. And we did this for over 20 years. So very deep learning! That was a big immersion.

Maggie: And outside of the country right?

Beth: Outside of Greece? Yes. But I used to go to Greece all the time, like in the summers, I would go to the Island of Andros, to Sifnos, to Crete, to Epiros... all over...

Maggie: So are you concerned that these are endangered traditions that need an infusion? Or is there an archive... you personally have this collection of instruments and recordings. But are you concerned about that?

Beth: Of course... Yeah when I first started getting excited about learning how the violin is played in different countries, I had an image of having a big palette of colors that I wanted to create with, or expand, add to. Because there are textures, timbres, ornaments, pitches, there are so many ways. And then eventually I thought I'm going to make my own music and create a language that's just mine, coming from the things that I'm interested in. And I didn't realize anything was endangered. But then when I started going to places, then I saw, and then I realized... and then I felt even more adamant, so when I got involved with Hungarian music there was an ethnographic... When I got involved with Hungarian music there was this museum in Budapest that really preserves the folk music. And they're very serious about it. Very serious. And they would do things like, if you were going to Transylvania for one weekend for a wedding where lots of people were invited, anyone could go... and these Roma bands of musicians would play and they discovered the music, because the villages in Transylvania, the Hungarian ones, were so isolated, they preserved their traditions more than in mainland Hungary. They would give people movie cameras, recording equipment and say, "Here! Take this! But just give us a copy." And they keep collections of these things. And so they really do actively do that. But in Greece I knew somebody named Maria Vouras who used to live here in Cambridge. And she, along with Simone Karas, who is a Greek ethnomusicologist, got a Ford Foundation grant, I think in the 70s, to go around to villages in Greece, different regions, and record. And they have a collection, but I don't know that many others that do that, so it felt like it was more in danger of disappearing. I still feel that actually.

Maggie: Yeah it probably is... Well, I wanted you to tell us a story that I came across that was, again this was a long time ago when you were interviewed by Kathy Neustadt. And you mentioned the power of music being able to bring people together from diverse factions, you know, groups in conflict. You told a story about performing a concert at the Longy School of Music with a Syrian Christian doumbeck player. Share that story with us.

Beth: So his name is Bassam and he played darbuka - doumbeck, and I asked him to play with me... I was teaching at Longy at that point and they had a little World music department and I would do faculty concerts every year. And that year maybe, I think,

was a concert of traditional Arabic, Hungarian, and Greek music. So in each part of that, I would have different ensembles, right? And also in terms of the sharing among people from different countries, I loved the idea of the audience being filled with not only Americans, but Greeks and Arabic people and Hungarian people because they wanted to hear their music. But then they were sitting next to each other... And I often find myself playing, for example, Klezmer and Arabic music, Turkish and Greek music, Armenian and Turkish music. There are conflicts among those groups of people. And I think sometimes music really helps dissolve those barriers, sometimes, hopefully... Anyway, Bassam was happy to be playing on stage with a Syrian Jewish musician. And he wanted to really broadcast that, he was really proud! I remember he came over for a rehearsal and it was Hanukkah, and he was so excited to light the Hanukkah candles with me. It was so cute! But yeah, I think music does have that way, I think hearing music, talking about different sides of the brain, different parts of the brain, we can bypass the opinions and the political stuff and the bias and the prejudices and we can go right to the heart with the music.

Maggie: Well, and after all these years of you studying and playing in a multitude of styles, what do you feel is your music? And here I'm talking about the genetic memory connection, like do you have a sense of... "Ah, I'm playing my music."

Beth: That's really good! So I remember when I played with the Klezmer Conservatory Band, I remember when my name was announced on the stage and he said, "And here's Beth Cohen on the violin," and I thought, "Oh my God, that's the first time in a long time when my name matches the music." So I think that there's a lot to be said for that, I feel like I keep coming around again to Arabic and to Klezmer music because I feel like it's mine. Although I'm still searching. And actually around 2000, I started using a looper, an echoplex looper...

Maggie: Explain that for us.

Beth: Yeah, and actually now everybody has loopers, they have pedals they use, and at that point, I think I went to a Berklee College of Music percussion week concert and I

saw Jamey Haddad, who is I think a Lebanese-American drummer and percussionist. And he, I'll never forget this, he sat up there and he picked up a little frame drum and started playing a rhythm, and he put the drum down but the rhythm kept going. We kept hearing it. And then he picked up another one and he added another rhythm on top of that, he put that one down and that kept going. He kept adding, and I said, "Wow. I'm going to do that too." Because I think it would be really fun to do that. To add all these instruments and... So I never really quite did that except what I started to do is I improvised with the echoplex. And I would do these recordings, I'd have these recording sessions with myself and I would just play for like a minute. Make it up. And I wasn't planning any particular style or any key, any makam. I just played. Just totally me. And then when it came around after a minute, I would push overdub. And then I would play on top of what I had just played. Maybe another round, I'd play another one. And it became its own thing. And then as a single line instrument player, like a violin player, I could actually hear what kinds of harmonies I liked. That's the first time I ever did that. "Oh my goodness, I like this kind of an edgy combination of notes." And I just kept doing that, and I started collecting the ones I liked. And I did put it into an album called 'Weaving the Worlds'. Yeah... it was the first time. And I didn't expect it to be the last but I haven't done it since, and I would actually like to do some more because it's fascinating. Because we don't know as violin players, fiddle players, single-line instrument players, what our sense of harmony is that we would like to hear.

Maggie: When you were doing this, what I would call fieldwork, in Greece and Turkey and Hungary, I wanted to ask you about the attitudes towards women playing some of these instruments when it wasn't common. What was that like?

Beth: Well, when I started with the Hungarian music, when I went there, I didn't see any women playing. And I still don't actually. There might be some... there are more now. But at that time, no. And I remember, it was odd for me as a woman to be playing... to be the primas, to be the lead violin player in the Hungarian band. And in Greece I don't think I see anybody. And in Turkey, women are playing more, but they're rare, like violin players. I play the yayli tanbur, the bowed tanbur, very tall-necked thing, I honestly have not seen another woman do it. So then, mostly everybody I went to study with was very

respectful of me and in some instances, flattered that I was interested in their music. And others were just really happy to help because they saw that I was really intense about it and I could actually play what they asked me to play, which was after my years with Gerry Beal. And I think... Women don't lead these bands generally. I remember in Greece I was playing with this violinist on the Island of Andros, and his daughter was the singer of the band, and she said to me, "I'm kind of mad at my father cause I really wanna play violin and he said 'Women don't play violin'" And so she became the singer and then she saw me playing... we would alternate... this guy would play a set, then he'd take a break, and I would play the set. And he and I would do this all night long, back and forth. And she was kinda bitter about it cause she really wanted to do it. So I hope that my doing that can inspire other women to do it.

Maggie: You know it's sort of what happened, it sounds like, you know, 20-30 years ago, that was the situation with old time music and Irish music here in the states. And now it's much more even.

Beth: What about in Ireland?

Maggie: Well I haven't been there for a while, but I think a similar case... maybe less so there. Maybe I can think of more people who stand out as female fiddlers and flute players. Although it is true, cause like the concertina was seen as a woman's instrument, I don't know if that will change. I think it will change slowly, like the whole rest of the world is changing, but that just struck me by how rare it was where you were going to study. But that they were tolerant of it, and even, well sure, whenever you show a real passion in somebody else's culture and wanting to learn it, it usually goes well. People feel validated.

Beth: That's right, that's right. Although I did notice that sometimes people like the people who said they were flattered, they'd say, "Why is an American musician interested in our music?" I saw a little bit of that, but I also saw pride and happiness to share! In Turkey, everybody who I studied with was so giving and generous. And I love that, and I think it was for me, it was, once I had a vision in my life of what I wanted to

do, I felt really guided. I felt like I was set, I found all the teachers I needed to study with in these different places, I found instruments, I found people to play with, it was effortless actually - just like listening to music and learning it by ear... effortless.

Maggie: That's wonderful, what a great way to live your life! If you- I mean, the audience can't see this, but I'm looking at you, and seated behind you are, oh god, 25 instruments hanging on the wall. If you were on a desert island and you could only have one, which would you choose?

Beth: Haha! Violin! I think because I come back to my violin - because it's such a universal instrument. And all of the instruments that I have behind me... well you can't substitute the violin for any of them, actually. They all have different voices, they all have whole repertoires attached to them... but I've been able to play a lot of it on the violin. Some of it is violin music, right? And even if it's lyra, Pontic lyra I told you about, that's tuned in 4ths. What I do now is I tune my violin in 4ths. I have a lyra and I can play it, but I'm better with the violin. And I tune my violin in 4ths and I have a whole repertoire available to me. The answer is the violin, yes.

Maggie: Well, Beth before we start to wrap up, is there anything I haven't thought to ask you that you'd like to share with us?

Beth: Maggie I can't think of anything right now, I'm sure once we finish, I will think of ten things.

Maggie: Well I have one silly question to ask you to end out... what music do you dream in? If you are having a dream, what would the music be?

Beth: I love that question. That's really hard... it's hard, I have to say... I don't know, I can't answer it. Maybe it's the music that I'm playing the day before I go to sleep, maybe it's that. What I do want to say in conclusion, although there's no conclusion yet, is that there's so much to learn still, I feel. All of these traditions I've been swimming in and immersing myself in are pretty deep, and I actually just feel like a beginner. I think that's probably what I'll always feel. And I feel really honored to be able to be part of the world of the music I'm playing. It's an honor actually, and there's never a dull moment.

Maggie: Well, you're a model of lifelong learning for us all. So thank you, Beth, for joining us on Musical Connections.

Beth: Thank you, Maggie, it's been my pleasure! Thank you.