

The CD cover features a photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright reflection on the water's surface. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and some clouds. In the distance, a city skyline is visible against the horizon. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

**LEON GURVITCH
PROJECT
w/FRANK LONDON
ELDORADO**

**Leon Gurvitch Project feat. Frank London
New CD "Eldorado", Release 15. August 2010
Label Morgenland/ Harmonia Mundi**

By Howard Mandel © 2010

Eldorado is the fabled lost city of gold, legendarily at the site of Lake Guatavita in the mountains of central Colombia. But as the title for this debut album by the Leon Gurvitch Project with trumpeter Frank London, "Eldorado" conveys multiple connotations, each enriching the meaning and enjoyment of the music here.

Eldorado might be thought of as Minsk, capital of Belarus, where pianist-composer Gurvitch was born and gained his classical education as well as his love of klezmer, Russian and Oriental ethnic "folk" musics -- or Berlin, where he first met Frank London (a New Yorker central to the "downtown" scene of radical Jewish music) for concerts leading to their ongoing collaboration. It could be at a mythic crossroads where quirky post-bebop voicings and moody Afro-Caribbean "Latin" airs blow through the joyful, propulsive freylekhs of Central/Eastern Europe's Ashkenazi. It may be the hot spot where virtuosic instrumentalists embrace the freedoms of jazz, or on the high plain of artful writing and inspired improvisation that all musicians aspire to each time they perform and that listeners are sure they've discovered when music penetrates to thrill their souls.

Is there an Eldorado, or is it simply one of the many imagistic ideas that flow from the music Gurvitch, London and the other notables of this extraordinarily cohesive ensemble conjure? Do these sonic intimations of a metropolis of wealth and beauty actually result in a real (if not geographical) place where people regardless of their backgrounds are united by the pleasures they take from compelling, live and lively sounds? Perhaps Eldorado exists as somewhere vaguely remembered, just beyond reach or just about to be arrived at and made accessible to all who approach.

These thoughts are generated by the 11 multi-faceted works Gurvitch et al lay down in their recording debut. Still more possibilities may occur, because as these musicians -- *klezmers*, meaning "vessels of song", to be sure -- spin out their interwoven, interactive parts, sparks fire in the mind as if leaping from the melodies, countermelodies, lyrics, harmonies and rhythms. It's like the good-natured demons of Asmodeus have come to cavort.

The world is, of course, lucky klezmer survives at all much less thrives today, and we're luckier still that exemplars of this Jewish-identified secular style emerge from its historic homes, places like Minsk. Leon Gurvitch was born there in 1979, around the same time that revival of interest in klezmer's age-old mix of themes out of Poland, Romania, Ukraine and the Balkan States began to percolate in North America, emerging from the unlikely environs of New England Conservatory (Boston). So Gurvitch's fascination with klezmer's tropes and possibilities developed well after the music, along with the rest of the population and culture from which it arose, was almost lost in the Holocaust. He expands upon klezmer's basics from the perspective of a piano modernist and a skilled, ambitious composer.

Serious about his studies from an early age, Gurvitch graduated from the Belarusian State Academy of Music. "There was no jazz department there yet," he

writes of his early experience, "but I always had an interest in jazz, folklore and ethnic music. I listened to records of American jazz musicians a lot." He conceived his project of creating and presenting all-original or newly arranged pieces blending aspects of the sounds that moved him in 2000, and relocated to Hamburg, where he entered its Music Academy, in 2002. Over the next six years, he enlisted a coterie of fine musicians into his Project, convening vocalist Inna Vysotska, reeds specialist Vladimir Karparov, bassist Omar Rodriguez Calvo and drummer Dimitris Christides in 2007. They've developed a repertoire of some 150 compositions, and become prominent on German and European jazz and klezmer circuits.

When the Project was scheduled at the festival Hamburger Jazztage in 2008, Gurvitch invited Frank London to join as a special guest. He knew London's big, brash, lyrical and sardonic horn from the music of the Klezmatics, the most active and adventurous band to emerge from Manhattans Lower East Side in the 1980s, reasserting and updating music of Jewish heritage. Leon wrote "From London to Berlin" especially for the Hamburger engagement. From London's complete integration and fervent participation in that work and indeed all the tracks of *Eldorado*, it's clear he was the perfect choice.

"Leon is amazing," London says. "He brings his formal Russian training to both the piano and his compositions. He has very clear ideas about what he wants -- a lot more of the record is composed than you might expect. And the band is great, one of those special ensembles in which everyone's from a different country but collaborate amazingly well, handling the complicated rhythms and tempo changes, for instance, easily. The Project is at the fore of the third or fourth generation of new Jewish jazz fusions, and I'm curious where they'll take this form in the next ten or so years."

While the future is always the question, Gurvitch and company make their *Eldorado* statements right now. The songs are graced by interlocking and/or contrasting episodes, funky ostinatos, brilliant flourishes and blazing solos, misterioso introductions (as on "Hamsin, referring to an Israeli desert wind), Weimar Republic-era Kurt Weill cabaret settings, yearning melodica (by Gurvitch), elastic bass lines (thanks to Cuban-born Rodriguez Calvo), melancholy mixed with resistance ("Kdusha," recalling Kristallnacht) and beguiling lyrics ("Talisman": Come closer and closer/Be free to go into the magic of this world). Hear London stretch, bend, smear, hammer his notes and nail his phrases; Karparov's smouldering clarinet on "Baruch Elokeinu," smokey tenor sax obligatto to Vysotska's melismatic scat vocal on "Talisman" and his racing soprano sax on "Die Hexe"; Gurvitch's subtle touch on Fender Rhodes and grandly sweeping piano climax on the Sephardic-related "Fiestele" and the colorful percussive touches of Christides throughout. Knowing that this record is the debut of not only a band but its leader, be astonished at its mature and coherent weaving of diverse people and styles into a persuasive whole.

"I don't consider myself to be purely a jazz musician," Leon Gurvitch says. "Jazz is a genre that's had great impact on me, particularly the music of Ellington and Brubeck. On the other side, I am very much influenced by Ravel, Shostakovich and Strawinsky. Last but not least, my music is influenced by my Russian-Jewish roots in the form of folklore which I try to reconsider and implement in my music." True,

those elements are all discernable in the music he's created, but the successful realization of his Project suggests something more. The Leon Gurvitch Project featuring Frank London has attained a long and widely desired goal. They envision and lead us into *Eldorado*.

Howard Mandel is president of the American Jazz Journalists Association, the author of *Future Jazz* and senior editor of *The Billboard Illustrated Encyclopedia of Jazz and Blues*. He is a New York-based writer, editor, author, and producer for National Public Radio. For more than 30 years, he covered jazz, blues and new and unusual musics for newspapers, magazines and websites. He teaches at New York University and elsewhere and consults for various arts organizations.

Tracking list:

1. From London to Berlin (8:00)
2. Agizn Parovoz (8:26)
3. Hamsin (8:19)
4. Belz (6:45) *
5. Barukh Elokeinu (6:41) **
6. Spiel & Tanz (5:37)
7. Kdusha (7:18)
8. Eldorado (7:02)
9. Talisman (8:17) ***
10. Die Hexe (3:45) ****
11. Fiestele (7:40)

ALL COMPOSITIONS & ARRANGEMENTS BY LEON GURVITCH ©

* Music: Alexander Olshanetsky/Lyrics: Jacob Jacobs/Arrangement: Leon Gurvitch

** Traditional/Leon Gurvitch

*** Lyrics by Inna Vysotska

**** Traditional/Leon Gurvitch

Line up:

Leon Gurvitch - Piano, Fender Rhodes, Melodica

Frank London – Trumpet, Fluegelhorn

Inna Vysotska – Vocal

Vladimir Karparov – Tenor/Sopran Saxophon, Clarinet

Omar Rodriguez Calvo - Contrabass

Dimitris Christides – Drums, Percussion

Recorded in Berlin, Germany. 17.-18. July 2009

Mixed & Mastered by Rainer Robben, Berlin AudioCue Tonlabor

www.leon-gurvitch.com