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On the confluence of Klezmer and Moldovan music: a short review of some of the writings of dr. Walter Zev Feldman

Jan 17, 2023 — by Ludovica Punzi Punzi in Written Word

by Peter Lippman



A synagogue in Chișinău, the capital of Moldova – photo: Peter Lippman

In a relatively recent period of the development of klezmer music, the klezmer genre came under the influence of Moldovan music. This is just one corner of klezmer history, but one that's very important to the last couple centuries of its trajectory.

The following writing draws extensively on the decades of work by Professor Walter Zev Feldman. This is a condensation of relevant points from his body of work. People can read the same sources I have read, and I encourage that (see citations below).

My goal is to provide a digest of information about what happened when Jewish musicians interacted with local ones in Moldova. I will start with a very brief background on klezmer music. I will then outline some history of Moldova, which is very important to the

development of klezmer music in that region. Finally, I will describe how Moldovan/Jewish music, as it arose in the 19th century, influenced the American stream of klezmer toward the end of that century and beyond.

Klezmer music: a very brief historical description[1]

Klezmer is the professional instrumental music of the East European Jews of the shtetls (market towns) and cities of Poland, the Russian-controlled Pale of Settlement, and eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly Galicia. Ashkenazi musicians formed professional klezmer guilds in Prague and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as early as the late 16th century. This guild formation was a social step upward from the professional situation of Jews in the German territories, where skilled work was forbidden to Jews.[2]

Elements of the klezmer genre included dance music of the European Renaissance; European Baroque; the modalities of Ashkenazi prayer, and Greek and Ottoman music.[3] Over the centuries these elements fused into a single musical style of composition and performance, which was largely unified over a very wide geographical area.[4]

By the 18th century klezmer music became a hereditary profession, and the musicians involved even constituted a caste. In a sense, klezmer in the shtetls resembled Romani music in the Balkans, in that it constituted a different repertoire from that of the dominant ethnicities around them.[5] This is consistent with the overall independence of Eastern European Jewish musical repertoires.[6]

The fact that there was a large, concentrated Jewish population in the areas in question, and that they were segregated in various ways from the mainstream (mostly Christian) population, contributed to this development of a separate, klezmer repertoire. In addition, the hereditary aspect of the profession helped a specific repertoire to be passed on from one generation to the next. In some of the areas where they were active, klezmorim (the plural of “klezmer”) constituted the dominant or only class of professional musicians. There were Hasidic dynasties that retained their own klezmer ensembles.

String ensembles built around tsimbl (hammered dulcimer) and violin were dominant from the beginning of klezmer music until the 1870s, when brass and woodwinds were added, leading to the development of larger orchestras.[7] The wedding was the centerpiece of klezmer creativity in manifold expressions,[8] but other events on and off the Jewish calendar were also occasions for music. And dance music was only one part of the repertoire; there were also varieties of ritual and listening pieces.

In his writings, Professor Feldman provides an important breakdown of the total repertoire of klezmorim into four categories:

Co-territorial music: Local non-Jewish dances were played by klezmorim for non-Jewish and for some Jewish communities. This material was almost never composed by klezmorim. For example, they would play mazurkas in a major key for the Poles, and in a minor key for Jews.[9]

Cosmopolitan: This repertoire contained western and central European couple dances such as quadrilles, polkas, and waltzes, played (but not composed) by klezmorim for Jews and non-Jews.[10]

The above two repertoires should not be considered as “klezmer music,” as they were almost never composed by the klezmorim themselves.

Core music: Music played and composed for Jews by Jews. It included dances, ritual music, and listening music at weddings and other *simkhes* (celebrations).[11]

Transitional: This category contains dance and non-dance repertoire including zhok, volekhl, sirba, ange or honga (from Romanian “hangu”), doina, and bulgarish. These forms are adapted from Moldavian genres, and this is the only significant group of melodies with non-Jewish names in the klezmer repertoire.

The difference between this transitional repertoire and the co-territorial material is that with the transitional material, klezmorim assimilated Moldavian elements into their more old-fashioned (core) genres.[12] Not only were the Romanian genre names retained, but also the choreographic forms. From the 19th century on, this kind of fusion had no other similar example in Jewish music in Eastern Europe.[13]

For most of its history, the word “klezmer” referred only to the musician, and not the music. The semantic crossover took place in the mid-1970s during the beginning of the revitalization of klezmer music among the post-WWII generation.

Some historical background on Moldova

Present-day Moldova, a former Soviet republic, is the area where much of the action relevant to this story took place. You hear the terms “Moldova” and “Moldavia,” variably, [14] as the two are sometimes used interchangeably. Today, “Moldova,” usually refers to the former Soviet republic, and “Moldavia” refers to the adjacent region in eastern Romania.

During the medieval period there were two Danubian Romanian principalities, Wallachia and Moldavia.^[15] Wallachia came under Ottoman domination in the 1400s, and Moldavia in 1511.^[16] By this time Romanians had settled in the previously Slavic- and Turkish-dominated region between the Prut and Dniester rivers, much of which comprised the region known as Bessarabia after a Kumanic nobleman named Besarab.^[17]

During Ottoman rule Bessarabia was part of Moldavia. This changed in 1812, when the Russian Empire took control of the part of Moldavia east of the Prut River (leaving the larger portion of Moldavia still under the Ottomans). After the Russian revolution a century later, the Soviet Republic of Moldavia was formed in 1924. This contained only the Tiraspol region and a small area from adjacent Ukraine, with Bessarabia absorbed back into Romania. After World War II most of Bessarabia was joined to the Moldavian Soviet Republic, but with parts of its northern and southern ends given to Ukraine. When this republic gained independence in 1992 it took its original name, Moldova.



A memorial in Chișinău to the victims of the World War II ghetto in that city – photo: Peter Lippman

What happened in Moldova

Ashkenazi Jews, and some Sephardim, were already well-settled in Ottoman-controlled Bessarabia/Moldova by the early 18th century, where they lived among Romanian speakers, Greeks, Turks, Tatars, Gagauz, and other ethnicities.^[18] After the Russian annexation, a significant influx of Jews from Ukraine and Galicia took place. Jews became a substantial component of the urban population. By the end of the 19th century they constituted 50% of the urban population of Moldova, and as much as 80% in some towns.^[19] In this period Bulgarians migrated into the southern part of Moldova as well.

Klezmorim were active in Ottoman-controlled Moldova at least a century before the Russian annexation of the eastern portion of that territory.^[20] The musicians' guild under the Ottomans was non-denominational, so Jews joined the dominant Romanian-speaking musicians known as *lăutari*—mostly Roma—and developed a lively and enduring collaboration that included local Greeks as well.

It was not unusual for *lăutari* to play in Jewish bands, and sometimes vice-versa. Feldman mentions one klezmer band that was run by a Romani musician.^[21] It came to the point that many klezmer and *lăutarmusicians* were “bi- or tri-lingual,” speaking Yiddish, Romanian, and Greek.^[22]

The growing, close musical associations between Jewish klezmorim and the Romani *lăutari* had implications pertaining to social status. On one hand, in the 17th and 18th centuries Jews came as free people to Ottoman-ruled Moldova. And even in the first half of the 19th century after Russia took over, there was less discrimination against them in that region than in other parts of the Russian Empire. Meanwhile, for centuries the Roma had been enslaved in Ottoman Moldova, and then in Russian-controlled Moldova, well into the 19th century. Some of the *lăutari* held slave status. So their association with free Jews was felt to be a social step upward.^[23]

In the 18th and 19th centuries the musical collaboration included not only Greeks, Jews, and Romanian speakers, but also Turks. Turkish influence was certainly present in Moldova, but there was ongoing trade—including cattle exportation to Istanbul—between Moldova and the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Feldman provides an intriguing account from the early 17th century of the travels of the Moldovan “cowboys” and their music-infused celebrations upon arriving to Istanbul with their herds.^[24] Along with commercial goods, melodies, modes, and rhythms traveled back and forth between Istanbul and Moldova, shared among the four ethnicities.

The interaction of Turks, Greeks, Moldovan *lăutari*, and klezmorim in this context led to a vibrant mix of tunes and dances, prominent among them the butchers' *hasapiko* (Greek,

from the Turkish “*kasap*,” for “butcher”). This interchange took place well before the klezmer/lăutar transitional genre developed, but the material stemming from it constituted an important influence on the genre. [25] If you hear similarities between Greek and klezmer music, chances are it is because of this development.

It is in Moldova, in this time, that the dynamic of the transitional repertoire in klezmer music is well illustrated. The doina, replacing the earlier Ottoman-derived taksim, is a non-dance contribution to the transitional repertoire.[26] One of the best examples of crossover from the music of the lăutari into klezmer is the south Bessarabian genre originally known as “bulgărească,” which was called “bulgarish” in Yiddish, and later shortened to “bulgar.”

The term “bulgărească” implies a Bulgarian influence, and documentation of the existence of the genre dates back to the early 19th century, predominantly in Bessarabia. This suggests a musical crossover resulting from the influx of Bulgarians into that region after the Russian annexation. The bulgărească/bulgar is related to another transitional genre, the *sirbe*. Both contain triplets against a 2/4 meter, reminiscent of the Bulgarian *pravo*. The *sirbe* employs straight triplets, while the bulgar adds a well-known syncopated rhythm.[27]

In the course of the 19th century, the bulgar became integrated into the regional klezmer repertoire. Melodies containing triplets were rare in the core klezmer repertoire, so this element, and the bulgar dance itself, were parts of a new transitional repertoire. Feldman explains that a genre is “transitional” rather than “co-territorial” when it has taken further steps toward adoption into the core repertoire, creating a new hybrid. This is demonstrated by the fact that klezmorim so thoroughly assimilated elements of the bulgărească that they were composing bulgars of their own, with limited melodic input from the music of the lăutari—while other klezmer compositions remained quite close to the Moldovan originals.[28]

Furthermore, unlike the co-territorial material, the transitional material came to be known among Jewish communities quite a distance from Moldova.

Based on research by the Moldovan ethnomusicologist Vasile Chiseliță, Feldman also points out that the transition was a two-way phenomenon, with Jewish musical forms migrating into the lăutari repertoire as well; he writes of a “mixed...lăutar instrumental repertoire with two distinct branches – Judaized Moldavian dance genres for the Jews, and Moldavianized Jewish genres for the Moldavian Christians.”[29] Among the Jewish

core dances that made the transition into the lăutari repertoire were freylekhs, khosidl, and sher.[30]

In his discussion of the transitional repertoire, Feldman quotes a fellow musicologist as saying that “the most important non-Jewish source for klezmer music was Moldavian music.”[31] He attributes the richness of the Moldavian contribution to the region’s geographic proximity to the Balkans, and Crimea, and of course to the earlier Greek and Ottoman factors mentioned above.

The transitional repertoire that developed in Moldova gradually spread among klezmorim to other areas of Jewish settlement, especially into Galicia and parts of Ukraine.[32] In this scenario I find a parallel with the rich culture of New Orleans, with its diverse contributing elements, which had an explosive effect on mainstream American music, and thereby on worldwide music. It is hard to imagine what music in North America would be like without that influence, and the same could be said for the influence of Moldovan music on klezmer in the 19th century and beyond.



A traditional market in Chișinău – photo: Peter Lippman

What happened in North America

With the great immigration of Ashkenazi Jews to North America, from 1881 on, came many klezmorim. They came from klezmer dynasties in the old country, and they carried on their family-based musical functions abroad in the newly located Jewish communities. They brought their repertoires with them, but as new conditions greeted them in the new home, the repertoire changed as well.

For one, the faster pace of life shortened the wedding cycle, gradually erasing the non-dance repertoire. Secondly, by the mid-20th century, if not earlier, the bulgar became the dominant dance, outstripping the majority of dances in the core repertoire.^[33] The freylekhs and shers remained, but the khosidl all but disappeared. The solo and competitive dances, which had not been part of the now dominant transitional material, vanished.^[34] Feldman states that the distinction between the core klezmer repertoire and the transitional one “collapsed between 1930 and 1950.”^[35] Through this process of simplification, the historic body of Ashkenazi dance became impoverished in North America.

Even before World War I, bulgars were dominant in the documentation of klezmer in the US. Kostakowsky’s 1916 collection, the *International Hebrew Wedding Music*, overwhelmingly presents bulgars. In contrast, while these dances were not unknown in European klezmer sources, they were not so prominent. The renowned musicologist Moshe Beregovsky, working in Ukraine in the early Soviet period, was evidently ambivalent about the bulgar and other transitional klezmer dances. He chose to include in his klezmer anthology only a small portion of the transitional repertoire that was available to him from local klezmer manuscripts. ^[36]

However, in America the popularity of bulgars grew to the point that musicians in the US were composing new bulgars by the dozen. Not only Moldovan klezmorim were playing bulgars; musicians from all the way to Belarus were caught up in the trend.

Dave Tarras, one of the foremost klezmorim of all time in the US, was born in Podolia, Ukraine, to a well-regarded klezmer dynasty. Before his arrival in the US in 1921, he received training from musicians in the northern Bessarabian city of Edineț.^[37] For decades during his professional life in the US, he created new bulgars that became classics and helped shape the sound of klezmer in its 20th-century heyday. Together with other musicians, Tarras incorporated non-bulgar modes, chord structures, and rhythms into what continued to be called bulgar, creating a new hybrid genre.^[38]

Meanwhile, back in Europe

With the unification of an independent Romania in 1878, after separation from the waning Ottoman Empire, there was a growing official promotion of Romanian village folklore as a national expression. Rural Romanian genres became more present in the repertoire of Moldovan Jews and Christians alike—a development that has very little evidence of taking place before the last one-third of the 19th century.[39]

Later, after the fall of the Russian Empire, the new Soviet regime abolished many anti-Semitic restrictions on Jewish life, allowing the opening of opportunities for Jewish musicians in the Soviet Union. A similar thing took place with new freedoms for Jews in North America, and it was not unusual for younger members of a klezmer dynasty to branch out into jazz, classical, and pop music, leaving klezmer behind. This, together with the aging of the immigrant generation of klezmorim—and the Holocaust—contributed to the waning of klezmer as a genre in the post-WWII period both in Europe and North America.

In Moldova itself, other factors contributed to changes in the mainstream of folk music. Given that klezmorim had been influential musicians in the region for at least a couple of centuries, the influence of their music on that of the läutari in that region was so strong that Jewish forms were clearly present in Moldovan music. In the period of Soviet domination of Moldova, anti-Semitic attitudes of the cultural arbiters at the top of the Moldovan regime were such that performance of native Moldovan music, with its evident Jewish content, was discouraged in favor of Romanian music coming from Bucharest. Feldman has observed that this prejudice and suppression of local Jewish-tinged material even extended to the repertoire of the Moldovan folkdance ensembles.[40] Furthermore, with the continuing post-1970s emigration of Jews and increasing influence of musical styles from Romania, by the late 20th century Romanian Romani material also contributed to the eclipse of the earlier Moldovan klezmer/läutarifusion.[41]

Peter Lippman is active in Klezmer and Balkan music in Seattle. He founded Seattle's first klezmer group, *The Mazl Tov Klezmer Band*, in 1980. He visited Moldova in 2005, and he currently plays with *Lox Stork & Bugle*. Mr. Lippman wishes to thank Professor Feldman for his lifetime of contribution to knowledge about klezmer as well as his close reading and assistance with the present article.

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Klezmer Music

By Peter Lippman European klezmer band, 19th century (from Odessa Jewish Museum) Klezmer is the traditional music of the East European Jews. Now a popular folk music in many parts of the world, over the centuries klezmer has experienced quite some transformations—at times almost disappearing, but then coming back with remarkable resiliency. Ashkenazic Jews ... [Continue reading](#)



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A couple of links about Yiddish dance:

Although Yiddish dance is beyond the scope of this article, it is entirely relevant. The preponderance of the core and transitional pieces named are dances. Given the reader's presumed interest in the meaning of klezmer music, becoming familiar with the dances behind the names is integral to understanding—and feeling—the music. See the following:

“Bulgars at Yiddish Summer Weimar 2015 Dance Ball”

Bulgars at Yiddish Summer Weimar 2015 Dance Ball



View dancers at this annual festival of Yidishkayt dancing the bulgar, led by Professor Feldman.

“Zev Feldman. Khosidl (instructional video) || Зев Фелдман. Хосидл”

Zev Feldman. Khosidl (instructional video) || Зев Фелдман. Хосидл



This is a 2017 class and interview given by Professor Feldman in Moscow, where he discusses the connection of solo movement, gesture and musical phrasing.

OTHER RESOURCES:

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Jewish Instrumental Folk Music, Second Edition (edited by Mark Slobin, Robert Rothstein, Michael Alpert, revised by Kurt Bjorling) www.muziker.org musical services, Evanston IL USA, 2015

See also the web site “Moisei Beregovsky and His Archive of Jewish Music” [here](#).

The Klezmer Institute: Advances the study, preservation, and performance of Ashkenazic Jewish expressive culture through research, teaching, publishing and programming:
<https://klezmerinstitute.org/>

“The art of the klezmer: improvisation and ornamentation in the commercial recordings of New York clarinetists Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras 1922-1929”
Doctoral thesis, Joel E. Rubin, City University of London, 2001
<https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/8393/>

New York Klezmer in the Early Twentieth Century: The Music of Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras, by Joel Rubin. University of Rochester Press, 2020

Ivan Lipaev’s 1904 essay “On Jewish Orchestras”

<https://klezmerinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Lipaev-Jewish-Orchestras-v-1-6.pdf>

“The Senescu Family: Their Musical Path from Moldavia to America”
by Paul Gifford <https://klezmerinstitute.org/senescu-family-orchestra/>

[1] For a somewhat fuller (but still brief) history of klezmer music, see “Klezmer Music,” Peter Lippman, 2021. <https://earlymusicseattle.org/klezmer/>

[2] Personal correspondence with Professor Feldman, January 2, 2023.

[3] “Klezmorim Between East and West,” Feldman, p.1.

[4] Personal correspondence with Professor Feldman, January 2, 2023. See also

“Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 84.

[5] “Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 88.

[6] “Musical Fusion and Allusion in the Core and the Transitional Klezmer Repertoires,” Feldman, p. 142.

[7] *Klezmer: Music, History and Memory*, Oxford University Press, 2016, by Walter Zev Feldman, p. 22.

[8] Ibid.; detailed descriptions of Jewish wedding practices and the involvement of the klezmorim abound in this book, for example, in Chapter 5: “The Jewish Wedding and Its Musical Repertoire,” p. 137-161.

[9] Ibid., p. 208.

[10] “Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 96.

[11] Ibid., p. 209.

[12] Ibid. p. 92-95. Feldman calls this process “nativization” or “hybridization”—see “Musical Fusion and Allusion in the Core and the Transitional Klezmer Repertoires,” Feldman, p. 158.

[13] Personal correspondence with Professor Feldman, January 2, 2023.

[14] Feldman writes that “Moldova” is the Romanian term, and “Moldavia” is the Russianized variant. “Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 84.

[15] See map: <https://romaniatourism.com/romania-maps/wallachia-moldavia-transylvania-map.html>.

[16] *Klezmer: Music, History and Memory*, Feldman, p. 9.

[17] “Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 84.

[18] In the 18th century an important factor drawing Jews into Moldova was the establishment in 1711, on the authority of the Ottoman government, of the rule of the “Phanariot” Greek princes (an Ottoman Christian elite) over the Danubian Principalities. In an attempt to build up the economy of Moldova, these new rulers encouraged the immigration of Jews and Greeks—Personal correspondence with Professor Feldman, January 2, 2023. See also “Klezmer Tunes for the Christian Bride,” Feldman, p. 7.

[19] “Klezmer Tunes for the Christian Bride,” Feldman, p. 3

[20] “Musical Fusion and Allusion in the Core and the Transitional Klezmer Repertoires,” Feldman, p. 153.

[21] “Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 98.

[22] “Klezmer Tunes for the Christian Bride,” Feldman, p. 4.

[23] Correspondence with Professor Feldman, January 3, 2023.

[24] Ibid., p. 9-10

[25] Personal correspondence with Professor Feldman. See also *Klezmer: Music, History*

and Memory, Feldman, p. 357.

[26] “Klezmer Tunes for the Christian Bride,” Feldman, p. 12.

[27] Ibid., p. 98-99.

[28] Ibid., p. 94. Further analysis of the Kiselgoff klezmer manuscripts—currently being undertaken through the Klezmer Institute—will reveal both types of transitional material: those very close to the original Moldovan, and those with fresh melodic content.

[29] Ibid., p. 11.

[30] Ibid., p. 12-13.

[31] “Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 95

[32] “Musical Fusion and Allusion in the Core and the Transitional Klezmer Repertoires,” Feldman, p. 143.

[33] Ibid., p. 96

[34] Ibid., also personal correspondence with Professor Feldman, January 2, 2023.

[35] Ibid., p. 87.

[36] Ibid., p. 96-97. As Feldman has noted, “The largest available corpus of bulgar melodies from Eastern Europe are the klezmer manuscripts collected in late Tsarist Ukraine by Z. Kisselgoff.” (Personal correspondence, January 2, 2023.)

[37] “Klezmer Tunes for the Christian Bride,” Feldman, p. 11.

[38] “Bulgărească /Bulgarish/Bulgar” in *American Klezmer*, Feldman, p. 106-110.

[39] “Musical Fusion and Allusion in the Core and the Transitional Klezmer Repertoires,” Feldman, p. 153.

[40] “Klezmer Tunes for the Christian Bride,” Feldman, p. 32.

[41] “Klezmer Tunes for the Christian Bride,” Feldman, p. 6.

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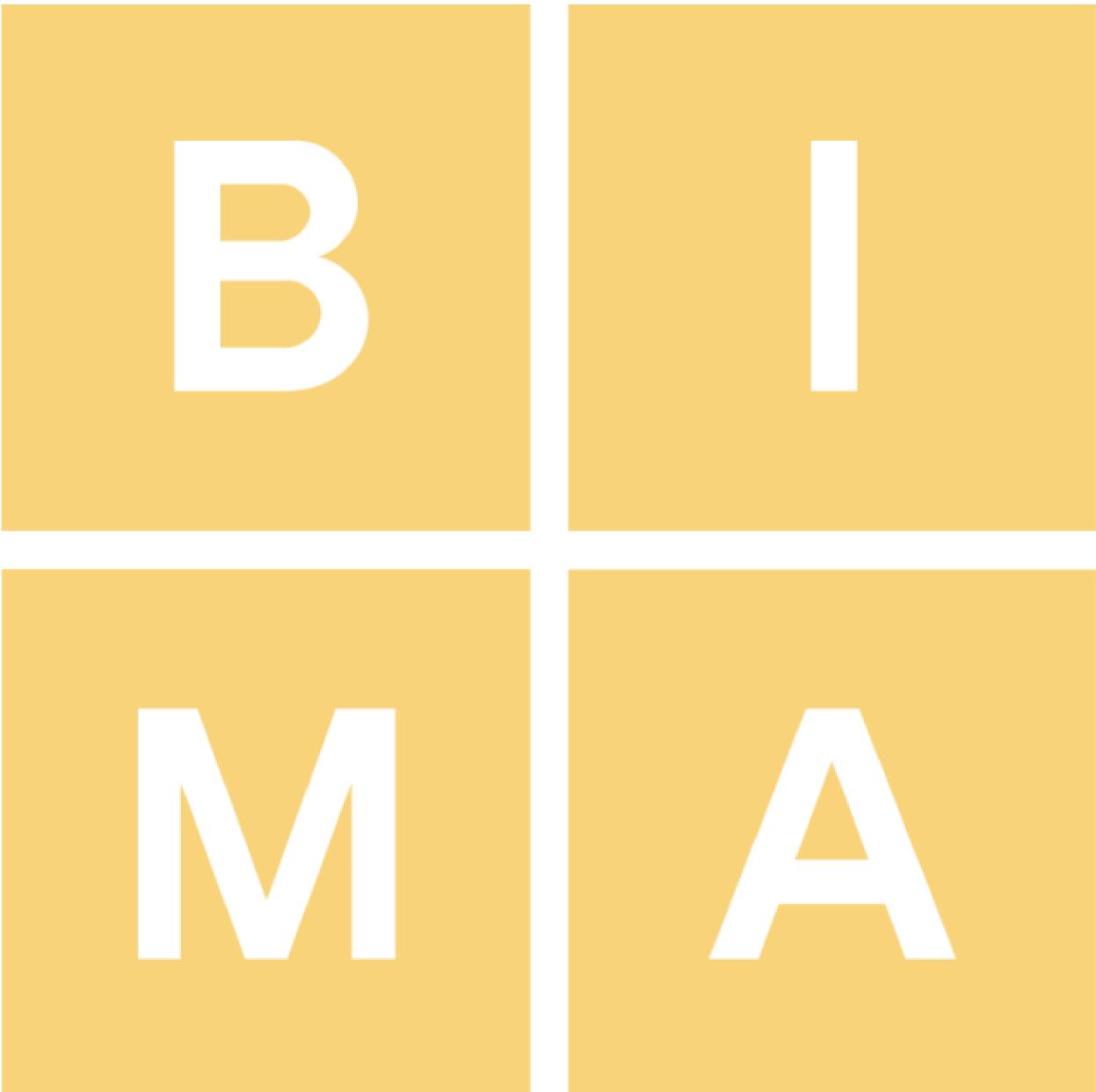


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