

*Piros karaván* (Red Caravan), building on the success of its initial staging at Budapest's Operetta Theatre to win further plaudits in a string of foreign productions. Csemer was also the guiding spirit behind the creation of a Gypsy Theatre Company in the mid 1990s, which is not linked to an actual theatre building but might serve as the kernel for a future venture of that kind. He strives to nurture young Gypsy talents systematically, both preparing them for college entry and helping them with their subsequent development. Currently, what is now the College of Dramatic and Film Art has three Roma youngsters amongst its students. Last but not least amongst the initiatives in this field, particular mention should be made of the initial successes that Béla Balogh achieved, before his untimely death, in trying, with funding from the Soros Foundation, to establish a dance theatre company.

## Music

### “Gypsy music”

So-called Hungarian “Gypsy music” is not the music of the Roma people themselves but the term which is almost universally used for a musical form and style that evolved in Hungary during the early part of the nineteenth century – a misnomer that incidentally fuelled what can only be regarded as the myth that Gypsies are born musicians who brought their profession as music-makers with them on their trek from India.<sup>7</sup> Closer acquaintance with their actual history suggests that music can only have given a livelihood to very few Roma in Hungary before the nineteenth century. The decisive change – one that was eventually to produce a remarkable measure of recognition and respect for an élite stratum of the community – came with the altered mode of life and need to find new ways of making a livelihood that were forced on the Roma population in the wake of the ousting of the Ottoman Turks from Hungary and Austria's subsequent imposition of the policies dictated by Maria Theresa and Joseph II. The opportunity was presented by the emergence of a new musical genre, the *verbunkos*, or recruiting dance, which coincided with the awakening of a sense of national identity amongst Hungarians. The dynamic behind this has been neatly summarised by Bálint Sárosi: “The coming to power of the gypsies in music was undoubtedly helped by society's contemptuous and condemning attitude towards entertainers. What counted as humiliation and degeneration for those more strictly belonging within the framework of society meant for the gypsies a way of entering society and the best way towards success. By the end of the eighteenth century, with the first successful appearance of the gypsy bands they had really reached the stage where music-making became the highest of gypsy occupations (it used to be the craft of smithery) and the occupation which was most attractive to the gypsies themselves.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The most recent of many studies that examine the issue is Gábor Havas: ‘Hagyományos mesterségek’ (‘Traditional occupations’), in: *A magyarországi romák* (The Roma of Hungary). Ed. István Kemény. Budapest: Press Publika, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Bálint Sárosi: *Gypsy Music*. Budapest: Corvina Press, 1978, p.60. Despite its stilted English translation, Sárosi's book remains the most complete survey of the various aspects of the professional instrumental tradition of Hungary's Musician Gypsy group.

Whereas late eighteenth-century Hungarian censuses refer to fewer than 1,600 musician Gypsies, those of a century later recorded 17,000. Occupying every step of a social ladder that stretched from lowly, part-time rural musicians to the members of internationally famous bands, these most successful and highly esteemed Gypsies of any era wrote their place in Hungarian history. Gypsy bands were amongst the troops who fought in the country's 1848-49 War of Independence and it was their music, above all, which helped keep a spirit of national resistance alive in the Hungarian population until the rapprochement with Austria in 1867, when the signing of the Compromise established the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. By the turn of the century, the fashion that the gentry adopted of merry-making whilst in their cups to the lachrymose plaints of Magyar song, or *nóta*, raised the status of this instrumentally based form of “Gypsy” music to a veritable cult. The influence of Gypsy bands also inspired prominent Classical composers across Europe, from Joseph Haydn onwards, to incorporate elements of the *verbunkos* style into their compositions, whilst Musician Gypsies performed in virtually every country on the continent, invariably returning home as fêted celebrities. Not a few non-Gypsy musicians found it helpful to have it rumoured that their brilliance could only be of Gypsy origin, whilst Franz Liszt supposed – wrongly as it transpired – that this “Gypsy” music was in fact the folk music of Hungary. Out of this there emerged a Gypsy “aristocracy” that, although it was eventually to find itself in slow long-term decline, was able to retain a respectable position in society and gain a fair measure of material success right up to the middle of the twentieth century. On Bálint Sárosi's own estimates, there were still 7,000-8,000 Gypsies making a professional living from music even as late as 1968.

By the 1980s, however, the changes that were under way in society were beginning to turn interest in the style cultivated by the Musician Gypsies into a decidedly minority taste in Hungary itself. As a result, many bands strove to obtain work abroad, playing in the restaurants that catered primarily to Hungarian emigrant communities, with Germany and Austria as the preferred goals, though excellent musicians with a bit of luck on their side managed to secure spells in Canada, the USA and even as far afield as Australia. By the mid-Eighties, however, even these opportunities began to dry up altogether, particularly in competition with the trivial costs of using recorded music. With the wave of privatisation of all dining and hotel enterprises after the change in régime in Hungary, nearly all those who were left in the profession found themselves unemployed virtually overnight. Their tragedy was that they had never needed any skills apart from their musical talents. A number were driven by necessity to try their hands as entrepreneurs or other forms of work, but for men who had been accustomed to being looked up to as the aristocrats of Roma society it was deeply humiliating to be reduced to working as unskilled labourers, and indeed many were crushed mentally as a result.

Once they had drawn on whatever savings they had managed to put aside in better times, the plight of these musicians became truly desperate. The younger ones amongst them have tried, as a last resort, to seek long-term engagements playing abroad and even

opportunities to emigrate permanently. In the last few years, in fact, it is Musician Gypsies who have made up the bulk of the Roma leaving Hungary. Their destinations are still mainly those cities around the world which support a sizeable colony of more elderly Hungarian émigrés who still nostalgically indulge themselves in their favourite *nóta* repertoire, but even that audience is naturally thinning with the passage of time. Those musicians who stay at home find at best occasional jobs playing in their formerly dependable haunts: restaurants, hotel lounge bars, night clubs and the like. In response to the crisis, the cream amongst them decided to put a brave face on it and band together as the ‘Budapest Gypsy Orchestra 100’ – a unique, 100-strong ensemble which has toured the world, from Paris to Sydney, with notable success.

That leads on to the subject of Gypsy musicians who choose to switch from that entertainment background to become distinguished players of mainstream classical music. Probably the best-known of these are the virtuoso cimbalom player, Aladár Rácz, who taught Stravinsky to play the instrument and inspired him to write various compositions for it in the 1910s, and pianist György Cziffra, whose interpretations of Liszt and Chopin had many admirers not just in France, where he made his home after 1956, but throughout the world. Violinist László Kótté and cellist Ede Banda are among others who are well known particularly to the Hungarian public. Nowadays there is a rising generation of young artists coming from families that for generations made their living as professional musicians in the *verbunkos*-based style but have grown up in an almost exclusively classical music tradition. Whilst personal inclinations clearly have an important part in this, in some cases the parents, concerned at the precipitate decline in the appeal of “Gypsy” music, have refused to allow children who were determined to make careers as musicians to take up that genre. The outcome is an increasingly impressive number of young Roma musicians who have been trained to the highest standards and now enjoy a social status quite different from that of their parents. Such is the influx of these highly talented youngsters into the classical music world that most of the students who are now gaining instruction on certain instruments at the Budapest Academy of Music are from a Roma background. That said, it has to be pointed out that Hungary has long been turning out more trained classical musicians than the country can absorb, so that those who are unable to win positions here in symphony orchestras or as teachers – and those opportunities are increasingly rare – have to bank on their chances of making a career abroad.

Outside the fields of traditional “Gypsy” music and classical music, there are other talented individual Roma musicians who have oriented to changing musical and social tastes by cultivating other genres. Jazz has exerted a strong pull, perhaps particularly after the example set by the double-bassist Aladár Pege, who trained as a classical musician at the Budapest Academy and still teaches there, but gained a wide following in Europe as an outstanding modern jazz improviser during the late 1960s and 1970s. Other widely known jazz musicians include pianist-composer Béla Szakcsi Lakatos, saxophonist Tony Lakatos, and guitarists Gyula Babos and Ferenc Snétberger. Roma musicians are

also starting to make their marks in pop music too, a prime example being the rap group *Fekete Vonat* (‘Black Train’), who have been one of the sensations of Hungary’s youth scene in recent years.

### *Roma folk music*

Long-standing confusion over the true origins and status of the instrumental *verbunkos*-based “Gypsy” style, referred to at the beginning of this section, was linked to almost total ignorance, outside the Roma community, that a Roma traditional music even existed. Stylistically this tradition has nothing to do with the “Gypsy” genre, being essentially vocal, albeit utilising – at least in the dance song genre – a wide range of vocal effects that are imitative of instrumental sounds (so-called “mouth bass”), as well as finger clicks, hand claps, and other percussive effects drawn from kitchen utensils, such as pairs of spoons or a water jug.

As far as most Hungarians are concerned, acquaintance with this original Roma music dates back no further than the 1980s, by which time it reached them in an already partly reshaped form, which itself was a response to the shrinking number of predominantly Vlach Roma communities that still preserved the traditional music as part of their everyday lives. Though it was still strongly rooted in the conventions of the old song repertoire, this electrified version, developed by the group *Kalyi Jag* (‘Black Fire’), won a big following both inside and outside the Roma community which has continued to the present day. The success of *Kalyi Jag*’s fusion of traditional song forms and style with elements of pop music has spurred the formation of a succession of other groups, such as *Ando Drom* (‘On the Road’), *Rományi Rotá* (‘Gypsy Wheel’), *Ternipe* (‘Youth’) and *Amaro Szuno* (‘Our Dream’), to mention just a few of those who have made names for themselves not just in Hungary but also further afield.

For many of these self-taught artists, generally from the Vlach Roma community, this recognition and success have a special savour, since the Musician Roma of the instrumental “Gypsy music” were never willing to regard them as true musicians in their own right. And indeed, they typically find that they cannot live from their music but must also pursue activities as entrepreneurs and traders, though the still growing interest in their music is prompting ever more of them to choose this as a livelihood.

### **Visual arts**

The production and exhibition of works by Roma artists in Hungary essentially goes back some three decades, though its antecedents can be traced further back. Vince Horváth, a Gypsy musician living in Nyíregyháza, from childhood on whittled wood and during a spell as a World War I prisoner-of-war in Italy constructed a violin and viola as well as carving hunting-crops for landowners then, on returning home, took up instrument repairs as a hobby. After he decided in 1937 to try his hand at sculpture, he eventually found a