



FEATURE: Softer, sweeter, finer

As Amati gears up for a special evening next weekend with Roby Lakatos at the Amati Exhibition, Barnabás Kelemen, the brilliant violin star whose grandfather was a great Gypsy 'primás', tells Jessica Duchen all about the cross-currents between classical playing and the Gypsy style

By Jessica Duchen, March 23 2015

Barnabás Kelemen is a violinist whose remarkable blend of heritages has allowed him to access a wealth of musical traditions. His grandfather, Pali Pertis, was a celebrated 'primás' (Gypsy band leader) before the Second World War; his mother is a harpsichordist; and Kelemen himself, after winning third prize at the 2001 Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels and first prize at the International Violin Competition in Indianapolis in 2002, quickly rose to become a sought-after international soloist, showered with awards in his native Hungary and well beyond.

Kelemen is now a professor of violin at Cologne's Hochschule für Musik und Tanz, where former incumbents included Zakhar Bron and Viktor Tretyakov. He is also the director, together with his wife, Kalalin Kokás, of a superb chamber music festival, [Kaposfest, at Kaposvár, Hungary](#). His [Kelemen String Quartet](#), in which Kokás is second violin quartet, won the Premio Borciani Competition last year; they are regular and favourite visitors to the Wigmore Hall in London.

Despite operating at the very heart of the classical world, Kelemen maintains a powerful affinity for the Gypsy style. As the Amati Exhibition's evening with today's pre-eminent Gypsy virtuoso, Roby Lakatos, is coming up next Sunday, I asked Kelemen if he could put the Gypsy style into a little context for us.

"The first thing that comes to mind is that the changing style among classical violinists over the last 100 years was a little similar to changes in the Gypsies' playing in Hungary," Kelemen says. "In that film you can see what amazingly sensitive, very gentle and very fine playing it was, though very virtuoso too, nearer the beginning of the 20th century. If you compare this to Fritz Kreisler, Yehudi Menuhin or my big favourite, Josef Hassid, then you can also find a

parallel between violinists like Maxim Vengerov and Vadim Repin with today's famous Gypsy violin players like Jozsef Lendvay or Roby Lakatos. It's interesting to see that they also follow the waves of famous classical violinists. The Russian influence was quite strong in the second half of the 20th century, which may be partly why – but also, they are very good friends!”

The roots of this Gypsy style, he adds, go back much further, “to the 19th century, when the greatest musicians like Franz Liszt and Johannes Brahms were influenced very much by the Gypsies. Or you could go even further back to Haydn's time, when he was in Hungary many times and listened to the Gypsies.”

“Generally the folk music that Bartok and Kodály were collecting is quite different from the kind of Gypsy style that is played in restaurants until today,” says Kelemen. “But also, with the folk music that these composers were collecting, many, many times those peasants were Gypsies. Still they had nothing to do with the Gypsy musicians who were playing in restaurants in the cities.”

“I was once asked to name my ten favourite tracks online,” he adds, “so I was searching for the best possible recording of old Gypsy ensembles from the early 20th century. I was proud to say that I couldn't find anyone as good as, or better than, my grandfather! He was really at the top; they were calling him Honourable Maestro – there were only two or three Gypsy primásés who were allowed to be called that.

“In the early 1930s, there was no need to play loudly. But at the end of the 20th century this music started to travel around to world music festivals and bigger concert halls. They have to play louder and louder and faster and faster. Not that 100 years ago they were not virtuosos enough to play at the same speed; rather, there was no need to play loudly because they always played at the table, where it's very charming, creating a special atmosphere.”

Lakatos, he says, is a good friend and a musician he admires tremendously. “He's such a talent. No matter how he combines jazz with Hungarian or any type of Gypsy music – he's also influenced by Romanian Gypsy music and offbeat, asymmetric Balkan rhythms – it's overwhelming. Whenever he plays one note on the violin, you just think there is no other way of violin playing. And you don't have to be a violinist to appreciate his virtuosity. He is a showman, but not cheap at all. He has really worked very, very hard and through his family he followed from the beginning this great tradition of Gypsy violin playing and learned everything about it. It's important he has put things together that no one has done before, but all the ingredients date from this wonderful tradition, the best type of ingredients. Maybe the taste at the end is new, lovable and unique.”

Given the changes in style that have accompanied the passing of the years, and the recent programme on BBC Radio 4 that lamented “the death of Gypsy music”, can there be a future for the old-fashioned table serenades that have

enchanted visitors to central Europe over the centuries, and to Hungary particularly?

“Gypsy music used to be a privilege, with live music only in the best restaurants or at the richest people’s weddings and parties,” Kelemen explains. “This was killed by the communism. Gypsy music started to be everyone’s under socialism. The musicians were supported under the communist regime, but they had to wear these folkish clothes, these red and blue vests. This is completely not authentic! If you look at the Gypsies as they used to be, playing at parties, they were the most elegant people, always dressed at least in jackets or tuxedos, but usually in tails. My grandfather always played in tails. They had nothing to do with any Hungarian folk motif. They never used them. They were gentlemen.

“But then, at least at Hungarian restaurants there was Hungarian Gypsy music until the end of the 1980s. In the 1990s most of these were bankrupted and the new restaurants that opened offered international cuisine, more for the western tastes. Many fewer restaurant owners took care of the Gypsy musicians. For 20 years after our revolution in 1989, their situation got worse and worse until it was so bad that it couldn’t get any worse. So it stopped getting worse! Now people have started to realise that this is such a wonderful tradition that it has to be taken care of. Maybe slowly the amount of Gypsy music in restaurants is growing again, but it’s nothing like it was 100 years ago – and it’s not easy for them.

“Today’s Gypsies are sending their children, who they want to be the best violinists, to the Franz Liszt Academy and other conservatories, so it’s not any more like 100 years ago where they were learning just from the musicians and the family. Another difference is that most of them have good connections and now they are going all over the world. The best players are often on tour through Europe or on big cruise ships. They go here and there and live from gig to gig – which is actually what they always did. And me too, I am having gigs all around!”

“Now when I go to restaurants where Gypsy music is played, I know all of the musicians and they know me,” Kelemen says, “and they give me the violin and I play with them. Then I am usually playing that old-fashioned way, this very soft and sensitive manner of playing. I love to play, in an authentic place, the songs my grandfather recorded. It’s really in me that I am surrounded with this music and these players.”

“Usually I’m not playing on my own violin when I’m at a restaurant for dinner and usually these musicians’ violins are already set up for more intimate playing and less power,” Kelemen remarks. “This has lots of advantages: a sweeter sound, easier resonance and more sensitivity, with less tension. This already gives a different type of inspiration when I play. If I take out my Guarneri del Gesù, which is set up for 2-3000-seat halls to project above an orchestra to the last rows, it wouldn’t fit a Gypsy orchestra, to play in a restaurant at the tables, for my wife!

“First you sit down, have some wine and talk and eat, while they are playing – I have to be in the mood. But when I am, I try, at least, to play exactly as my grandfather played.”

Roby Lakatos and his ensemble give a special performance in cabaret-style setting at the Amati Exhibition, The Langham, London, 29 March, 7pm.