



AMATI

INTERVIEW: Bravo, Lakatos!

Roby Lakatos is a living legend, a grand violin virtuoso in the Gypsy tradition that dates back to his own ancestor, Janos Bihari. Ahead of an exceptional London performance, he tells Jessica Duchen why this music has required radical reinvention for a new century – and how he has made it happen

by Jessica Duchen, 9 March 2015

If you listen to BBC Radio 4's From Our Own Correspondent, you'll have noticed a segment last weekend called '[The Death of Gypsy Music](#)'. A report from the Balkans and Budapest explored the likelihood that the central and eastern European tradition of café music may soon be no more, due to a perfect storm of shifting fashions, piped music and economic hard times. The notion that one might go to Budapest and not be serenaded at the table by a Gypsy trio over your *palacsinta* pancakes is almost unthinkable to those who have been there and tried it.

That violin style is unmistakable: the sweet, intimate, vibrato-rich tone, the arching glissandi and kaleidoscopic expressiveness, plus those whirling, foot-tapping finales has captivated many of the greatest composers from Haydn's day onwards. Haydn himself, Paganini, Liszt, Brahms, Debussy, Ravel, Bartók, Enescu – all bear a profound impact, in one form or another, of Gypsy music. [In musical terms, the style is still described as 'Gypsy' rather than 'Roma'].

But there is one man who is busy reinventing this tradition for a new century. He is, of course, Roby Lakatos; and he can claim as his ancestor Janos Bihari, the great bandleader ("primás") who created many of the famous Gypsy melodies later appropriated by Brahms and Liszt. Mixing Gypsy style with influences from classical playing, jazz and folk musical traditions from all over the world, this remarkable musician has won a large and devoted following.

Lakatos in London

I am catching the superstar virtuoso in London the morning after his appearance with the LSO at the Barbican: he and his ensemble of piano, cimbalom, double bass, guitar and second violin joined the orchestra in pieces

ranging from Gypsy favourites like “Deux Guitares” to the theme from *Schindler’s List* – and, by way of encore, Monti’s Csardás, featuring the LSO’s concertmaster, Roman Simovic, as soloist, duetting with the Hungarian star.

Lakatos cuts an unusual figure in London’s Square Mile: the unmistakable moustache, pony tail and flamboyant dog-tooth coat all seem from another world. In person, though, he is soft-spoken, thoughtful and slightly impish. Turning 50 this year, he has become a grandfather and is increasingly a magnet for younger musicians who flock to him for inspiration.

“My father was a violinist, like all the rest of the family,” Lakatos reminisces [we talk in French; I am translating his answers]. “I was the seventh generation in which everyone was a violinist.” Anyone who imagines his forefathers eking out a living in an encampment can bin that notion: “The family was very rich and the Lakatos dynasty was always extremely famous in all regions and regimes,” he declares.

“In the First World War, the Second World War and even under the communists, they were always there. The Family Lakatos was always important for Hungary, in effect, because they were good publicity for the country. My uncle, Sándor Lakatos, was the most famous violinist in our family – he played and was known everywhere, as my father was too. During the communist regime travelling was no problem, since they were the best advert for Hungary wherever they went.”

Here is Uncle Sándor:

Magnifique!

Lakatos played in his father’s café orchestra in Budapest from the age of nine. “We performed every evening – in that era it was the fashion that all the children played in orchestras. I was lucky because I played with the best, the greatest musicians. Today it’s not the same because these environments don’t exist any more, and where they do it’s no longer possible for the young ones to play because there are laws [about child labour]. At that time it was still possible – I think my generation was the last. I learned many, many, many things, and often I played in front of the orchestra as primás. It was *magnifique!* Now it’s more difficult.”

When he left Hungary, Lakatos realised that the coffee house music in which he had been steeped as a child was starting to be forgotten. “Therefore if I wanted to do something to renew this music a bit, I realised I had to change the conception of the instrument and the ensemble.”

Instead of the traditional Hungarian formation with cello, clarinet and viola, he introduced piano and guitar, besides the cimbalom. “With that formation I find it doesn’t matter what you play because it is more flexible.” It has its own difficulties, he points out: the piano and cimbalom can be awkward partners because a cimbalom cannot be perfectly in tune. That combination

necessitates special arrangements of pieces so that the two can play together.

"I studied a lot of classical music before, when I was a child, and as a pupil at the Bela Bartók Conservatory in Budapest. Later I felt it was necessary to mix Gypsy music with classical music and also jazz – I adore jazz and played a lot of jazz when I was little. I tried a bit to manipulate the style – and what came out was a style that's very interesting and a little dangerous."

Essentially, he took *musique tzigane* out of the café and on to the stage: this meant, he says, that he had to invent ways to rethink the music for an audience that was seated in a theatre and paying attention to the show, rather than drinking coffee and talking. "So that's the point for me and that's my particular style which people recognise, the special *sonorité Lakatos*."

"A good film that is always unfurling..."

"In Hungary they didn't want to accept it at first," he adds. "I had a lot of problems, because they didn't understand. I mix all the styles, it doesn't matter what – I play music that's Hungarian, Balkan, Romanian, Russian, Mexican, Spanish, Flamenco, French... This mix is more interesting because there is always something new – it's like a good film that is always unfurling. Now everyone is used to it. It's a new style that's recognised everywhere and I'm very happy about that. Wherever I take it I meet young people, a new generation, who are following this style. In Hungary too, the young people try always to play this way, and that's very nice for me. *Et voilà!*"

It took a while to become established commercially, he adds, because the record shops did not know where to put his discs. His music could not easily be categorised, and one moniker presented by a Belgian journalist, "unorthodox Gypsy fusion", captured the nature of the music without necessarily helping to find a suitable pigeon-hole on the shelves. "In the end they put me under 'Violinists'," he smiles. With influences ranging from David Oistrakh to Miles Davis, and a determination not to "imitate" music, his expert ensemble – many of them also from distinguished musical dynasties – have the expertise to leap from genuine classical style to jazz to Flamenco in the twinkling of a cimbalom beater. What keeps them at the top of the tree is the sheer excellence of their playing.

Strings attached

Lakatos says he is equally happy performing in a concert hall or a jazz club such as Ronnie Scott's; he changes his repertoire to suit the setting. "In Ronnie Scott's it would be a little more rhythmic and a bit crazier," he says, with a grin. "It's totally different; in that setting I can see people and their reactions right in front of me – it is wonderful!" [When he performs at the Amati Exhibition at the Langham, London, on 29 March](#), the set-up is to be closer to the jazz club concept, with tables ranged around the hotel's ballroom.

But Lakatos has a further reason to be at the exhibition: he will be displaying a set of violin strings he has just created with Thomastik in Vienna, under the title Lakatos Pizzicato. "They've been tested with all sorts of violins, including Stradivarius and Guarneri, and I think the sound is three times bigger than usual," Lakatos claims. "Each string is different and it was necessary to choose them for the best quality." The E is steel, the A is steel and chrome, the D is synthetic and aluminium and the G is synthetic and silver. "They are very good for tuning as well," he adds. "I hope that on 29 March lots of violinists will come along and try them at the exhibition." His next appearance in the UK after the exhibition evening will be at the pianist Peter Donohoe's Fishguard Festival in Wales on 28 July.

His own violin, he says, was made for him in 2000 by the Cremona-based luthier [Leonidas Rafaelian](#). "It's an extraordinary violin and I love it very much," he declares. "Rafaelian is the living Stradivarius of Cremona!" He has played plenty of historic violins, including an Andrea Guarneri and the 'Lord Borwick' Strad, which he had for several years; in New York, he says, he was once lent an Amati, "which I adored – it is small and very comfortable to play". But with the modern instrument he has found a fiddle for all seasons. "I travel so much and there were always problems with the planes," he says. "I'd arrive somewhere and have to go straight to the luthier to have the violin fixed. A newer instrument is stronger and it's the answer to travelling without problems. But that isn't why I love it!"

His violin, then, represents an old tradition in a new incarnation – much like Lakatos's music, and indeed Lakatos himself. Everything is more mixed than you might expect, he points out – whether music or people. "In my family too – I grew up in the Jewish quarter of Budapest; all my friends when I was a child were Jewish, and my mother too is Jewish. But Christian. A lot of the Hungarian Jewish population became Christian. In a way, we are Jewish Christian Gypsies!"

His blend of musics will be reflected in his next recordings: a DVD featuring the music of Gypsy Swing legends Stéphane Grappelli and Django Reinhardt, but with big band; and a new version of Vivaldi's The Four Seasons, topped and tailed with new pieces to form what Lakatos describes as "an Alpha and Omega", including an apocalyptic finale.

There Lakatos has one more surprise for us: he says that he plays the drums. And there is that impish twinkle again: "I love the drums. When I was little I wanted to be a drummer," he confides. "But I had to be a violinist. Now maybe I'm in my second childhood and I have three drum-kits at home..."

The film continues to unfurl. We look forward to the next reel.

Roby Lakatos and his ensemble give a special performance at the Langham, London, as part of the Amati Exhibition on 29 March, 7pm. [Tickets here.](#)