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# Harmonia



From the Danube to the Carpathians: Music from Ohio

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# Harmonia

## From the Danube to the Carpathians: Music from Ohio

**Walt Mahovlich, Accordion**

**Alexander Fedoriouk, Cimbalom**

**Beata Begeniova, Vocals**

**Steven Greenman, Violin**

**Andrei Pidkivka, Panflute (Nai), Sopilka (folk flute)**

**Branislav Brinarsky, Bass, Fujara, Gajdice, Vocals**

Bands centered around the combination of violin and cimbalom (a large hammered dulcimer) are found in a broad area of Eastern and Central Europe stretching roughly from the Carpathian mountains to the Danube river, encompassing most of what was once the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. The bands typically consist of one or more violins, cimbalom, and bass. The first violin (the primas) plays melodic lead and variations, while the cimbalom plays a combination of rhythmic and chordal patterns as well as occasional melodic solos. Depending on the region, viola, accordion, clarinet, flutes and drums may be added.

The cimbalom has been played in Eastern Europe at least since the Middle Ages. In the mid-nineteenth century, József Schunda, a Budapest-based instrument maker, redesigned and expanded the instrument to its standard concert form, which has 125 strings, is fully chromatic over four octaves, has a damper system rather like that of a piano, and has a wide dynamic range. The smaller, older form of the cimbalom remains in use, particularly when mobility is a key requirement.

In Europe, the musicians who played in these bands were by and large professionals and typically were Gypsies (i.e. members of the Roma ethnic group). This was by no means a “back porch tradition” where anyone was welcome to join in, but regarded as a serious profession. This outlook led to an emphasis on virtuosic playing, and the playing of “variacia” or florid, melodic variations, while the possibilities offered by the concert cimbalom contributed to a harmonic complexity which is a hallmark of this music, distinguishing it from many other traditions. The music was in great demand in rural settings as well as in large, sophisticated cities. Venues ranged from village weddings to urban coffee houses, salons, and ballrooms. The repertoire included traditional dance tunes and folk songs — often in virtuosic renditions — as well as songs and melodies composed in folk style, and popular urban dance forms.

### **The music in the US:**

The Eastern European regions where the violin/cimbalom bands predominated were also the sources of huge numbers of immigrants that came to the United States beginning in the 1880s and continuing to the 1920s. These early immigrants primarily settled in the coal and steel producing areas stretching from the coal fields of Pennsylvania and Ohio to Chicago and brought a taste for the music of their homelands with them. Not surprisingly, professional Gypsy musicians followed in short order to provide these immigrant communities with the music that they longed for. An important group of Gypsy musicians settled first in Braddock, Pennsylvania in the 1880s and spread out from there. Soon cities like Cleveland, Youngstown, Pittsburgh, and Detroit had thriving music scenes featuring this music. Later waves of immigrants following World War II and

the 1956 Hungarian Uprising reinforced demand for this music. For many years violin and cimbalom bands were a prominent feature of Eastern European immigrant life in the industrial Midwest. Church and fraternal picnics, weddings, grape harvest festivals, pre-Lenten celebrations featuring a mock funeral for the bass fiddle, formal balls, as well as restaurants and taverns all featured this music. There was also a thriving recording industry. However, by the mid 1980s a number of factors contributed to a decline of this music in Cleveland and other industrial cities. A general economic decline in manufacturing, as well as changes in urban ethnic neighborhoods coupled with a move to the suburbs removed many of the old cafes and restaurants that provided steady income for professional musicians. Many of the professional Gypsy musicians moved away from the area to pursue musical opportunities in Las Vegas and other cities. Cold War restrictions on emigration prevented a continuing influx of new musicians from Eastern Europe. Also, other more Americanized musical styles - particularly polka bands - began to replace the older European-based music.

After 1990, things began to change yet again. With the demise of the Soviet system, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall, a new wave of Eastern European immigrants and musicians made their way to the United States.

A multi-ethnic group of master musicians performing on authentic folk instruments, Harmonia presents the virtuosic and passionate traditional music of Eastern Europe. The harmonic, rhythmic and tonal richness of Gypsy and village music from east of the Danube are channeled by this “musical gem” (National Public Radio). Featuring top soloists from Ukraine and Slovakia, and with roots in Hungary and Croatia, this Cleveland-based ensemble includes violin, accordion, vocals, folk flutes, and cimbalom. Harmonia makes the depth, fire and passion of Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Ukrainian, Carpatho-Rusyn, Croatian, and Gypsy music and culture come alive.

Harmonia’s musicians come from several different ethnic groups and from different, but related, musical traditions. The musicians do see their musical traditions as distinct, but they appreciate each other’s music and share an interest in it. Against the backdrop of America they have come to understand what they have in common in the kinds of music they play. It’s a group that could not have existed in Europe, at least not in the 20th century. In this sense it is a very American band.

Walt Mahovlich

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please Visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*

