

An article about Harmonia from the Spring 2001 issue of *SingOut!* Magazine

Walt Mahovlich was in a local Cleveland copy shop with some sheet music of Ukrainian tunes. A sweet older lady with a strong Hungarian accent looked over and said: "Oh, what kind of music you have? Folk music? Oh, my husband, he play very good folk music..." Her husband was bass player Joe Varga, a Romanian-born Hungarian of Rom (Gypsy) descent, and soon a member of the group now known as Harmonia. Many more such coincidences led to the formation of the band; in both its music and its make-up, Harmonia is a tribute to the interaction possible with so many vital ethnic communities from Eastern Europe living side-by-side in Cleveland.

Harmonia performs traditional music from the region they call the Heart of Europe, an area ranging from the Danube river to the Carpathian mountains. Styled after turn-of-the-century East European Gypsy bandas, Harmonia combines exquisite singing, fiery violin, rich accordion, and pulsing bowed string bass with instruments less familiar to Western audiences. Of these, the biggest contributor to the group's distinctive sound is the cimbalom (pronounced TSIM-bah-lum). A relative of the hammered dulcimer and Greek santouri, the cimbalom is common throughout Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine. It is frequently played by Rom (Gypsy) musicians, and was an important part of early Eastern European klezmer ensembles.

It is hard to describe Harmonia's music without sounding overblown, but the adjectives called to mind are no exaggeration. Brilliant. Lush. Dazzling. Soulful. All true, but still insufficient to evoke the passion and exhilaration, the melancholy and triumph, that a Harmonia performance evokes. Each individual musician is stunningly virtuosic; together, they weave such a complex layer of richly textured sound that the only thing one can liken it to is the finest of traditional oriental rugs.

Harmonia co-founder Walt (Vlado) Mahovlich is reminiscing about the genesis and evolution of this musical tapestry.

"I'm Hungarian on my mother's side, and Croatian on my father's. While with Harmonia I mainly play accordion, I'm also a clarinetist, so I used to play a lot of Serbian music, my own Croatian music, and especially Macedonian. But my dreams were to be in a band playing the sort of Hungarian and Carpathian Basin music that I'd heard so much as a kid here in Cleveland, and there'd never been an opportunity."

The Carpathian Basin refers to Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and western Ukraine; similar music is played in the former Yugoslavia and up into Croatia, as well as among the Carpatho-Rusyns, an ethnic group common throughout those areas which speaks a distinct west Slavic language. All these groups are heavily represented in Cleveland.

The city's ethnic mix goes a long way back, to at least the 1880's. One of the symbols for Cleveland is the onion domes of St. Theodosious Cathedral, built before the Russian Revolution with money from the Tzar. An industrial town since the Civil War,

Cleveland's job prospects attracted immigrants from Eastern Europe, including what was once the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They're still coming to this day, and traditional music and dance remain an integral part of celebrations and holidays for established communities as well as newcomers.

"It was 1989. I'd just returned to Cleveland from New York, having gotten an engineering degree. A friend connected me up with violinist Steven Greenman, who was getting his master's at the Cleveland Institute of Music and had a strong interest in Hungarian music. We started playing together, in restaurants and for community groups. I was preparing for a gig in a Russian church, which really meant playing for Carpatho-Rusyns, when I met Joe Varga. He came from a family of musicians, and was both conservatory trained as well as steeped in the folk tradition.

"Steve and I played a csardas for him, and he was impressed that we knew the Hungarian chords, which are not all that obvious. He agreed to play with us, and became my mentor - an irascible one, I must say. He wasn't very patient about rehearsing, but from him I learned more about harmony in a year's time than I had in my entire life.

"At this point our vision was primarily to play within the community. We played a lot for Carpatho-Rusyns. They happened to hear us on the radio, playing for the WRUR Folk Festival, and then ran into us at a small community picnic near where I live, which is an old Hungarian/Slovak/Carpatho-Rusyn and Romanian neighborhood. They were surprised to find that anyone was still playing the old music, especially on violin. Previously in Cleveland, the music had been played by Gypsies, still professional musicians into the second and third generations after immigrating. But in the 1980's many moved away."

In fact, the situation was similar with many of the other communities. The Slovaks were being entertained by polka bands, because there was no one left playing in their own traditional style. The Romanian musicians were getting old, too. But in the last ten years, as the doors in Eastern Europe have opened, there has been a new influx of musicians.

Shortly after the December 1989 fall of the Romanian dictator Ceaucescu, Walt got an excited call from a friend that some great Romanian musicians had turned up in Canton, Ohio. They included Gheorghe Trimbitas on taragot (or tarogató), a Hungarian single reed instrument similar to a wooden soprano saxophone. Gheorghe started dropping by Walt's house and sharing tunes, while Walt learned to back him up on accordion. Soon, the Romanian was joining Harmonia in performance.

Like Joe Varga, Gheorghe and the other European born musicians in the band have both formal and traditional musical backgrounds. World-class Ukrainian cimbalom player Alexander Fedoriouk studied transcriptions of classical violin pieces while spending weekends playing for weddings. He came to America on tour with the traditional band Cheres, which decided to stay and play for the communities here. Their early engagements were mainly weddings, concerts, and festivals at Ukrainian resorts in the

Catskills. While modern bands are often used at weddings, there are still those who want the traditional sound for cocktail hour or a short ceremony.

Alexander brought to Harmonia another Ukrainian, Andrei Pidkivka, a master of a host of ethnic flutes. Among these are nai (pan flute), a Ukrainian wooden shepherd's flute called sopilka, and tilinca. The latter is the simplest of folk flutes, from the Carpathian mountains, with similar flutes found elsewhere in the world. It has neither fipple nor holes; melodies are produced through the use of overtones.

The latest addition to Harmonia is singer Beata Begeniova, originally from Medzilaborce, Slovakia - also the home town of Andy Warhol's family. She has noticed that the songs she presents are not necessarily familiar to American community audiences.

"People have been here 40 or 50 years, they know songs from their grandparents, who brought these songs 50 years ago. So these songs I'm singing, these are new songs though in traditional style, what we are singing in Slovakia right now. "

The one member of Harmonia without an ethnic connection to the band's music is Adam Good, who replaced Joe Varga on string bass when the latter's health limited his ability to perform. Originally a jazz guitarist with a degree from Boston's Berklee School of Music, Adam was introduced to Balkan music by musical friends in New York. To learn more, he attended the Balkan Music and Dance Workshop run each summer by the East European Folklife Center at a camp near Baltimore. (Another session is held in California's Mendocino Woodlands.) These week-long events bring together the finest performers and teachers of authentic instruments and traditional singing styles, with eager students who may or may not have family heritage to explain their passion for these cultures. Exciting musical alliances have developed out of these workshops, and small-scale but very real peace between Balkan neighbors has been achieved. It was due to Balkan Camp that Walt decided Adam was meant to be a string bass player, and recruited him for Harmonia.

As the band's line-up and repertoire grew and coalesced, the group started gaining a following from outside its natural Eastern European base, which was already quite broad. Some of these fans arose from appearances at the Red Star Café, a hip little coffeehouse at the edge of the Slovak community, which would draw babas in babushkas and punks in leather and chains. When Walt and his friend Tommy Stanchak decided to develop the idea of a gallery cum performance space, featuring an international concert series, Harmonia packed the place with a cross-community crowd of ethnics alongside the artsy set. Sometimes these groups overlapped.

Walt explained: "Look at Tommy Stanchak. He's part of the artsy, hip, cool, early 20's scene. But he's Ukrainian. Someone else is a Pole. Someone else is Croatian. People my age [late forties or so] might have felt a little embarrassed to go to something like that. It wasn't cool. Cause here in Cleveland, there was merciless fun made of this stuff on TV, making people feel bad to be sons and daughters of immigrants. But now there's a whole other generation that doesn't feel bad about it. They might not know anything about it,

except that this music connects to them, it touches them. There are some people who show up because they like it esthetically, but for a lot of people there's this whole connection.

"That's also helped build the scene. When we do a concert, it's really wild. At the dance party after, we'll get Romanians and Croatians and Hungarians and Slovaks and Serbs and Carpatho-Rusyns. And then there's this contingent of Greeks, who just really like us, and who love cimbalom, because it's sort of like santouri on steroids. And [our fans are people] who also like the idea of romances - not just playing upbeat things, but also slow rubato pieces that are intended for listening - in Hungarian you'd call them a halgato.

"Bear in mind, ethnically we ourselves don't have one single community base. But we find musical connections between us, and learn a lot about each other's stuff. Our interest is not so much in recreating things, as in playing the real material and turning them into concert pieces. But we are also a dance band. And the dance music we play is what we'd play for the community - the communities in the States, or what the immigrant members of the band remember from home as being treasured there."

Walt leaned back and smiled.

"This has been a great thing. Beats being an engineer, I have to say that."

-- **Judy Barlas** in *SingOut!* Magazine, Spring 2001