

Article by Bob Cohen (Budapest) for other music e.V. Copyright by Bob Cohen, 2008

The Roma culture is widely distributed over Europe, and various Roma communities have distinct differences in their relationships to music and dance. It is impossible to talk of a unified European "Gypsy Dance" culture, and so in an effort to narrow the field, we have chosen to present the dance culture of the settled "Musician" Roma of central Transylvania, an area in northern Romania. Dances of this type diffused over the Central European region are performed in informal contexts by a wide range of Roma groups all over east and Central Europe, particularly in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and the Ukraine.

The Musician Gypsy Dance Tradition in Central Transylvania:

Today in Romania one will no longer find Jewish musicians performing traditional music in these areas, and among the Roma musical tastes and trends have also changed with the rise in globalized electronic media. Yet Roma still maintain their particular dance and music traditions, and in Transylvania one can still find old fashioned Gypsy violin string bands playing a specific Roma repertoire of dance music for Gypsy family gatherings, weddings, and "Gypsy Balls" to this day. These same bands make their living playing the traditional music of the local Romanian and Hungarian populations, and much of the music is based on the same motifs and melodies. The dance style, however, is significantly different.

In the 19th century, across east and central Europe, the performance of music for public dancing was usually the realm of professional musicians from either the Roma (Gypsy) or Jewish (dynastic Klezmer) families. In both cases, such professional families preserved wider repertoires, and often older musical practices that hinted at historical connections to higher art music from the Ottoman Empire or the late renaissance dances favored by local small nobility. Today this tradition exists most viably among the Gypsy instrumental ensembles of Romania.

With the coming of the Ottoman Empire, many Roma in Hungary and the Balkans were employed as military musicians for the Ottoman troops – mention is made of Mehter bands (Ottoman military bands comprising of shawms and drums – the ancestor of modern Turkish/Balkan *davul* and *zurna* ensembles.) After the retreat of the Ottomans in Transylvania and in the Hungarian lands these Roma musician families remained and turned to the local nobility for patronage of their musical skills. Military service remained a source of patronage, and local Roma adopted the western violin and transformed the baroque military recruiting dances - 'verbunkos' – into a virtuosic form of music which became the basis of the modern "Hungarian Gypsy Orchestra" style. The virtuosic elements of this dance style were eventually adapted to serve as a Romani form of dance known as "chingeralas" ("finger snapping dance.") Similarly, the late renaissance couple dance styles that developed into the well known Csardas were adapted to fit Romani dance aesthetics, which required less physical contact between men and women. In Transylvania these dance repertoires still maintain their vitality and are performed alongside more modern popular Romani dance forms such as the Turkish influenced pop music *manele* and various popular "belly dance" forms of the Balkan *cocek*.

The Dance.

Although outwardly similar to the traditional dances of Transylvania as done by Romanian and Hungarians, the dance style of the Transylvanian Gypsies is unique in that it is one of the few archaic *Gypsy instrumental music repertoires* that serves to accompany dances done by Gypsies themselves.

The Transylvanian Musician Gypsies, however, maintain a repertoire of traditional music known as "țiganești" which accompanies a fast, virtuosic solo dance called "chingeralas." In addition, "țiganești" dance style reflects the Romani cultural attitudes towards proper separation of gender – dance partners do not hold each other as closely as would non-Gypsy dance partners during the slower parts of the dance cycle, and do not hold each other at all

during the faster part of the dance cycle. In addition, improvisation and innovation is more common among the solo dance moves of the Romani style than in similar dances among non-Gypsies.

The figures that make up the Transylvanian style Gypsy men's solo dance as well as the women's dances – known as “chingeralas” – are quite adaptable and these patterns and movements – (and most importantly, lessons in comportance) will ably serve for most dance situations among Roma anywhere within east Europe (with the exception of the Balkans, where the Turkish influenced “cocek” – similarly adapted for gender segregated group dance, supplants it). These particularly Transylvanian boot-slapping dance moves, in fact, are often considered “Gypsy style” dance moves once performed outside of Transylvania, as in Hungary or Moldavia, for example.

The Music

We have chosen to highlight the Romani dance styles of Central Transylvania (the region west of Cluj-Napoca known as *Câmpia Ardeal* in Romanian, or the *Mezőség* in Hungarian) during our workshops. Our dance leader, Florin Korboba, is an accomplished musician and dancer who is the youngest in a dynasty of musicians based in the village of Palatka. The Roma of Palatka refer to themselves as “Tigani” more than by the term “Roma” (or in Hungarian, “Muzsikus Ciganyok”) – Musician Gypsies – as is common in Transylvania, where the word “Roma” tends to refer to the Kalderash or Gaborești “Vlach” Roma, and “Lautar” refers more to dynastic musicians in the southern part of Romania.

The traditional band of the village of Palatka (*Palatka* in Hungarian) is well known in the Hungarian “Dance House” folk music revival as a source for much of the music performed by Hungarian folk bands, including the well known Muzsikás. Palatka and the neighboring villages (Barai, Mociu) are rural multi-ethnic communities in which most people are conversant in Romanian, Hungarian, and in the local version of Romani. It is home to a large community of musician Gypsies of the Kordoba and Macsingo families. Palatka, however, is renowned for the stunning virtuosity of the late fiddlers Bela and Marton Kordoban, as well as their large repertoire of based on some of the most archaic styles of Transylvanian music. Where other local village bands have modernized their music (influenced by radio or by electronic instruments) Palatka remains one of the last working Gypsy bands in Transylvania who perform strictly on strings. In addition, Palatka still harmonizes their music in the oldest form known among central European Gypsy bands – by harmonizing modal and minor melodies using only major chords, which creates a dissonant tension characteristic of the style. This is made possible by the use of the Transylvanian kontra violin – a viola strung with three strings on a flattened bridge, and tuned to GdA (the first three strings of a violin, but with the A string tuned down an octave, leaving the middle string highest.)

In most non-musician “Vlach” Roma communities today, dance is usually accompanied by song, household percussion, and vocal scat singing known in Hungarian as “rolling” or “mouth bassing.” (An instrumental version of this, performed on guitars, mandolins, and milk can, has been popularized in Hungary since the 1970s by bands such as Kali Yag and Ternipe.) This vocal dance music is often thought to be in imitation of the style of accompaniment used by the Gypsy string band ensembles. We have chosen to focus on the dance traditions of the Musician Gypsies of Transylvania in part because it is these instrumental ensembles that reflect the older traditions of Gypsy musical practice that were concurrent to the period when Jewish musicians were also active in the sphere of Romanian popular music. While the Transylvanian musical tradition shows relatively little of the Turkish influence that marked early Oltenian and Moldavian lautar styles, this music is possibly one of the most conservative of the old-time instrumental Gypsy band styles. It is not an easy music to learn to play – compared to other styles often played in Hungarian dance houses, the repertoire and style of Palatka is considered the hardest to master. The dances, however, are not as daunting as learning the full dance cycles of the local Romanian or Hungarian dances.

Examples of Palatka Music

The Palatka Band has several CDs available from Hungarian sources. Many of these are available from Passion Discs in England, as well as other internet sources. The Hungarian Label Folk Europa has released several recordings of the band produced by Di Naye Kapelye's kontra player, Puma: http://www.passiondiscs.co.uk/e_pages/hung_e/fecd021.htm
http://www.passiondiscs.co.uk/e_pages/hung_e/fecd011.htm

Youtube offers several clips of Palatka and Central Transylvanian Gypsy music styles of music and dance.

The Palatka Band playing for tables at Budapest's Fono Klub
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcJffj00Mhc>

Palatka playing for a slow Hungarian style dance, pt. 1
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL4xx70jNzQ>

Palatka playing for a slow Hungarian style dance, pt. 2
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1iFsSRkwSQ>

Palatka playing a czardas, Hungarian style pt. 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cO-4bg9iXs>

Palatka playing a czardas, Hungarian style pt. 2
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIH57LZn2P4>

Florin Kordoban from Palatka playing a "batuta" dance
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyND7ZwZh_I&feature=related

The "classic" Palatka lineup – led by the late Marton and Bela Kordoban, on a mp3 video from about 1993. http://www.hagyomanyokhaza.hu/doktar/sebo_olvasokonyv/videok/07_1.mpg

Roma dance from one of the "Vlach Roma" groups on the Hungarian plain.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJh5rf_bgNU&feature=related

The late Gojma, founder of the Vlach Roma band Romano Drom, shows how far the virtuostic tradition can be taken – excellent example of percussion based Vlach Roma music.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9pxyHE1x7U&feature=related>
Also here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PagS2f2HrGE>

Roma dance (chingeralas) from Karpatho-Ukraine
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL4c_1eE5w

Roma dance from Sepsiszentgyörgy (SE Transylvania)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g625OGVkv1g&feature=related>

Roma and Hungarian dances performed by members of the Talpra Magyar Hungarian folk dance Ensemble in New York, illustrating the differences in style and posture between the two groups in one dance. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5h6FjIsTnY&NR=1>

Roma dances performed by amateur Hungarian folk dancers
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPOI7pRpyRM&feature=related>

Google Video cache of groups from an international Roma Festival performing in Japan:
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=8746057675332560220>

This Youtube user <http://www.youtube.com/user/zoliapu> has a series of videos on his user page documenting the teaching of Gypsy dances from Vajdaszentivany (Voivodeni, Mures, Romania.) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYIXwpYd-Fg>