

DAVID ADLER  
CULTURAL CENTER

Presents



**Personal and Global Delights:**

**The Dulcimers of Nick Feraru and Kiu Haghighi**

I well remember my first encounters with the dulcimer and how this discovery burst my musical vistas wide open. It was in the early 1970s that I first happened on a hammer dulcimerist on a sidewalk just off of Harvard Square, where he was playing along with a clawhammer banjoist. The second meeting had to wait a few years, until I stumbled onto Paul Gifford playing on a street corner in Detroit's Cultural Center area. His electrifying, street-wise repertoire led a gathering audience through a stream of Irish jigs and reels, movie theme songs, American fiddle tunes, and popular standards, with a bit of Bach thrown in. This time I had to know more, and a budding friendship with Paul gave me an important entry into world musical traditions. Upon graduating from high school, Paul became so entranced with the dulcimer—the instrument was a family tradition, rooted in upper New York State—that he travelled several continents searching for any manifestation of the instrument he could find. He returned from Europe with a Ukrainian *cimbali* a Greek *santuri*, while in the States he obtained a *cimbalom* and several other 'board zithers' from the Middle East. In the process he became a self-

taught ethnomusicologist and was most willing to share his knowledge of the musicians and musical cultures to which these exotic stringed-concatenations belonged.

The dulcimer, which is part of our country's English heritage, belongs to a large family of instruments found all around the world, and in increasing variety on our own shores. The strings of some members of this family are plucked (as were those of one alleged ancestor, the Biblical psalter). Others are struck with small knobbed sticks or 'hammers.' In the words of one globally minded musicologist: "Trapezoidal zithers, the earliest evidence of which dates from the tenth-century Middle East . . . may be fashioned with legs like a small delicate table, or set on a tabletop, on the knees of the player, or on the floor. . . . The Persian *santur* is perhaps the prototype." The Anglo-American dulcimer tradition is strongest in the Great Lakes region, with Michigan arguably the U.S. capital of dulcimer playing. The multi-cultural facets of this regional tradition are aptly symbolized by Henry Ford's curiously creative pairing of dulcimerist Edwin Baxter and Gypsy *cimbalonist* Billy Hallep in his pre-World War II square dance orchestra. This multi-cultural interest has been carried by that State's Original Dulcimer Player's Club and a new generation of talented players.

It was to Henry Ford's Detroit that Nicolae Feraru came when he fled the Romania of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1988. Born in Bucharest in 1950, Nick's family was raised in a family of Gypsy musicians. It was thus no great surprise that he learned to play the *cimbalom* as his father and grandfather before him had done. In addition, he had an uncle who played the *cobza*, a small guitar-like instrument that has today given way to the *cimbalom* in Romanian Gypsy ensembles. Yet even more than a family tradition, the role of musician is a long-standing specialized profession among the Gypsies of Romania, Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Nick is a member of the Gypsy people known as *vatras*: that is, people with a hearth. The settled Gypsies in Romanian cities and villages are thought of as different from those who still maintain a nomadic lifestyle. It is from this 'tribe' that most professional Gypsy musicians spring.

For many generations, Gypsy orchestras have provided the music for *gajo* (non-Gypsies) in Romania and the Balkans. During the time that the Ottoman empire contained much of Southeastern Europe, Gypsy musicians were attendants—slaves, in fact—in the Turkish courts. Then, when the Turks left, Gypsy musicians had to learn the folk music of the peasants and also the harmonies and melodic structures of the Western world, for they became the musicians of choice at important ritual and festive events for both Gypsies and the dominant society. In recent years, the domain of the Gypsy musician remains largely the folk and traditional music desired at weddings and baptisms or at public folkloric or nationalistic performances. To the contrary, the realm of popular music is dominated by non-Gypsies in today's Romania.

Going back to the seventeenth century, the typical Gypsy ensemble contained only *zurna* (an oboe-like instrument) and a bass drum. In later years, the *nai* (or panpipes) and *cobza* became

avored instruments, and still later, the violin. In the nineteenth century, Gypsy *cimbalonists* began to appear more and more. In the first years of this century, the typical Romanian Gypsy orchestra was composed of one or more violins, panpipes, *cobza*, *cimbalom* and string bass. In the 1950s, two things happened. Georghes Zamphir achieved great fame on the panpipes, and many non-Gypsy musicians attempted to follow in his footsteps, so that the instrument became more generally identified as Romanian. Also, the accordion began to appear in Gypsy orchestras, to the point that the violin has been losing its importance. More recently, the clarinet and the synthesizer have also been making inroads into Gypsy music.

Still, the quintessential Gypsy instrument in Romania, as well as in neighboring Hungary, is the *cimbalom*. In fact, Nick asserts that he knows of no *gajo cimbalom*-players in Europe. The Gypsy repertoire is known *Muzica lautareașca*—professional Gypsy musicians are called *lautarii* (literally, the lutists). Their music includes "table music" or slow sentimental songs to which people cry while seated at a wedding table; love songs, both slow and fast; nature songs and songs about Spring; and dance music for the *sirba* (a fast 6/8 dance), the *geamparaua* (a Turkish dance in 7/8) and several types of *horas*.

With the rise of the Ceaușescu regime, being a Gypsy and especially a Gypsy musician became more difficult. For centuries, Gypsies—an often oppressed people—had been relatively well-accepted, or at least tolerated in Romania, as in other Eastern European countries. The new party line, however, encouraged assimilation, and Gypsy ways were frowned upon and even suppressed. Gypsy musicians came to prefer playing for weddings, for there they could play Gypsy music without fear of reprisals. When an orchestra played in a more public setting, such as a restaurant, the band's set list often had to be approved by government inspectors. Still, Gypsy musicians could disguise their own repertoire by giving Gypsy pieces Romanian names.

This situation became unpleasant for Nick, and at the end of 1988 he left for the United States, where he was eventually granted political asylum. In coming here, he gave up a successful career as a relatively well-known Gypsy performer. A member of Ion Lăceanu's six-piece ensemble, Nick recorded on several LPs in the 1970s and '80s. In the US, he has not gained the fame he deserves, except among the large Romanian communities of Detroit and Chicago. He moved to Chicago in the last year, where he plays five nights a week at Nelly's Saloon on Elston Avenue for a small, but generous tipping crowd of Romanian immigrants, who sing to better remember their homeland. In this setting, Nick works with several *gajo* musicians, as well as with musicians from neighboring Balkan countries such as Bulgaria.

It is an equal delight to have on this program Kiu Haghghi, a *santour* virtuoso living in north suburban Chicago. Born in 1936 in Tehran, Kiu began formal study of the *santour*—the prototype of the dulcimer—at the age of ten. A professional concert artist who appeared often on Iranian television and

radio, he emigrated to the United States in 1965. Though no longer a full-time professional, he continues to give frequent performances at college campuses, conservatories and other venues throughout North America. Over half of his concerts are for non-Iranian audiences, while many of his appearances are at Bahai events.

Kiu, who has developed his own style and techniques within the tradition of Persian classical music, was a pioneer in pairing the Western piano with the Eastern *santour*. When his piano partner suddenly became unavailable five years ago, his daughter Keely stepped in. For our delight a nineteen-year-old college student, Keely continues to accompany her father. Kiu has recorded several cassette albums which also feature his brother on *zarb*, an Iranian drum.

By the way, I have never been able to verify it, but I believe that first dulcimer player I encountered in Cambridge twenty years ago was William T. White, now of Okemas, Michigan. He is playing bass tonight with Nick Feraru's Gypsy Orchestra. The violinist is Paul Gifford, currently residing in Flint, Michigan.

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