

Intercontinental Pendulum and Harmonic Convergence

An unexpected cultural pendulum is swinging from Eastern Europe to a city that, until recently, had the largest population of Hungarian people outside of Budapest. A city with more Slovenians than any other city in the world. In the past decade as political and economic woes have driven Croats, Serbs, Carpatho-Rusyns, Ukrainians, and Slovaks to America, the music and culture of Eastern Europe is having a resurgence in Cleveland. This is the second wave of major immigration from the region to this industrial Ohio city. And now the two generations are creating music and traditions that can only exist in the heartland.

The first wave of immigration came in the late 19th century in response to the unstable political and economic situation in Eastern Europe. Large rural populations were suddenly forced to enter a cash economy that struggled to support them. So they left for greener pastures. This migration coincided with enormous expansion in American industry and steamship travel. In addition to Cleveland, these forces brought newcomers to Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Chicago.

One hundred years later in the 1990s, things became politically and economically unstable again in Eastern Europe. A new generation of émigrés sought opportunities in the United States, including professional musicians who previously benefited from state funding of the arts. Many settled into communities established during the earlier wave. This has been like a shot in the arm for the revival of Eastern European cultures in America.

The band Harmonia is the result of this convergence. Founder and accordionist Walt Mahovlich is the progeny of Croatian paternal grandparents and Hungarian maternal grandparents. Other players in the band are of the new generation: Alexander Fedoriouk on cimbalom and nai (Ukraine), folk flutist Andrei Pidkivka (Ukraine), singer Beata Begeniova (Carpatho-Rusyn from Slovakia), and, though not on this recording, taragot player Gheorge Trâmbitas (Romania). Bassist Adam Good (who does not share Eastern European heritage) is a fixture in the Balkan music scene. This American encounter has brought together fellow musicians who never would have collaborated if they had met in Europe.



“You know,” says Alexander Fedoriouk. “Beata and I lived only a seven hour drive apart. We could have visited each other. But I had no idea of what was happening there musically. I didn’t know her music.”

“We have a lot of people who lived very close together with little idea of what was going on musically elsewhere,” explains Walt Mahovlich. “Suddenly you come to the States and you are all in the same boat. You have a chance to hear each other’s music and experience it in a way you couldn’t back home.”

Just like the Ukrainian expression, “boiling in your own juice,” musicians look to other *local* musicians for inspiration and information. Europeans are steeped in their own heritage with centuries of history and tradition. Similarly, other art forms keep a local flavor that distinguishes them from other regions. Each village has its own style of woodcarving, embroidery, and a type of belt making associated with logging.

“If my mother embroiders a shirt for me,” says Fedoriouk, “and I go 40 kilometers from home, they say this guy is from Kolomyja, because they recognize the style. There are thousands of combinations of colors and patterns and there are people who can tell where each is from. It’s the same long, local legacy with music.”

“In Eastern Europe the culture is so rich. You don’t have to go anywhere to conduct fieldwork or research,” explains Beata Begeniova. “We keep within our own tradition, because there is so much material to learn and you can’t possibly learn it in one lifetime.”

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In the United States in its modern form, there are only a couple centuries of cultural history, and it has always been a hybrid.

“Why would Ukrainians try to play Bulgarian music, when there are hundreds of Bulgarians who can play it really good,” asks Fedoriouk. “Here it is different. People put things together and see what they can come up with. It’s more common to collaborate which makes it a lot easier to see the relationships between the music of one place and another.”

Outside of Eastern Europe, these cultural groups are able to explore common threads that tie them back to their shared heritage from the time before the Slavic tribe splintered in the eighth century.

From country to country, the instrumentation is different enough that under typical circumstances these commonalities would not emerge. In the former Yugoslavia a piece might be played by an orchestra comprised entirely of tamburica, but in the Ukraine a virtually identical piece is played at a different tempo with cimbalom, violin, and bass drum.

“This same music has been shared by different people,” explains Fedoriouk. “Beata sings this one song in Slovakian that she sings in a major key. In the Ukraine we sing the same melody but in a minor key! Then we come across songs that have the same melody, but totally different lyrics depending on the region. So Gypsies or somebody liked the melody but came up with words that fit their experience.”

“An ethnomusicologist explained this to me back home,” says Begeniova. “If the people of one region do hard physical work, they may sing more in a minor key. When you get to the richer parts of the country, things are more often in the major key. If you’re working hard in the field than you don’t feel like singing those happy tunes.”

Band members credit their ability to make these kinds of transcultural comparisons to the unique experience of playing this music in America. A similar pattern of illumination and cross-cultural awareness has emerged with Harmonia’s audiences.

Originally, most people who knew of Harmonia heard them at community events specific to one ethnicity or another. The band would play Slovak music for the Slovaks, Hungarian music for the Hungarians, and so forth. But eventually their various followings realized that Harmonia was drawing from several repertoires, and they too began to make the connections.

“I’ll always remember one scene clearly,” recalls Mahovlich. “Several years back we played in a coffeehouse and it was one of the first times we drew fans from several of our bases. In the same room we had Romanians, Serbs, and Croatians; grandmothers from a nearby Slovak church; and young, local artists with black leather jackets and multiple piercings. They had all heard some of our music before. But this was a moment where it all came together. From the looks of it, people were pretty much bowled over by both the diversity of what we played and the connectiveness of these regional musics.”



But all of this cross-cultural exchange is not always so smooth.

Harmonia Moments

The Slavic languages—such as Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, Ukrainian, and Russian—are all related. In fact, the Slavic word for German is *nemci* which means “people that don’t understand.” This is because the Germans were the first group of people that early Slavs came across whose language they couldn’t understand. Other neighbors spoke related languages.

Members of Harmonia all speak English, but for half the musicians it is not their native tongue. Three or more languages are spoken between band members depending on the context.

“After a while you begin to understand each other,” says Mahovlich. “Sometimes we speak a bit of a polyglot language. Where we mostly can understand what each other is saying. But sometimes you can say something that you would think would be transparent, but it’s not. We call these ‘Harmonia Moments.’”

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In the Croatian language *zivot* means “life,” but in Ukrainian the same word means “stomach.” So what is a tummy ache for one band member is a bad life for another.

“On tour once, we were on an airplane together, and I didn’t want to sit over the wing,” remembers Be-geniova. “I wanted to be able to see. My word for ‘wing’ is *krvoh*. But one letter different in Croatian means ‘crooked.’ So they thought I was arguing that this row of seats was crooked and they were yelling at me that it wasn’t crooked. And they thought I kept saying I don’t want to sit in a crooked row. It takes a while until you figure it out.”

According to Mahovlich, it gets even more complicated because sometimes the mistranslations across languages and cultures take on a vulgar meaning. He says, “we managed to really insult Beata one time, and I’m not sure we ever convinced her that it didn’t have real weight.”

In Search of Kolbász, Cimbalom, and a New Old Folksong

The story of Harmonia is a story of yearnings and discovery. It was when Walt Mahovlich first left home for college in 1970 that he made realizations about his own identity, things he had always taken for granted.

“You don’t recognize your own culture until you step outside of it and realize that not all of your American peers have a Grandmother with a foreign accent,” recalls Mahovlich. “I can’t tell you what a shock it was to be in a western Michigan town where the bakery thought a poppyseed roll was a bread roll with a few seeds on it. And don’t ask me about the looks I got when I tried to buy Kolbász [a spicy sausage]!”

These longings brought Mahovlich back to Cleveland. He felt more at home in a city where it was commonplace to ask someone “What’s your nationality?” upon first meeting them. Mahovlich dove head-first back into the Croatian community, attending community picnics and playing the music he became fond of as a child.

Mahovlich began playing Hungarian and klezmer music with a local violinist in 1988. One day, while photocopying sheet music at a local print shop, Mahovlich ran across a woman with a Hungarian accent who noticed his music. She introduced him to her husband, bass player Joe Varga, a Hungarian Roma born in Romania. Varga, who had great folk knowledge as well as formal training, became a mentor, and the three men were the first iteration of Harmonia.

Right after the fall of Romanian dictator Ceausescu, Mahovlich found out about some Romanian musicians that turned up in Canton, Ohio. One of them was Gheorge Trâmbitas who played a wooden saxophone-like instrument known as the taragot. It wasn’t long until he started dropping by Mahovlich’s house to play, and began performing as part of Harmonia.

Soon, Cleveland State University charged Mahovlich with finding them a cimbalom, the Eastern European, 250-pound trapezoid grandfather of the hammered dulcimer. This was no easy task. At the time, there were no American makers of the instrument, so a cimbalom’s only route to America was across the Atlantic. Not only did Mahovlich find a cimbalom, as word got out of his search, he became a magnet for them, and he ended up purchasing one for himself too. His cimbalom, in turn, became a homing device for players of the instrument excited to have the chance to play. And before long, Harmonia grew to include six musicians.

More recently the band’s personnel was rounded out with the group’s first woman and singer, Beata Be-geniova. Not only has Be-geniova’s sweet voice provided a new balance to the band, she has contributed new folks songs to the repertoire.



“There’s a big thing about going into the field and finding new music,” she explains. “It’s such a treasure when you get a new song. You try to record it before someone else does. Then it belongs to you. And if someone else takes this song and sings it at a concert right away, it’s like stealing.”

One day Be-geniova’s father went to a wedding in a far-off village where he heard a song he had never heard before. He knew right off that it was rare and that probably nobody in the other villages knew it.

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Begeniova went back to learn the song and her performance of it ended up winning the Carpatho-Rusyn equivalent of a GRAMMY. Other people perform the song now, but they still remember that Begeniova recorded it first.

“Now it’s popular to make new songs,” continues Begeniova. “Ten years ago we wanted everything to be authentic. We used to think new compositions would destroy our music. But we’re running out of songs. Before, they were so old they were considered anonymous. Now every song has an author. In another hundred years, they will be considered very authentic songs.”

“We compose some of the music, but it’s always within the boundaries of folk,” Fedoriouk expands. “We’re trying to stay as close as possible to the traditional rootsy stuff but still put our own personal influence on the music. It’s not that different from an Indian raga where there are 12 notes that you have to use in a certain way, and you extend it to hours, staying within the mode. Our pieces are short, but, similarly, we use folk standardized patterns as the basis of our compositions.”

Harmonia made a conscious effort not to record the popular, most-performed songs, on this recording. *Dze Ty Idzeš* or *Where Are You Going?* was made famous by Maria Macoskova when she recorded it over a decade ago. “For a long time, nobody touched it,” says Begeniova. “But after the revolution in 1989, all of us got a lot looser about singing other people’s discoveries.” The meaning of the song has shifted in the post-revolutionary era. The literal meaning is a song of yearning and heartbreak. But ethnomusicologists have infused interpretation of songs like this with political meaning, saying this one is actually about defection to another country. “It’s going to have a new meaning every ten years,” posits Begeniova with a hint of sarcasm.

On another song, *Ej, V Komori Na Ladi*, or *In the Cellar on the Wooden Chest*, Begeniova uses the three verses to demonstrate the evolution of folk music. The first verse is sung in an authentic style, and the last two verses are sung in a modern style with a more contemporary rhythm. And on *Bodaj Tobi Dole* this process is reversed as Begeniova takes a modern song she learned from cassette and sings it as if it were a traditional folk song.

Eastern Europe, the Politics of Music, and Black Power

Mahovlich was once in a music group of Serbs and Croats that had to disband because of death threats. And there is a story of an Albanian musician that was shot in the head in a coffee house in New England for singing a song in Serbo-Croatian. In that sense, the music of Harmonia is inherently political, though their lyrics are not laden with dogma. But there is a subtler, yet more powerful political bent to their existence.

“I don’t want people to think of us as a bunch of undifferentiated white folk,” says Mahovlich. “Holding onto your culture and sharing it and being proud of it—in the face of all these messages that are telling you to join up with McWorld—is a political act in itself. People are always talking about making music revolutionary. Hey, I’m playing music that my grandparents played and I think THAT’s revolutionary!”

“I always loved this music. From the time I was a little kid, I loved the community picnics, the songs my parents sang, the scratchy 78s,” continues Mahovlich. “Although I do remember a time, particularly in the ’50s, ’60s and early ’70s, where folks of my generation were made to feel embarrassed by this stuff—accordions and violins—and by the music that the immigrant generation brought here.”

“That feeling has passed from the scene,” says Mahovlich. “The generation that’s now in their 20s doesn’t have those preconceived notions. It doesn’t come with that kind of cultural baggage. Ears have opened up. The idea of heritage has become a much more positive thing and in the popular media there aren’t as many negative stereotypes and put downs of the older generation. After all, the Mystery of the Bulgarian Voices are on Xena the Warrior Princess. It has something to do with Roots – the movie and the whole movement that followed.

“It’s not that people are explicitly saying ‘I’m really in touch with my Hungarian roots.’ But there’s no longer a negative stigma in the minds of these folks. No longer embarrassment.”

Power to the cimbalom! Power to the accordion!
Power to Harmonia!

Dmitri Vietze