



Roby Lakatos and his ensemble have created a winning blend of gypsy music and jazz. **Heather Kurzbauer** went to listen and was bewitched

ABOVE Lakatos is proud of the group's history; second violinist László Bóni studied with Roby's father, Antal

The term 'gypsy music' conjures up memories of the opening of Sarasate's heart-wrenching *Zigeunerweisen*, but for many our experience ends there. The stereotype of the gypsy band, with its rich aural tradition of melody passed on from father to son, still persists. Sophisticated conservatory-trained musicians capable of arranging

complex jazz scores or playing Paganini with Vadim Repin just don't fit into the picture. Or do they? The king of contemporary gypsy music, the Hungarian-born violinist Roby Lakatos, does all this and more.

One of the high points for laureates at the Queen Elisabeth International Competition in

Brussels is the moment of discovery when they walk into the plush decor of the fin-de-siècle stage at *Les Ateliers de la Grande Ile* and encounter the musical magic of Lakatos and his ensemble.

Witnessing the group in action at a recent performance, I was caught up by their pulsating rhythm, brilliant improvisation and Lakatos's Perlman-like panache. As he puts it, 'Regular visits on the part of great masters of the classical stage keeps the band sharp. Just imagine, you are on stage and you hear that Ivry Gitlis, Pierre Amoyal or Vadim Repin are present. Of course, you try your best to perform at the very top end of your capabilities.'

To hear Lakatos at one of his numerous engagements worldwide or on his series of CDs – the most recent, *As Time Goes By II*, was released in March 2003 by Deutsche Grammophon – is to be swept away by an artist whose musical energy and imaginative powers take him to limits that few of his classical counterparts can even dream of. Who is Roby Lakatos and what makes him move to such innovative beats?

In fact he is a seventh-generation direct descendant of János Bihari, the legendary gypsy violinist whose performance at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 was given as much press coverage as the ongoing political machinations. Liszt probably spoke for many when he noted after one particularly moving performance, 'The strains of his magic violin

Exotic fusion

fall like tears on our enchanted ears.' Bihari became the first in a line of distinguished gypsy musicians to gain access to the highest echelons of Hungarian society.

Lakatos began his initiation into the splendid musical heritage of his ancestors at the age of five. 'To really learn about our music, one's ears have to be opened as soon as possible,' he says. 'The rest is total immersion, listening and playing night after night until the music and the performer are one.'

Right from the start, young Roby was being encouraged to play with his father, Antal, and his world-renowned uncle, Sándor. 'I knew way back then after I picked up the violin exactly what path I would have to follow,' recalls Lakatos. 'My father travelled the world for at least six months of every year with his gypsy orchestra. Maybe to some children this would have been perceived to be a hard life. But a life spent with music as its core has rewards most people will never experience. And although I missed my father, he always brought me back treats in the form of newly discovered recordings of music to tempt my imagination. The impact a Stéphane Grappelli recording had on me as a young child stays with me till this very moment.'

Recognising Lakatos's aptitude for playing and absorbing music, the family decided that he would benefit from some formal training alongside his regular participation in his father's and uncle's ensembles. They brought the six-year-old Roby to the formidable Béla Badar at the Budapest Conservatory: 'I was really afraid of him at first. He was almost two metres tall, an imposing gentleman with grey hair and an incredible air of authority. Thinking about the relaxed way young people approach their lessons nowadays, I am happy that I was a product of a stricter, more conservative approach. Even in the late days of the Communist regime in Hungary, there was an



unspoken and total respect for authority figures. Violin teachers were definitely in that class of authoritarian people!

Lakatos was put through his paces with the other aspiring professional violinists: bi-weekly lessons concentrating on etudes and technical exercises, and open lessons at the end of each week for performance. 'My teacher taught all of his students how to think for themselves, how to practise. Before we were even allowed to put our fingers on the bow and start working on a new piece, we had to imagine playing the piece with every dynamic and nuance in the correct place.'

But Badar's strictness did not prevent him from acknowledging

his students' personal input, as Lakatos explains. 'Compared with regular violin students, I was something of an anomaly as I spent all my evenings in the world of improvisation. However, my teacher did not seem to mind. If I came to a lesson with a fingering that would have shocked more conservative pedagogues, my teacher would test me to see if that fingering really applied to the interpretation I had in mind and if it did, he encouraged me to use it.'

Preparation, however, was all-important to the exacting violin teacher. 'On several occasions I was sent home without playing a note, with the words "come back when you've worked well".' Badar demanded the maximum from ▶



ABOVE AND RIGHT
Lakatos says the secret to a long-lasting career is knowing how to conserve energy and loving what you are doing

his students but he firmly believed that they should never over-practise: his motto, adopted readily by Lakatos, was '*il faut travailler les choses importantes*'. At the age of nine he was performing every night with his father's orchestra while making sure Badar was satisfied with his musical progress. 'By the time I was 14,' says Lakatos, 'I was playing duos with one of the greatest gypsy musicians, Sándor Jaróká, the first gypsy musician to receive the coveted *Disque Diamant* [a French award to artists whose CDs sell over a million copies].



1986–96, Lakatos held court in Brussels and loved it: 'This was really a fantastic time. I was able to experiment as much as I wanted and there were always incredible people to play with and for. Although I always made a plan of what we would play before the set started, I'd often look out and see a great fiddle player or sense a collective mood from the audience that would make me change the set completely. Working with an ensemble at the highest level on a daily basis has given me the freedom to go my own way and discover new ways to express the genre we've created.'

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Sándor created a furore with his arrangements of pieces from the mainstream violin repertoire, Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* and Tartini's 'Devil's Trill' Sonata, way back in the 1950s. My penchant for exploring new horizons comes in part from his power to inspire: he could play absolutely anything and loved everything that was music.'

Lakatos graduated from the Béla Bartók Conservatory with the first prize aged 19, by which time he

had started experimenting with jazz. Within a year of graduation he had signed a contract to form his own band at a club in Liège, in Belgium. He was travelling the path set out before him by not only his father and uncle, but seven generations of musical innovators. A request soon arrived for Lakatos to take up residence at a club in the Belgian capital that had been transformed from restaurant to private concert hall. For one decade,

Over the years Lakatos has delved deeper and created a new sound for his gypsy band. Traditional bands have always had much the same format: a first violinist who leads the group; a second violinist, supporting the first and often playing a part a third below the first violin's; a cimbalom or dulcimer, its distinctive timbre providing harmonic support and counter-melodies; a bass; and, often, a clarinet. ▶

'Something was missing between the sound I heard in my inner ear and the sound of my band in its original, traditional set-up,' remembers Lakatos. 'To answer to the arrangements I was making – often a blend of traditional Hungarian gypsy music, jazz and classical music – I needed another type of sound. You would not believe how much criticism I received from insiders after introducing a piano into the band. Traditionalists were outraged, claiming that the unique sound of the cimbalom would never be heard.'

The Roby Lakatos Ensemble, consisting of a second violin, piano, cimbalom, double bass and guitar, is certainly a musical phenomenon all of its own; a group that shares a collective past with its leader. 'Our second violinist studied with my father, the cimbalom player trained with me at the conservatory in Budapest and our bass player was an amazing natural talent we discovered when he was just 14. He had never heard of jazz yet learned how to play the most intricate riffs within a short period of time. Our pianist, Kálmán Cséki, shares the responsibility of arranging and

would make the most seasoned performer agonize over burn-out – Lakatos and his ensemble give more performances than any classical musician in their prime.

An inquiry about the secret of his long-lasting, intense career, just a few hours after Lakatos tracked down a car that had been stolen from him the night before, brought the inevitable wry answer. 'Stay in the driver's seat! No, seriously, I learned how to conserve energy while performing many years ago. My teacher asked me to play for a group of wealthy patrons of the arts when I was a young teenager. He set me up by telling me I should pretend that I was performing for a huge audience of 5,000 in a famous concert hall. I played my heart out and was exhausted within five minutes. He then started to teach me to conserve energy, beginning with an anatomy lesson: if your body is well supported from your spinal column as you play, you will not tire easily. David Oistrakh taught all violinists when to give their all and when to stand back and recuperate. It also helps if you really love what you are doing.'



LEFT Lakatos is a direct descendant of Bihari, the famous gypsy violinist

BELOW at the age of six, Lakatos went to study with Béla Badar at the Budapest Conservatory

accelerated the demise of our music. There still are players of gypsy origin making their name in the classical field – Indianapolis Violin Competition gold medalist Barnabas Keleman, for example, the grandson of a revered gypsy violinist. But a new age for Hungarian gypsy music as a living art form will not come from its homeland.'

Encouraged by Dutch violin pedagogue Dirk Verelst, founder



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finding new repertoire – I don't think I could breathe without him.'

As a result of encounters at *Les Ateliers de la Grande Ile*, Lakatos has appeared in concert performances and music festivals with Joshua Bell, Ida Haendel, Nigel Kennedy, Julian Rachlin, Vadim Repin and the legendary jazz musicians Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones and Stéphane Grappelli. By the time he had landed a recording with Deutsche Grammophon in 1997, his concert engagements were taking him to every corner of the world. A glance at his calendar

Now approaching 40, Lakatos laments the end of an era for gypsy music in Hungary. 'Don't tell this to the people who write history books, but Communism in Hungary was not such a bad thing for gypsy musicians. The government helped support gypsy orchestras and Budapest counted 850 gypsy bands amongst its cultural treasures. Nowadays, there are no more than a dozen groups playing in Budapest, on a sadly lower level than the glorious groups of the past. Pop music and MTV, as the pervasive global media export, have

of the International Academy of the Arts, Lakatos has plans to train conservatory-graduate violinists in the art of gypsy ensemble playing, in masterclasses and summer courses. The new golden age of gypsy music may well have migrated from the fertile Hungarian plains to wherever he and his ensemble are currently performing. Lakatos sums it up thus: 'Always play when possible; one can't explain what one does through words. One should play, otherwise life is just too tiring.' ■

