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

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 Île 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
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 ensem-
bles. 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 author-
ity. 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
Sándor created a furor 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.

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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"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 Róby 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 Csöki, 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."

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 Kelemen, 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 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."