

# MUZSIKÁS

Simon Broughton gives the low-down on Hungary's premier string band who have brought Transylvanian music to an international audience



If you've got the slightest interest in traditional Hungarian music, then Muzsikás (pronounced 'mu-zhi-kash') is where you need to start. They've been on the scene now for 35 years. Forming at the moment the folk scene in Hungary took off, they bring the music alive in sweaty dance houses in Budapest and concert halls around the world. But why should you be interested in traditional Hungarian music?

Muzsikás' music comes largely from Transylvania, the area of north-west Romania with a mixed Romanian, Hungarian and Gypsy population. It's where some of the richest Hungarian music is found and where it's still a living tradition, played at weddings with enormous gusto and passion by local village bands. It has a fantastic rhythmic bounce and drive – led by the dance. It might

not have the 'in-er-face' boldness of Balkan brass, but has more subtlety and depth. Its lithe and sinewy energy comes from the sawing bass, chugging offbeat string chords and beautiful violin melodies. It's one of the musical treasures of Europe. Muzsikás' lead fiddler Mihály Sipos learned from some of Transylvania's masterful traditional players.

Like other states in Eastern Europe, Hungary promoted its folk music with large state ensembles and choreographed dancing. But by the 70s, Hungary was the most progressive of the Soviet satellites and a genuinely popular grass-roots movement sprung up to play and dance to traditional Hungarian and Transylvanian music. There was a whiff of nationalistic pride in this – the Magyar Hungarians are unrelated to their Slav, Romanian and Austro-German

neighbours and have their own distinctive language and music.

In the spring of 1973, three musicians of the Bartók Folk Dance Ensemble won the Népművészet Ifjú Mestere (Young Master of Folk Arts) competition – Mihály Sipos (fiddle), Sándor Csoóri (*kontra* or accompanying fiddle) and Dániel Hamar (double-bass). They were invited to play for Hungarian radio that summer as 'Sipos Mihály és Kisegyüttese' (Mihály Sipos and his chamber group) because they had no name. When they started a weekly club in the autumn of 1973, they called themselves Muzsikás – "until we came up with something better". It's actually a little-known Transylvanian dialect word meaning 'musician'.

Muzsikás and the Sebő Ensemble, which started around the same time, played Hungarian music (most of which had to

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be arranged as it had virtually died out as a living tradition in Hungary) and, more significantly, Transylvanian music from over the border. In Ceaușescu's Romania, Hungarian culture was under threat, but the communist Hungarian government wouldn't openly protest about the policies of a fraternal socialist state. So, inspired by the composers Bartók and Kodály 70 years earlier, it was the musicians (and dancers) of the so-called *táncház* (dance house) movement who went into Transylvania, learned from village musicians and came back to teach and play the music and dances in Budapest. It had the energy of an underground counterculture.

Muzsikás recorded three CDs for the state label Hungaroton – their fourth member Péter Éri migrated from the Sebő Ensemble around 1978. Then they were lucky enough to be picked up by Joe Boyd for Hannibal – one of the pioneering labels on the world music scene. This gave Muzsikás and their regular singer Márta Sebestyén their opening into the international market. From 1988 they recorded six CDs for Hannibal: *Márta*

Clockwise from top left: band members Mihály Sipos; László Porteleki; bassist Dániel Hamar; multi-instrumentalist Péter Éri; a workshop in a Budapest school

*Sebestyén & Muzsikás, The Prisoners' Song, Blues for Transylvania, Maramaros: The Lost Jewish Music of Transylvania, Morning Star and The Bartók Album.* Although Muzsikás' métier is traditional music, they are not narrow-minded about it. In 1995 I worked with them (as director) on *The Dancing Room*, a contemporary dance piece for BBC television. Filmed in underground vaults near London Bridge, to choreography and scenario by Kate Flatt and Sally Jacobs, it used Muzsikás' incredibly powerful music from a specific tradition to say something universal about human relationships.

In the mid-90s Csoóri left the band to be replaced by fiddler László Porteleki, while Hannibal passed to Rykodisc, then to Palm Pictures and finally to Warner, when it closed down. This, and the rise of Balkan music, has certainly meant Muzsikás have been less active on disc in the last decade, although they still tour extensively. In 2003 they released *Live at the Liszt Academy* (2003) and play with various classical musicians, like the Takács Quartet and pianist Jenő Jandó, juxtaposing Hungarian folk with the music by Bartók that it inspired. At home, Muzsikás have given workshops in 150 schools over the past three years. "Kodály's dream was to build a really good music education in Hungary," says bass-player Dániel Hamar. "Sadly it's got worse in recent years. It shouldn't be just for a privileged group, but for everybody." ●



A still from the BBC film *The Dancing Room*. Fiddler Mihály Sipos and Péter Éri on kontra violin, which has a flat bridge and is played side-on to get rhythmic accompanying chords



You can hear an interview and music from Muzsikás on this issue's podcast

# BEST...

## ALBUMS



### *The Bartók Album* (Hannibal, 1999)

Their most ambitious album and which set a new trajectory into the classical world. It includes three of Bartók's early phonograph recordings, three of his violin duos and lots of music re-created by Muzsikás from their experience of music in the field. The Hungarian version comes with an 80-page booklet in English and Hungarian.



### *Morning Star* (Hannibal, 1997)

For those interested in the pure Transylvanian tradition, this has the best material, including a great ten-minute sequence of dances from the Mezőség region of Transylvania. Sinewy duo music from the Carpathian region of Gyimes too. For collectors there's a much more village-like version of this, called *Hazafelé* (Homeward Bound) that Joe Boyd thought was too 'authentic' for international consumption.



### *Márta Sebestyén & Muzsikás* (Hannibal, 1988)

This international debut (released in Hungary in 1986) stands up well. A great Kalotaszeg lament from Sebestyén, although the arrangements of Hungarian material sound more dated now than the traditional Transylvanian material.



### *Maramaros: The Lost Jewish Music of Transylvania* (Hannibal, 1993)

Some valuable musical research here with two Transylvanian Gypsy musicians who remembered tunes from playing alongside Jews before the war. Sebestyén's 'Szól a Kakas Már', a well-known Jewish song is beautiful and the cimbalom playing of Toni Árpád is a great addition to the band.

Most Muzsikás discs exist in international and Hungarian versions. The covers sometimes differ, but the music is usually identical. [www.passiondiscs.co.uk](http://www.passiondiscs.co.uk) has the full range of releases.

## IF YOU LIKE MUZSIKÁS, THEN TRY...



### TÉKA ENSEMBLE

#### *A Szüzeké: The Dance of the Virgins* (Harmónia, 1998)

One of the most consistent *táncház* bands who've been around almost as long as Muzsikás. Some very juicy Transylvanian material in this collection.

