

Le Gazhikane Muzikante

When I wrote *God's Zoo* (Carcenet, 2014), which is a record of a world journey through London's cultures, that is, through the lives of exile and émigré artists, writers, poets and musicians, one of my biggest disappointments was in not being able to pin down a group of Romani musicians from Poland. They were a regular feature in London's musical life, and, so I thought, who better to write about than a people who are in a perpetual state of exile. With every phone call I made to them I was given fresh promises. There seemed always to be a wedding or a funeral. Sometimes they're the same thing of course. Sometimes the bride flees the future corpse. 'Yes, yes, we will meet soon, I promise.' One has only to hear the word twice — *promises promises* — to realise one is going to be left empty-handed. The double positive is almost always a single negative. *Yes, yes* means *no*. This is probably just as it should be. Are not Romanis, by their very nature, elusive? And can one ever reach deeply enough into their culture to be able to return with more than just a handful of doubtful coinage? Is this not why they are feared and loved in equal measure? This reminds me of something that happened to a friend of mine, when a Gypsy girl of about ten years of age stole from a café table in Rome his copy of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, as he watched on in mute fascination. She did not take his Parker pen or notebook. What did she make of that lordly punster, the master of gobbledygook?

Another of London's many glories is that here one can choose to be just about whatever one likes. There is the culture that is imported, which in my book I have attempted to describe although only through its individual voices, and, here we go into reverse, there are those people residing here who reach out into other cultures, making them, to some degree, whether by means of intellect or the heart's occurrences, their own. I wonder if historically this does not represent some deeper dissatisfaction with our own culture. Are we somehow deprived of, or even betrayed by, it? Times there are when its products seem to be covered with a very thin yet incredibly hard layer of plastic. Turn on the radio and skip from channel to channel to see what I mean. And if musically this has been the case, it serves to explain why in the past couple of decades there has been, in the search for the *real*, a proliferation of musicians adopting earlier musical identities. Might this not suggest we are living in rather confused times?

Among those seekers after old clothes is the Italian singer and guitarist, Antonio Riva, long resident in London, who has circulated himself widely through the city's world music scene. (Ghastly phrase, *world music*. Surely there must be another. Multiculturalism, when not closely observed, turns to cultural mush.) Prior to this Riva had covered a huge gamut of musical styles from classical to rock to Celtic. Somewhere along the line, he was spotted with green hair. I might not have paused to speak to him. An Englishman with green hair is one thing, a throwback maybe to pre-Roman invasion days when green was the new blue, but an Italian? When I first met him he was part of the London Gypsy Orchestra, in which, incidentally, there are no Gypsies to be found. A month or so later, I caught him accompanying a Macedonian singer, Bojana, at a New Year's Eve party at a restaurant that I choose not to identify here, attended by former Yugoslavs who seemed happy enough to bury their national differences for an evening of terrible food, drunken ribaldry and great music. I should think that with the morning light they went back to shooting each other with glee. My abiding memory is of a beautiful woman who danced on the tables, and Riva behind his guitar with something approaching a satyric smile. I didn't notice whether his feet had turned into hooves. Bojana collapsed magnificently onto the floor, weeping undiluted passion into her microphone. Meanwhile the food, or, rather, the only dish on offer, comprised meat so overcooked as to be unidentifiable and boiled potatoes that were undercooked, indeed raw at the centre. It was as if one were presented with a kind of yin and yang of the inedible. The cook was, I believe, too inebriated to care. It was a memorable meal, which, I suppose, added a kind of perverse magic to the evening. There were no complaints from any of the tables. The music, meanwhile, was al dente. We shared a table with another musician, a violinist, Meg Hamilton, another rising star in London's ethnical music scene. A wild evening, it is a wonder that neither the police nor an ambulance came.

And now, in his latest manifestation, Riva has emerged as the leader of Le Gazhikane Muzikante, a group devoted to, although not exclusively, the Gypsy music of south-eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. It was at one of London's most charming venues, Jamboree, tucked away in deepest Limehouse, and in what I would like to think was one of the Chinese opium dens so lovingly described by Thomas Burke in his fin de siècle prose, that I went to hear the group whose name, incidentally, translates, somewhat clumsily, as "the non-Gypsy musicians who play Gypsy music". This, however, is to lose the magical flavour of the group's name, which is playfully rendered in the Romani language. The occasion was the launch of their first CD *Jekh Duj Trin Shtar*, Romani for "One, Two, Three, Four" (just as

one gets at the outset of the Beatles “I Saw Her Standing There”, which, curiously enough, I heard just a few minutes ago. My, my, things really do connect out in the ether at times.) Anyway Le Gazhikane Muzikante launched its craft and it did so with aplomb. They opened with a tremendous piece called *Ben Seni Sevdugumi*, which I was saddened not to find on the CD (next time, I hope) but whose mood can be gauged in the lovely *Zapjevala Sojka Ptica*, (track 8 of the CD) and from thereon they presented a musical tour of that very difficult zone of Europe.

What was musically intriguing was the somewhat unorthodox inclusion of a cello (Katherine Henderson) which immediately summons the question of authenticity, but its presence, an inspired choice, gave additional depth to the overall sound. The percussionist (Seppi Pogadl) did what the best percussionists do best, which is to do a great deal with very little. The accordions (Elana Solomon live, Ana Reisinger on the CD) and clarinet (Clare Southworth) brought the musical puzzle to a happy conclusion with what might be described as solid traditional features. The guitar while not virtuosic is steady, rhythmic, and keeps the whole together, as does, of course, Antonio Riva’s mellifluous and sonorous voice. There is, I hazard to say, an Italianate edge in his voice, which, again, is not a detriment but an enhancement. This said, his mastery of languages is such that often he is addressed in them by people who think he is of their tribe. The second half of their set opened with *Gelem Gelem* which has come to serve as the Romani anthem. It provided the title of Yaron Matras’s recent book on the Romani people *I Met Happy People* (Allen Lane, 2014), a book that ought to be on the reading list of anyone interested in Romani music. The song, although it came from the terrible circumstances of the *Porajmos*, the Romani holocaust of the Second World War, at times feels too much a contradiction in terms, an anthem for a scattered and indeed shattered people. But then what in Romani culture is not contradictory? It is almost as though the song, as anthem, goes against the very rootlessness that is at the heart of their deeply troubled history. It is, after all, the absence of an anchor that produced Romani culture.

Such was the group’s performance and so, too, the recording they have given us. They are to be congratulated for their verve. The question is whether one can be sufficiently steeped in the music of another culture to be able to produce anything other than a mere facsimile of it. This rather goes back to the question everyone was asking in the 1960s, “Can white men sing the blues?” It is an argument upon which people became hopelessly ensnared, to the point of being tediously academic, and it was something of a relief when suburban

whites stopped declaring what is or is not real and tuned up their instruments instead and played even though with varying degrees of success. There were embarrassing moments and there was, spare us, much too much self-indulgence. There were also some brilliant successes. My memory of the young John Hammond, for example, is that of a blues musician who dissolved the line between black and white. Still the question of authenticity is an important one. I do not think Le Gazhikane Muzikante is so vainglorious as to think it can wholly capture the *duende* of the different traditions whose music it seeks to emulate, but with considerable conviction they do what probably very few, if any, of the musicians from any single one of those separate cultures can do and present a wide spectrum of music, covering a huge expanse of territory and differing traditions, and in as many as seven or eight different languages. It is an ambitious project and one that is driven wholly by a love of the music, underlined, I suspect, with a certain amount of scholarship, and indeed I now discover that Riva has studied the Romani language. The group is, in turn, loveable. I mean loveable as to the truthfulness of what it pursues. It also needs to be said that the music they play extends to non-Gypsy folk songs from Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, Greece, Macedonia, Turkey and the Black Sea. Also, it is true to say that while Riva closely studies the musical traditions behind the songs he plays rather than ape them he applies his own arrangements. It strikes me as the most sensible option to pursue, rather than to seek to duplicate what can never be duplicated.

When I spoke to Riva on the matter of what comprises Gypsy music his response was succinct: ‘In reality, there is no such thing as *true* Gypsy music. Many people think of it as crazy beat brass band music but that is only one branch of the music. The music is nothing other than the folk music of any specific group of Romani people living in a particular place, which is to say there are as many forms of Gypsy music as there are Gypsy groups, which, although similar in many respects, differ according to geographical location, history and linguistic variations in specific Romani dialects.’ Clearly Riva loves to lose himself in those dialects and so although it might appear a contradiction with respect to what it is an artist seeks to do, which is to communicate, he likes to express himself in languages that not everyone understands, and which is to underline a truism that in the end the deeper forms of communication, particularly in music, are much more than verbal. They are as much a matter of what is conveyed with one’s body, one’s facial expressions, and the timbre of one’s voice. Music, in this respect, has become for Riva a form of travel and indeed in performing the music he aims to take his audience on a journey. It is also for him a journey through time, to

the very roots of European music. Riva comments: ‘There are some harmonic structures that sound ancient and remote, but which at the same time resonate inside one. The music I play retains musical patterns that recall our past. If some Balkan tunes tend to sound “mediaeval” well, that’s because I believe they are. So the music is a journey not just through geography but time as well.’ The musician, by default, becomes storyteller.

When speaking to someone as enthusiastic as Antonio Riva one wants always to discover somewhere a solid foundation upon which to settle, something, no matter how big or how small, in which can be located the roots of that passion. One goes in pursuit of the perpetually fugitive, of course, for any number of factors go into the making of an artist. I will settle, rather, on a happy image. When Riva was a small boy a young Romani woman came to the family home, asking for some clothes for her children. She followed Antonio’s mother inside the house. It was, as Riva recalls, a strangely brittle moment. There was, perhaps, some jangling of nerves. The young woman was given some clothes. When she saw young Antonio she took him in her arms, gently lulled him, and whispered Romani words into his ear. ‘Who knows what she said to me,’ says the older Riva. *Roots?* This may not be them, not precisely, but then might they not be?

Marius Kociejowski, 2015