



# YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE...

## FANFARE CIOCĂRLIA

Sala Palatului, Bucharest, Romania, December 7 2006

Early December and Bucharest's grimy centre is swathed in fog and ice. EU membership is less than a month away but little about the city Ceaușescu ruined offers grounds for optimism. Yet tonight something special is happening with large numbers of citizens entering the vast Sala Palatului (national cultural palace): the evening of December 7 finds Romania's Fanfare Ciocărlia making their Bucharest debut at the nation's most prestigious theatre.

Fanfare Ciocărlia, the brass orchestra from north-east Romania, have conquered the globe over the past decade, their hugely powerful sound having made them the most internationally popular of Balkan Gypsy bands and helped them win the BBC Radio 3 Europe Planet Award in 2006. So it appears odd that they've never before performed in their nation's capital. But, this being Romania, things don't always make sense.

Backstage Fanfare are nervous. To help celebrate the event, they have invited

Above: Fanfare Ciocărlia's first ever concert in their own capital city, featuring the queen of Gypsy, Esma Redžepova and dancer Tantica (below)

Above right: Fanfare Ciocărlia's Oprică Ivancea on the sax and Costică 'Cimăi' Trifan on trumpet

some noted friends along: from France there's Kaloomé, from Bulgaria Jony and Boril Iliev and from Macedonia the queen herself, Esma Redžepova. These (and several other) artists have joined Fanfare during the recordings of their forthcoming album *Queens & Kings Sing Tales of Gypsy Life* so tonight's concert is not only the Bucharest debut but the first outing for the new material.

At 8pm Perpignan's Kaloomé take the stage, the trio of flamenco guitars and *cajón* warming the chill night. As their third number begins two tuba and two French horns arrive on stage and soon all the members of Fanfare are there to deliver a roaring rendition of 'Iag Bari'.

Bulgaria's Jony and Boril Iliev are the next guests, Jony singing soulfully while Boril confirms he's one of the Balkans' great brass musicians. Then Esma Redžepova strides on stage. Esma is a tiny woman yet possesses a huge voice and the Bucharest audience are

awestruck by this icon of Gypsy artistry.

Fanfare take back the stage again, playing with almost frightening power. Unlike so much loud or fast music, Fanfare always temper their sonic attack

with imaginative instrumental verve and gracious wit. The Bucharest audience, most of whom only discovered Fanfare after they won the Radio 3 award, appear both stunned and entertained. They then launch into Roma anthem 'Djelem, Djelem', with Esma taking lead vocals and all the guests joining on stage to sing and play as one.

What's most moving about the festival unfolding is not the interaction between the different musicians – which is almost expected, Gypsies being legendary musical adaptors – but how the absence of Ioan Ivancea, Fanfare Ciocărlia's clarinet-playing patriarch, who died in October 2006, is not causing the band to fray. His son, Oprică Ivancea, is playing with such wild freedom that Fanfare sound more powerful than ever.

Fanfare invite audience members to join them and Bucharest roars approval, knowing it's witnessing something very special. Post-gig the mood is one of celebration. "Let's tour Romania," the band suggest. Even a few years ago this concept would have been ridiculous. But as the nation looks West and *manele* (electronic Gypsy pop) appears to be losing its stranglehold, maybe the time is right for Romanians to finally embrace the great beauty their nation produces.

Garth Cartwright

