

# Fanfare Ciocarlia, Old Bailey, London Yasmin Levy, Union Chapel, Islington, London

Reviewed by Tim Cumming  
Thursday, 7 February 2008

It's the end of a sell-out tour that began at the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow and ended in the basement of a Romanian restaurant on Old Bailey in the City of London. The restaurant's basement had been cleared of tables and chairs, and it's standing room only for the heaving mass of revellers close to the stage.

Fanfare Ciocarlia, the 12-strong brass band from Zece Prajini in north-eastern Romania, were first discovered a decade ago, when a German sound engineer, Henry Ernst, who now runs the band's record label Asphalt Tango, convinced the local musicians to form a touring band.

Tonight wasn't an official date on the tour calendar; but it's the perfect place to see Fanfare Ciocarlia in action – playing, literally, in your face as the trumpeters Radulescu Lazar, Paul Marian Bulgaru and Costica Trifan take turns to blast out searing solos. With frontman Dan Ivancea and his two brothers weaving their way in to the opening Vivaldi on saxes and clarinet, they hit the ground running, storming through the punchy opening numbers before slowing down for the beautiful "Lume, Lume".

The likes of "Ah Ya Bibi" and "Caravane" get a big cheer, and as Fanfare launch into the second set with the exuberant, massive riffing of "Asfalt Tango" (the track Basement Jaxx sampled on their 2006 song "Hey U"), they are pumping out the hardest, hottest Balkan brass in the world.

By the closing track, "Presentarea", complete with an astonishing drum solo from Costel Ursu, the band are taking requests – the classic Saban Bajramovic number, "Sandala", before easing into a majestic rumba, the magical sound snaking up the stairs to the smokers on the street, and drawing a good proportion of them back down after the last train has gone and the last note has been wrung from this phenomenal band.

The Israeli singer Yasmin Levy melds the Ladino tradition – the Judeo-Spanish Sephardic culture of 15th-century Moorish Spain – with flamenco. Many of the tracks tonight are parting, broken-hearted songs, while "La Alegria" is almost a pop-soul anthem. With Levy's warm but unerring professionalism as a performer, it is music that could work just as well in Las Vegas as in Jerusalem.

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