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## Big and brassy in the Balkans

A gypsy brass band from Romania is finding fame on the world stage  
 BY GARTH CARTWRIGHT

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**IT IS** not on any map. True places never are" wrote Herman Melville in Moby-Dick. While Melville was thinking of uncharted islands in the vast Pacific ocean, his epigram proves true for Zece Prajini, a village in northeast Romania often described as "invisible".

Zece Prajini remains unmapped not simply due to the late Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's banning of maps - the paranoid president feared enemies would use them to plot an invasion - but because this tiny hamlet exists in what could be described as "a land that time forgot", so agrarian and undeveloped is the surrounding countryside. Still, I have no fear about finding it as I am travelling with Henry Ernst, a German music entrepreneur who literally put the village on the world's musical map. Alongside Memphis and New Orleans, musical tourists now travel to this isolated outpost, home to Fanfare Ciocarlia - the world's leading Balkan brass band and, arguably, the greatest live music experience going.

Ernst thought he knew Romania, having spent 20 years travelling around making field recordings of musicians. Then one day a farmer told him about a village of brass musicians.

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"It took some time to find," Ernst recalls, "but when I arrived and said I was interested in hearing music, within a couple of minutes the entire village - 400 people, including 40 musicians - were gathered and a party started."

The brass played in Zece Prajini was faster and more furious than anything Ernst had heard before, a music of great intensity yet filled with joy and perfect for getting a party going. Which is appropriate: the musicians plied their trade at weddings and festivities across the Moldavian region.

Ernst had come for the day but ended up staying for three months. Then he sold all his belongings, set up Asphalt Tango Productions and took the musicians - who until then had scratched a living as farmers or labourers - on tour.

Since then Fanfare Ciocarlia have become a major international attraction, releasing five superb albums and winning the BBC Radio World Music Award for Best European Artist in 2006. Last year they headlined the Cambridge Folk Festival, where Joan Baez joined them on stage as an honorary belly dancer. They've appeared in several films (including the recently released Gypsy Caravan) and become favourites with Russian oligarchs who hire them

to play at their feasts. Along the way they have unintentionally managed to create the Balkan Beats club craze. Not bad for a bunch of farmers who dress in polyester suits and possess little knowledge of the outside world.

The live forum is certainly the best way to experience Fanfare, as Glaswegians will find out this week when the band performs at the Celtic Connections festival. Their energy and imagination make it impossible not to get up and dance - or at least grin like a maniac - so infectious is the roar of pumping tubas and sour trumpets.

Back in north-east Romania, the dirt road we're travelling on coils around a hill and, as we start to descend, Zece Prajini (whose name means "10 acres") comes into sight.

As we arrive in Zece Prajini, children surround the van and musicians arrive in horse and carts, waving their brass instruments before blowing a welcoming fanfare. Ernst is a hero here and we're immediately made welcome. The temperature is below freezing so everyone quickly moves to the village's only bar, where we are served shots of tuica, a potent home-made plum brandy. I enquire as to what the band expect of their Scottish debut. The answer? Lots of kilts and an audience who resemble the cast of Braveheart.

I first visited Zece Prajini in 2003 while researching my book Princes Amongst Men: Journeys With Gypsy Musicians. Returning now, little appears to have changed, although the musicians' increasing wealth means houses are growing more and more ostentatious - some now even have indoor toilets. But the musicians first built a church - the only Gypsy church in Romania - and I'm sure tomorrow we will be called on to attend a service: Fanfare believe God has answered their prayers, so they like to offer praise.

Fanfare's brass sound is itself a legacy of the Ottoman Empire's military bands and can be found in various forms across the

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Balkans. Balkan brass first came to international prominence when it featured in Emir Kusturica's Palm d'Or-winning film *Underground* in 1996. Back then, the war in the former Yugoslavia meant brass bands from Serbia (a particular stronghold) were unable to tour internationally, so Fanfare has fortuitously found a Western audience ready to rave to trumpets and tubas.

"It was a big surprise when we first went to Germany and found the Germans liked our music," says Monel, one of the band's three tuba players. "Then the Americans liked us. And Japan! Who would have thought the Japanese could like us? Now we go everywhere - Australia, Israel, Brazil - and always we get a great audience. I hope the Scottish will like us too."

Of all the Balkan nations, Romania possesses both the largest Gypsy population - 2.5 million is a rough estimate - and the richest reservoirs of Gypsy music. Oddly, under Ceaucescu, superb recordings were made of Bucharest's finest fiddlers and singers. But communism denied Gypsy musicians the opportunity to be heard by Western audiences.

What remained hidden was the legacy of hundreds of years performing at Eastern inns and courts: Catherine the Great had her own Gypsy orchestra and dancers, reputedly drawn from Moldavia. Ernst's Asphalt Tango Productions has recently rescued the master tapes of Romania's communist-era Gypsy recordings and started issuing them in the *Sounds From A Bygone Age* series.

A question I'm often asked - and spend much time pondering - is why Europe's Gypsies produce so many feted musicians. Musicologists make links to India's ancient musical castes - the people we call Gypsies left India around 1000 years ago and, upon entering Constantinople, they were mistaken for Egyptians. But a more pragmatic theory suggests this marginalised people focused on trades that were in demand: music-making was one, as a means of escaping drudge labour and discrimination. Fathers taught sons and the legacy continued.

"Maybe it's a gift from God," says Daniel Ivancea, the band's saxophonist, when I put the question to him. "But it's also a question of study. No Gypsy is simply a great musician. Like anybody else they must practise and study, then maybe they can be good."

When the Berlin Wall fell, Taraf de Haidouks, a string band from south western Romania, were first off the block and quickly won large audiences and much praise. Fanfare followed and since then musicians from across the Balkans have won wide international audiences. This year's Celtic Connections programme also features Serbia's Balkanopolis and Croatia's Kries - but Fanfare retain the heavyweight title by never repeating themselves: each album and tour is a fresh event. Thus Sacha Baron Cohen commissioned Fanfare to record rock standard *Born To Be Wild* for the Borat film soundtrack, having heard the band's take on the James Bond Theme and Duke Ellington's *Caravan* on their hugely enjoyable *Gili Garabdi* album.

In Zece Prajini, the tuica is still flowing and everyone is getting merry. A visit from Ernst is always a cause for celebration, but I need answers before things fall apart. Why, I ask trumpet player Cimai, has the West so embraced the band?

"Maybe we bring them something fresh," he replies, passing me another tuica. "We are open to all music," he continues when I pester him about his band's current in-demand status, "that's what makes the Gypsy musicians special. When we played weddings we needed to know every request - TV themes, pop hits, folk songs - or else we might get a beating. I enjoy meeting the young Western musicians. Maybe they don't play so good, maybe the DJs make a mess with our music. But we are a generous people and share our sound."

Evening descends. The tuica keeps flowing. A makeshift band begins to jam. I step outside for fresh air and hear a barnyard chorus of animals. From an invisible village in north-east Romania to Glasgow's Old Fruitmarket appears a huge distance but Fanfare Ciocarlia will, undoubtedly, deliver. Just remember: they expect kilts Fanfare Ciocarlia, Old Fruitmarket, January 24, 8pm

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Posted by: Mr P Dantic, Czech Republic on 9:58am Sun 20 Jan 08

I guess Fanfare must find it difficult to keep track of all the countries they've played in as they have in fact played in Glasgow before - at the Royal Concert Hall, the Fruitmarket and then an incredible impromptu smaller-scale gig at the Riverside Club (all on the same day!) back in September 2000. It was an unforgettable day for me, though perhaps another musical blur for them!

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Posted by: Lavinia, Bucharest, Romania....now in Thailand on 3:57am Tue 22 Jan 08

i am really pleased that good things are said about Romanians and gypsies in Romania...and indeed I've heard them before and they are magnificent:) ...these are the kind of stories you don't hear much about anymore:)

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Posted by: Brass Band CD's, UK on 2:07pm Tue 22 Jan 08

You really can't beat a brass bands for authentic music and uplifting melodies.

**[www.brassbandinformation.co.uk](http://www.brassbandinformation.co.uk)**

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