

Ioan Ivancea

Magician of music who perfected his craft behind the Iron Curtain and introduced Balkan beats to world audiences

ARNE REINHART / ROMANIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTE LONDON

Ten years ago Ioan Ivancea was a peasant in a remote part of eastern Romania who played soprano clarinet at weddings, wakes and other gatherings. When he died, the Gypsy was the leader of a band that as Fanfare Ciocarlia had made many recordings, toured the world, been the subject of a film and was in the vanguard of a dance-club trend.

He was born into the Ursari clan of Gypsies in Zece Prajini, near the Moldovan border. Most of the few hundred inhabitants of this wretched settlement, for long lacking electricity and other modern facilities but beautifully situated among the Carpathian mountains, make a poor living from smallholdings. Some of its Romany majority earn a little extra from playing in brass bands, using sousaphones, cornets, trumpets, clarinets, timpani and huge drums borne on stomachs only slightly smaller, in a genre inherited from the Turkish military during the time of Ottoman rule.

Ivancea started doodling on a clarinet soon after learning to walk, which was a joy to his musician father, whom he did not see until the age of 7. The man had struggled back from the Soviet labour camp to which he had been consigned for having had the temerity to be conscripted as a soldier by the Romanian fascist regime, then the misfortune to be captured by the Red Army.

It was not the end of his misfortune: the year was 1947, and in December the "people's republic" was proclaimed: Ivancea Sr was again within the Soviet empire. Two years later, as collectivisation started, farmers were being sent to work in heavy industry, and when the young Ivancea grew

up, he was assigned to a steel mill. His home-grown talent ensured that he also became leader of the factory band.

For decades he worked and played in obscurity, known only among rural folk for his group's ability to keep everyone awake at parties for several days. And then he was discovered in 1996 by a young Westerner. Henry Ernst was a German sound engineer — until, while visiting eastern Romania, he heard Ivancea's outfit, which even under the repressive dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu had, via illicitly tuned radios, seamlessly absorbed Beatles and other pop hits into its performances, to raucous and stunning effect.

Democracy had stepped on to the Romanian stage in

In Zece Prajini the ancient secrets of Gypsy magic live

December 1989, so Ernst, turning promoter, was able to organise a tour of Germany for the group, now called Fanfare (a misspelling of fanfara — orchestra) Ciocarlia, the Skylark Band.

Its ease at merging traditional melodies with pop tunes as seemingly unsuited to wind instruments as the James Bond theme, in a staccato high-energy style, was new to Western audiences, and offers of work flowed. The next ten years were spent touring and recording CDs — four of them, all blending Balkan with Turkish, Bulgarian, Macedonian and Klezmer folk music, as well as rumba, Bavarian oom-pah-pah, and Arabic rhythms — and they still sell well.

In 2002 Fanfare Ciocarlia starred in a 103-minute, 35mm

documentary that depicted their humble origins, their travels and their performances, including one in Tokyo announced, in the bizarre kind of English used only in Japan, as part of "The Trans Europe Fes: Gypsy Summer Expansion". The Fes-goers were particularly excited by the 12-man ensemble's unlikely conversion of the Jamaica-born Shaggy's simplistic *Mr Lover Lover* into a piece of musical virtuosity.

Back in Romania, Ivancea still raged against the tide of racism that had swept across the formerly communist countries since the Marxist system collapsed in the late 1990s. He was always puzzled by the way in which non-Gypsies could deride his ethnicity while at the same time envying Romanies as wild, free-flying spirits.

Yet he was not above a bit of romantic nonsense himself, once telling a journalist: "We are magicians of music and in Zece Prajini the ancient secrets of Gypsy magic live." A few months ago the "magic" stopped. Cancer was diagnosed and Ivancea was advised to go to hospital. He refused, spending his last hours with family, as Romany tradition prefers.

He is survived by Maria, whom he married 42 years ago, two daughters and five sons. Three of them play in the band, which is likely to continue: Eastern Europe is rich with Gypsy talent, and as Western DJs mix the music to widen its appeal, dance clubs in Berlin, New York, Los Angeles, although less so in London so far, are demanding more.

Ioan Ivancea, musician, was born on January 4, 1940. He died on October 20, 2006, aged 66

Steve Benbow

Guitarist who, after being at the forefront of a folk revival, was a leading influence for British folk artists

Steve Benbow was a mainstay of the English folk scene for half a century. A fine performer who recorded more than two dozen LPs and was once dubbed "Britain's first folk guitarist", he also collected songs, ran clubs, encouraged younger artists and generally proselytised for the music he loved, in the firm belief that maintaining the folk tradition was always more important than personal ambition. With performances on television and radio in the late 1950s and 1960s, he was a seminal influence on a whole generation of folk guitarists.

Born Stephen George Benbow in Tooting, London, in 1931, his family soon moved to

Hooley, Surrey, where he remembered milking his first cow at the age of 5. At Reigate Grammar School he showed an aptitude for languages, speaking French and German. He also learnt Arabic from his father who had spent time in Egypt in the Camel Corps.

However, when he left school in 1947, he took a job as a farmhand in Axminster, Devon. In 1950 he was called up to the Army and joined the Royal Veterinary Corps, serving as a mule breaker and dog handler in Egypt, where his language skills were also put to good use.

It was while stationed in the Middle East that he bought his first guitar and he was soon entertaining the troops, performing songs by the likes of country star Jimmie Rodgers and American folk singer Burl Ives on forces radio and reportedly singing in eight different languages.

On his return to Britain in 1955, he went back to farming,

but realised swiftly that he could make more money playing in pubs a few times a week, with the additional advantage that a musical life did not require him to rise before dawn. He landed a gig playing trad jazz with Dave Kier's Jazz Band but also began accompanying the leading singers of the English folk revival that was under way at the time, such as Ewan McColl and A.L. Lloyd, both on their recordings and in concert.

By 1957 he had launched his own solo recording career with EMI, beginning with *Steve Benbow Sings English Folk Songs* and a companion volume called *Steve Benbow Sings American Folk Songs*.

Over the next 20 years he recorded around two dozen albums, one of which was produced by EMI staff man George Martin, shortly before he began working with an unknown group from Liverpool called the Beatles. Sometimes

nicknamed "Tiger", he was mostly a solo artist but for a time had a group called the Steve Benbow Folk Four, which included Jimmy McGregor and appeared with the Sonny Stewart Skiffle Kings, Chas McDevitt's Skiffle Group and the Brady Boys among others.

He also became a regular broadcaster, appearing on the 1950s television shows *Guitar Club*, *The Saturday Skiffle Club* and *Easy Beat*. In the early 1960s he hosted a weekly folk slot called *Have Guitar Will Travel* on Radio Luxembourg, the only folk singer to appear on the pop station. Yet although his love of folk music was profound he was no purist, as he made clear in a sometimes iconoclastic weekly column he wrote in *Melody Maker*.

He was also well known in country and western circles and his gigs were famous for his witty repartee, which may have ac-

counted for how he came to work with Spike Milligan on a 1963 stage show in the West End of London, which also led to them collaborating on the television series *Muses with Milligan*. Always ready to encourage other artists, he also produced recordings for the likes of Dominic Behan and Christy Moore.

By the late 1970s he had stopped recording and resumed his interest in animal husbandry, keeping goats, chickens, donkeys and even a pony and trap. But he returned to recording in 2003 with *Don't Monkey with My Gun*, his first album in 25 years, and continued performing in local folk clubs in West London until a week before his death.

He is survived by his wife, Sandie.

Steve Benbow, guitarist, was born on November 29, 1931. He died on November 17, 2006, aged 74

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