A pre-concert talk by Dr. David Gramit begins at 7:15 PM

Gypsy or Roma culture is rich with music and dance. Much of what outsiders have assumed was “gypsy” culture was actually music adopted by the itinerant or professional gypsy musicians for the entertainment of their patrons. Brahms and Liszt, for instance, both assumed what they heard at cafés and campfires to be true gypsy folk music. More often than not, they were hearing urban popular music derived from folk music or composed by lesser-known artists. Authentically “sourced” or not, the Roma musical performance culture made a profound impact on classical music. Ultimately, it was the unbridled spirit of the Roma performers which inspired 18th century musicians to paraphrase this music. In the case of the 19th century, the tradition of the improvisatory musician - as if playing off the cuff of his soul – married perfectly with the romantic spirit. The “gypsy” represented something both “exotic” and an unspoiled part of “nature,” a true font of musical imagination. This evening we will hear compositions inspired by the Gypsy or Roma culture. We will also hear music closer to the source, giving us an idea of why such performances would have set these composers on fire.

Joseph Haydn’s (1732-1809) patrons, the Esterhazys of Hungary, employed gypsy musicians. The gypsies functioned as recruiters, playing the verbunkos (music for recruiting soldiers) or entertaining the court. It is certain that Haydn would have encountered these musicians. In his Trio in G major, Hob. XV: 25, Haydn concludes the work with a “Rondo all‘ Ongarese” (Hungarian or Gypsy Rondo). The trio was composed in 1795 while the composer was in London, and is part of a series of three trios dedicated to Rebecca Schoedter. From Haydn’s correspondence, we learn of a likely (but discreet) affair between the 60-year-old married composer and the 40-year-old widow. Schoedter was not only enamored of the composer, but also fond and supportive of his music. In Haydn’s trios, the piano is the primary instrument; the violin is an additional voice and generally the cello extends the expressive capacity of the piano. The first movement of Haydn’s G major trio is a delightful variation set on a charming melody. In the middle adagio movement, the piano and violin share a songlike theme. It is in the finale where we hear the traces of the peasant folkdance style of the gypsy musician, touched with a good deal of humor.
***

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) was not particularly fond of what he saw as “gypsy” music. He noted that the Roma café performers were playing Magyar and other Hungarian and Romanian melodies, but the tunes were distorted by the ornate performance style, obscuring the source material. Bartók and his colleague, Zoltán Kodály, were not only composers but also pioneering ethnomusicologists. They spent months living with peasants, recording and transcribing their “old style” folk melodies. As an academic and artist, Bartók was searching for the original folk music of Hungary. He believed that to understand it would allow him to cultivate a national style based in the roots of his country, rather than in an imitation of café music.

Bartók’s **Rhapsody no. 1 for cello and piano** is dedicated to the Hungarian violin virtuoso Joseph Szigeti. Szigeti had earlier transcribed some of the pieces from Bartók’s “For Children” to play in concert. Bartók was so pleased with Szigeti’s treatment of the music that he and Szigeti played together in 1926. The Rhapsody was composed in 1928 and transcribed for cello the following year. The Rhapsody is a prime example of how Bartók, the modernist and nationalist, married folk music with classical music. Somehow the folk melody and primitive performance style shines through, despite the occasional radical harmonies in the piano accompaniment. The piece is divided into the two parts of a traditional *czardas: lassú and friss* (slow and fast). The *Lassú* begins with an earthy tune (probably from Romania) over a bagpipe-like drone. A tender middle section, almost declamatory with the Hungarian short-fast snaps, provides a serious contrast to the opening tune. The *Friss* begins with a merry, light folk tune followed by a series of upbeat folk tunes.

***

Leó Weiner (1885-1960) was a contemporary of Bartók. Although not an ethnomusicologist, he too turned to Hungarian folk music to develop his own Hungarian national style. Generally his music is more conservative than other early 20th century composers, but he was a facile and gifted musician. Weiner was also a prominent educator, teaching at the Budapest Academy for most of his life. He is credited as an exceptional chamber music coach, making a significant impact on the Hungarian chamber musicians of his time. The **Divertimento no. 1, op. 20** is subtitled “Old Hungarian Dances.” Each of the five movements is based on a Hungarian tune or dance style. “A good czardas” is based on the national folk dance of Hungary. The “Fox’s Dance” is a charming tune which has become very popular in Weiner’s own piano arrangement. The “Waltz of the town of Marosszék” is a curious off-kilter waltz. The “March” or “Verbunkos” is based on the classic Hungarian military recruiting dance. The work concludes with “Stamping Dance” or “Pestle Dance.” A stamping dance was a social gathering where peasant villagers would come together to pack down and smooth the clay floors of a neighbor’s new barn.

***

In 1924, a composer with a flair for the exotic, Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), composed his **Tzigane, Rhapsodie de concert pour violon et piano (ou luthéral)**. Tzigane was composed for and dedicated to the brilliant Hungarian violinist Jelly d’Aranyi, a descendant of the famous violinist Joseph Joachim. D’Aranyi had come to Ravel’s attention by mastering and performing his Violin and Cello Sonata a few months after its premiere. At a gathering of musicians soon after this performance, according to the pianist Gaby Casadesus, Ravel asked d’Aranyi to play some Gypsy melodies she remembered from her homeland. The violinist obliged with one tune after another until the wee hours of the morning. Two years later, Ravel completed the Tzigane for D’Aranyi.
Ravel originally scored the work for violin and luthéal, a special piano adapted with a metal bar lightly touching its strings. The effect supposedly resembled a cimbalom, the Hungarian hammered dulcimer, so common in Gypsy bands. The luthéal thankfully fell into obscurity and Tzigane is most often heard with orchestral or piano accompaniment.

From the start, Tzigane projects a colorful portrait of a lone gypsy violinist improvising (beneath the light of the moon, perhaps). The work is similar in architecture to the lassú/friß (slow/fast) arrangement of the Bartók Rhapsody. Ravel poses many serious technical challenges to the violinist in order to convey the wizardry of the gypsy performer.

***

Few tunes could more immediately invoke the idea of "Gypsy" music than Brahms' 5th Hungarian Dance. To modern listeners, this tune has almost become a parody of "Gypsy" music. To Johannes Brahms, the tune sprung from the unbridled spirit of the musicians at the Café Czarda or perhaps gypsies heard while touring with the Hungarian violinist, Eduard Reményi in the 1850s. Inspired by the music, Brahms composed a number of "Hungarian" dances, which he would perform for friends or share in manuscript with Clara Schumann, who occasionally played them in recitals. In 1869, he committed ten of them to paper. For Brahms, this Gypsy or Hungarian music was a journey into a soundscape of exotic melodies and improvisational style. It is likely that Brahms believed the tunes to be original Gypsy music, probably having first heard them from his friend Reményi. Many of them were, in fact, composed tunes of others. For example, the tune from the first dance is likely the "Sacred Czadas" by Fervency Sarkozi. The fifth and most famous is from a tune by Béla Kéler.

Aside from the tunes, the compositions are distinctly the music of Brahms. The guise of composing in the Hungarian fashion provided Brahms the liberty to explore cross-rhythms, extravagant rubato, and exotic cadences for the delight of these elements, unfettered by the demands of sonata form and Brahms' own "developing variation" practices. The Hungarian dances were originally published in a four-hand arrangement. They were so popular, the composer made a two-hand version shortly thereafter.

***

The final three works on our concert are written in the spirit of the pyrotechnical gypsy virtuosi who inspired so much of the music we have heard this evening. The next works are two original compositions and one arrangement composed for violinist Lara St. John, whose interest in ethnically inspired music has also served as an inspiration for these composers.

The Klezmer styles that developed in the shtetls of Eastern Europe evolved shoulder-to-shoulder with gypsy performance styles. One type of dance tends to dominate when we hear Klezmer: the Freilach, a joyful dance (from Yiddish, "cheerful" or "festive"). The Freilach is most recognizable from the 3-3-2 rhythm in the melody. In Freilach no. 19, Matt Herskowitz transforms this performance tradition with his own synthesis of ethnic, jazz and classical traditions. Contrary to type, this Freilach begins in a brooding manner, gradually developing into an ecstatic frenzy.

About Falling, the third and last piece from the “Russian Evening Suite” written for Ms. St. John, Gene Pritsker writes, “In these variations I took 3 famous songs from Russia and developed their beautiful and original melodies. I was born there, so I have known these songs all my life, and nothing was more natural for me than to put these melodies through my own spectrum of how I understand music. I kept the melodic content which I find to be unique, intact, but altered the harmonic language dramatically
and added a virtuoso element for the violin and piano. 'Falling' is based on a song called 'Evening is Falling.' This melody has that distinct sound of Russian Gypsy music that is simple, free and yet deeply sad. I enjoyed playing with the tension and release of form in this movement, constantly bringing the music to a climax only to deliver it into a melancholy reflection.”

Among the famous lăutari of the 20th century, none can compare to the manic cimbalom (hammer dulcimer) performer, **Toni Iordache** (1942-1988). Iordache was famous not only for his breathtaking virtuosity, but his sophistication and sensitivity in slower passages. This evening we hear **Ca la Breaza** in a transcription based on Iordache’s performance. The melody is a well-known dance tune from western Romania. Violinist Lara St. John writes that she “first heard ‘Ca la Breaza’ some years ago on my scratchy old '78 recording of Toni Iordache... Although a lot of Romanian Gypsy music is very fleet, this one actually always left me breathless – I think I would hold my breath till the end, unwittingly. When I decided to have it transcribed for violin and piano, I added in a lot of ricochet (flying spiccato) in varying rhythms, partly to create that hammer effect, and partly so I would, in fact, be winded at the end.” Michael Atkinson transcribed the Iordache performance for Ms. St. John.