



THE CIMBALOM

If you were proposing to perform a concert of Gypsy melodies, it would strengthen your case if you had a cimbalom. The earliest form of this haunting instrument was an Arabian version called the kanun, a musical sound box with strings strung across one or two bridges and struck with a pair of metal mallets. Early Asiatic nomads from Mongolia and China as well as roaming Gypsies from India spread it to all parts of Europe and the Middle East, like so much wheat. It evolved into many different shapes and sizes, variously called, in Germany, the hackbrett; in Italy, the psalterio; in England, the dulcimer; in Austria, the zither; and in Hungary and Romania, the cimbalom. Admittedly, the modern version of the instrument has strayed somewhat from its mobile roots. Developed by József V. Schunda in the late 19th century, with a pedal to make softer playing possible, it can weigh up to 200 pounds!

— Jeannie Mellinger

In the Symphony's January "Passport to Hungary" concerts, Petra Berényi will show us how it's done in Kamilló Lendvay's Concertino Semplice for Cimbalom and Orchestra. Here's what Petra told us about her instrument:

What are the challenges of the cimbalom?

PETRA BERÉNYI: Mostly tuning and transporting! Since the strings are divided by one or two bridges, upper strings offer three different pitches. While you tune the middle pitch, the two sides should be in tune. Most of the time they are not. Then you get your copper screwdriver-like tool and a hammer to adjust the little brass pieces on the side. How fun! Takes forever...

When did you learn to play the cimbalom?

PB: I began at the age of six. In Budapest, several music schools teach this wonderful instrument. My ear-training teacher thought that since I am left-handed, I wouldn't be able to play a stringed instrument. (She was wrong; I became a violist as well.) I agreed to learn the cimbalom because every music school had at least two of them, and I thought I wouldn't have to carry it to the school

and home. Nobody warned me that, as a professional, I would have to carry it everywhere.

What do you love about it?

PB: I love that basically anything can be played on it! You can play almost the whole repertoire, from Baroque to Modern, including Bach's organ pieces, the Goldberg Variations, French and English suites, solo violin and cello works. I have also done Couperin, Rameau, Domenico Scarlatti, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Janacek, Paganini and many others. We cimbalom players usually make our own transcriptions, but there are many original works written for the ancient type of cimbalom. Leopold Mozart knew it, mostly as a folk instrument, and wrote a part for it in "Die Bauernhochzeit" Symphony.

We use many different kinds of mallets, which open a wide horizon of changing colors, something other instruments like piano cannot do easily. It really gives composers new possibilities if they let their imagination fly. We all keep searching for new sounds; on the cimbalom, through the use of new techniques.