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Love stories behind the Iron Curtain

From the mid-1950s Swiss businessman Marcel Cellier negotiated with Communist regimes in Eastern Europe on shipments of ore for the Swiss metal industry. At the same time, in the middle of the Cold War, he showed to the Western world how melodies from the East could melt hearts. He introduced the West to Hungarian gypsy music, the plaintive tones of the Romanian pan flute and the archaic-sounding harmonies of Bulgarian female choirs.

By Marc Lettau

You could picture this scene in any cosy Swiss living room: there is a “listeners’ choice” concert on the radio, a pan flute can be heard through the speakers, and the lady of the house says: “Ah! Zamfir!” And her husband responds: “Exactly! Zamfir, with James Last.” Pan-flute player Gheorghe Zamfir, who grew up in isolated, Communist Romania, has been a firm favourite in Swiss households for decades. The ethereal tones of his pan flute are frequently heard in hotel foyers and shopping centres and are a popular listeners’ choice for music programmes. The average Swiss record collection is also highly likely to include some pieces from “Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares”. After all, even George Harrison of the Beatles enthused about the other-worldly, archaic sounds produced by the Bulgarian female choir. “Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares” has long been regarded as perhaps the most successful example of the World Music genre. It actually won a Grammy Award in 1990. Even the youth of today in Switzerland are fond of Eastern European music. In clubs, remixes of music from the Roma people of Eastern Europe and Balkan pop stars are regarded as “hip”. And whenever a concert featuring brass band music from the Balkans is announced, young people swarm to it as well. In short, Switzerland is now all ears for music from Eastern Europe.

From the Black Sea to the Baltic

This is mainly thanks to Marcel Cellier. Now 86 years old, this Swiss gentleman is regarded as a pioneer for his discovery and promotion of Eastern European music. For almost half a century Cellier and his wife Catherine made recordings in Eastern Europe. For thirty years the Radio Suisse Romande programme “De la Mer Noire à la Baltique” (From the Black Sea to the Baltic) provided an insight into Cellier’s musical journeys of discovery. And



Catherine and Marcel Cellier in their youth and today at their home in Chexbres

for twelve years Bayrische Rundfunk broadcast Cellier’s radio series “Völker, Lieder, Tänze” (People, Songs, Dances). These statistics reveal just how obsessed the music-lover was: starting in 1950, the Celliers travelled three million kilometres throughout post-war Eastern Europe, recording more than 5,000 examples of the region’s music in the process.

These days, Marcel Cellier says, “I have no interest in travelling anymore. I don’t need to travel anymore.” Today he finds enough pleasure in “looking out of the window and admiring the beautiful Lavaux countryside”. The couple live in a fairytale country home surrounded by the vineyards of Chexbres, in the canton of Vaud, and let their minds do the travelling now – taking in their view of Lake Geneva, the Savoy Alps, the vines and their own flower garden. Cellier enjoys a cigarette without any hint of a bad conscience, and later in the day a glass or two of St. Saphorin. After all, this wine is grown and bottled virtually on his doorstep.

Now he has settled down, the obligatory questions are put to him: Why, Marcel Cellier, were you on the road for half a century gathering musical treasures in the process? What motivated you? How do you see yourself? As a music ethnologist? He appears to find the questions only vaguely interesting. People do what they do, he says: “I certainly was not on a mission, and I didn’t have to convert anyone.” Perhaps, he says, the an-

swer is simple: he is a doer, not a thinker: a player with a drive and enthusiasm for discovery. “And I also like sharing with others all the fantastic things that I am passionate about.” Catherine Cellier offers a more succinct way of summing up the man with whom she has shared “the happiness of more than 60 years together”: “He speaks through music. He participates through music. He lives music.”

Love No. 1: The recorder

Cellier lived and still lives the music that was originally forbidden to him. He grew up in the strict, ultra-conservative milieu of the Free Church of the Brethren movement (Darbyites), where music was a source of conflict. Although he was given a recorder at the age of four, when he performed a dance by Leopold Mozart on it he was firmly told that there was no place for dance music. Cellier says: “A sarabande was enough to turn you into a prodigal son.” So, the dutiful son did what was expected of him: he studied assiduously, completed an apprenticeship with a bank, established himself in his profession by becoming an authorised signatory and, from 1950, pursued what is commonly called a career. He became the right hand of an ore trader and quickly worked his way up from clerk to Vice President. He purchased metal ore behind the Iron Curtain that was then processed into quality products by Swiss companies such as Von Roll, Fischer, Von Moos,

Monteforno and Metallwerke Dornach. He dealt with the state-run corporations of the Soviet Union that traded in raw materials, negotiated with Polish and Romanian combines, and pressed palms with chrome ore producers in Maoist Albania. While he was trading in silicon, copper and manganese, Cellier says he stumbled on a gold mine – “the region’s still-vibrant folk music”.

Love No. 2: Catherine

So, did this raw materials trader also adopt a business-minded approach and plunder the cultural treasures of Eastern Europe alongside its ore reserves? No, not really, because first and foremost Cellier, despite his thwarted ambitions with the recorder, was more a musician than a dealer in raw materials – a trombonist in the army, a trumpeter with the “New Hot Players” of Neuchâtel, a cellist in a string trio, and an organist. Secondly, Cellier initially travelled throughout Eastern Europe for pleasure rather than business – simply out of love, wanderlust and high spirits, and because of Catherine. Catherine Cellier: “We didn’t know each other, but one lunch-time he spoke to me and asked me to accompany him on a trip.” His directness made her sceptical.

But just a few months later the couple set off in a Fiat Topolino, heading for Istanbul. The trip turned into a disaster half-way through – they had to navigate the post-war hell of visas and form-filling and

their car was confiscated and sealed by the Bulgarian customs authorities, forcing the couple to continue their journey by rail. Catherine slipped into the role of journalist and described for the “Bund” of Berne her youthful impressions of the sadness behind the Iron Curtain. Two years later, in 1952, they made their second attempt – and underwent a life-changing experience. On the radio they carried with them they heard something they had never heard before, thanks to Radio Skopje, Radio Belgrade, Radio Sofia and Radio Bucharest: plaintive voices, seemingly discordant, diaphonic intervals, asymmetric rhythms and unfamiliar instruments. There was no going back: from then on, the Celliers always carried a 35-kilogramme tape recorder with them to record their encounters with musicians.

Love No. 3: 45/16 time

On the road, heading East in a Fiat Topolino: this is also the subject of the seminal work by French-speaking Swiss Nicolas Bouvier entitled “L’Usage du monde” (The Way of the World). Travel as a journey of self-discovery, an escape from the narrow confines of home. “Exactly”, says Catherine Cellier, “a fantastic, touching book. Almost a bible for me”. A bible because, although the Celliers set off a year before Bouvier, Nicolas Bouvier managed to put into words the essence of such a trip.

What followed can be summed up quite simply: the Celliers penetrated ever deeper into the music of Eastern Europe at that time, discovered Bulgarian dances in 45/16 time and were immediately hooked: “The Bulgarians can dance to this because they don’t count, they just dance.” Cellier’s hunger for these worlds of sound drove the couple ever further east – but in a sturdy Mercedes Benz rather than the original little Fiat. This car had one major advantage: the political elite in the Communist countries of Eastern Europe also liked quality, so spare parts were easy to obtain.

“Lady Madonna” tops the charts

1968: The Beatles topped the Swiss charts for thirteen weeks with “Lady Madonna”, and Cellier met the young pan-flute player Gheorghe Zamfir in Bucharest. He was captivated by Zamfir’s powers of expression. On seeing that the musician was about to “waste his talent in a café”, Cellier leapt into action and invited him to French-speaking Switzerland. With far-reaching consequences: within less than an hour the two had recorded an LP, “Flûte de Pan et Orgue”, in a church at Cully, with Zamfir on the pan flute and Cellier on the organ. The 2,000 records pressed were nowhere near enough to meet the demand. 1.5 million copies were sold of this recording with this hitherto unknown pairing of instruments, regarded by record companies as “uncommercial”. Cellier and Zamfir had captured the mood of the times.



Marcel Cellier presenting his radio show in 1973

Even “Picnic at Hanging Rock” (Peter Weir, 1975), a milestone in Australian film history – the film that highlighted the yawning gap between European settlers and the mysteries of aboriginal Australia – drew on their music. Australians went wild. The concert halls “down under” were full. And Zamfir, who liked to act the lonely shepherd, rocketed to stardom. Zamfir and Cellier. Zamfir and James Last. Zamfir and Ennio Moricone (“Once upon a time in America”).

A Grammy for archaic sounds

At the same time, Cellier enthused in his radio broadcasts about the magic of Bulgarian choirs, published an album called “Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares” (1975) and, in so doing, fed the hunger of those who yearned for archaic, unadulterated music. While Cellier showed the avant-garde, artistic way in which the choirs from Tolbuchin, Sofia and Plovdiv brought archaic songs up to date and demonstrated the magical symbiosis between old and new, listeners preferred to im-

agine themselves transported back to an innocent world of mediaeval tonality. “Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares – volume II” ended up exceeding Cellier’s wildest imaginations, winning him a Grammy Award in Los Angeles in 1990. So successful had the amateur become that Warner Brothers and Polygram took over the marketing of this musical export from Bulgaria. This was followed by a “Le Mystère” world tour, at a time when the socialist order was being toppled – not mysteriously but rapidly – in the choirs’ home country.

Discord

So has he led a charmed life of love and harmony? No, says Marcel Cellier. Like everyone else he has also had his disappointments. He has not come to terms with the extent to which Gheorghe Zamfir has distanced himself. Nowadays, the musician treads a fine line between genius and delusions of grandeur, and is on a mission with his pan flute to free the world of “Satanic sounds”. His material fortune has been squandered, and now he tends to view himself as a prototype of the “exploited gold mine”.

Astonishing things are also happening in the world of song: in the mid-1980s, the female choir of Bulgarian state radio and television decided to change its name to “Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares”. The objective was to profit from the wave of popularity that Cellier had unleashed with his collection, which notably included several choirs.

TRACING THE FOOTSTEPS OF MARCEL AND CATHERINE CELLIER

In the new Swiss documentary film “Balkan Melodie” (2012), director Stefan Schwietert documents the life and love story of Marcel and Catherine Cellier and follows in the footsteps of the Eastern European World Music stars of that era. Thanks to encounters with pan-flute player Gheorghe Zamfir and the singers of “Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares”, the film itself has become a piece of contemporary history and illustrates how “folk music” has been played, appreciated, assimilated, marketed, changed and rejected over the years.

www.cineman.ch/movie/2012/BalkanMelodie/

Cellier is unruffled. The discoverer knows that discoveries sometimes change and develop a life of their own. And the singers know that their interpretations have changed the perception of music in their home country as well: for Bulgarians, folklore is only genuine when it sounds like the folklore Cellier loved to hear. Choir director Dora Hristova explains it like this: “Without Cellier our choir would not be what it is today. And without the choir Cellier would probably not have become what he became.”

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Marcel Cellier with Romanian musicians in 1961



Marcel Cellier with young musicians at the music school in Bucharest



Gheorghe Zamfir and Marcel Cellier on the organ