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It’s my heart, and  
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— Anti von Klewitz



Photo by Claude Vanheye ©

## *The Spirited Musical Amalgam of* **CSÓKOLOM**

BY FRANK MATHEIS

**T**oday’s European folk scene, with its musical pan-Europeanism and massive infusion of international sounds, belies the astonishing fact that prior to World War II, Euro-indigenous folk music was still relatively confined, as it had been for centuries, by ethnic and national origins. Not to say there were no cultural exchanges, as musical traditions merged any time cultures met through war, assimilation or expansion. But the musical hierarchy was reflective of social class, with folk music relegated to the lowly end of the spectrum. And, by and large, folk music was localized and community based. The French didn’t care what they played in Poland, Prussians didn’t listen to Bavarian music, Celtic music was not an international rage; people mostly played and sang their own regional and national songs in their own languages. Everything was nice and orderly and easy to understand.

The main exception to that rule were the itinerant Gypsies, the Roma, who were essentially a musician and entertainer caste. For centuries they traveled along vast stretches of Europe, carrying their music with them and picking up and assimilating indigenous styles along the way, especially throughout Eastern

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Europe. It would be difficult to imagine the fiery fiddle music of Romania and Hungary without the Gypsies, despite claims by nationalist locals, disguised as folk-purists, who would just as soon deny the fact that their "real folk music" is actually inseparable from the music of this oft-despised minority. Indeed, the very essence of folk-violin music in Eastern Europe, from Romania to Russia, including Eastern-European Jewish traditions, is *at its core* Gypsy music. They are the carriers of these traditions ... as they have been since the time of the Ottoman Empire.

If folk music in Europe was the music of the lower classes – played at weddings, dances, drinking establishments and street festivities – the World War II era and its aftermath did little to salvage its stature. The Nazis abused *Volksmusik* as the culturally valiant heritage of the people – "das Volk," promoting ethnic purity and National-Socialist values through permissible, approved German songs. Later, the Communists in the East elevated "Proletarian instruments" like the accordion to high status, along with workers' songs, and pushed forth folk music as a political propaganda tool. To this day the connotation of the word *Volksmusik* conjures images of funny country people dressed in traditional outfits playing beer halls for tourists. Perhaps that's why Germans are drawn to anything other than their own language and musical heritage? But the break with the past has also given them a certain freedom to disassociate themselves and forge new directions. Post WWII musicians have reached as far back as their own medieval and Renaissance music; and looked elsewhere – to the wide musical palette of the world. There are German Delta bluesmen, German Flamenco guitarists, as well as Champion Irish harpists and Mongolian throat singers from Germany. Many sing in English or other foreign tongues. Some add spice to their musical stew with a hefty dose of ethereal excitement. Foremost among them is the mold-breaking Csókolom (which translates as "May I kiss your hand?"), an en-

semble consisting of violins, a kontra (Transylvanian chord fiddle) and double bass.

The front-woman of Csókolom is the lanky, flamboyant violinist and raspy-voiced Anti von Klewitz. She is a classically- and jazz-trained musician who grew up on Bach, but started fiddling folk when, as she puts it, "I found out you could actually get paid for playing the violin and you could have much more fun than just playing Mozart – all while being free, that was deep and exciting."

Anti was born to diplomat German parents, and she spent her formative years in Zagreb, in the former Yugoslavia (now the capital of Croatia). She lived in many countries *other than* Germany, which probably explains why she now feels like a stranger there and doesn't really think of herself as German. She does keep a residence in Berlin, as well as Amsterdam, and actively plays on both scenes, but her bandmates are Dutch and the songs they perform are Balkan songs (mostly from Hungary/Transylvania, Romania and Yugoslavia) in the three "official" languages, plus Roma, the language of the Gypsies. Anti doesn't sing in her native German, which she calls "an ugly language with too many syllables." Is she an enlightened new breed of the modern cross-cultural musician, an internationalist of the new Europe, leaping all boundaries, smashing boundaries and throwing out all preconceptions and formulas? Or, is she a culturally confused misfit with a serious identity crisis? Who cares? Csókolom sounds good, swings like mad, and is lots of fun.

The Balkanized von Klewitz is a wild fiddler, unencumbered and expressive, who leads Csókolom into a frantic, rhyth-

mic, declamatory fury, closely related to Eastern European Gypsy music. Americans might hear similarities to Klezmer fiddling, which also holds close kinship to Gypsy violin music. Von Klewitz and Csókolom deliver infectious, danceable, paprika-spiced sounds that are madly emotive. Whether it's a steamy, foot-stomping dance tune or a mournful, moaning lament, it always carries an essential mix of "angry sadness" that von Klewitz says is an integral part of Gypsy music the world over. Yet, if comparisons have to be made for the sake of explanation, Csókolom sounds closer to ensembles like the Kronos Quartet than to typical contemporary Gypsy fiddlers such as the Romanian Florin Niculescu. Compared to the smooth perfection of the real Gypsy violinists, who are often given to tear-jerking sweetness, melancholy expressiveness and dazzling displays of speed and technique, von Klewitz and Csókolom can sound edgy and nervous, occasionally even discordant. That's not to say they are without finesse – quite the contrary – but Csókolom tend toward forceful deliverance, with bold expressiveness, rather than exquisite ornamentation. There is the underlying feeling in the music that there can never be a natural, calm ease, but rather a raging, whirling tide ... a sense of physicality, a constant storm. Von Klewitz' throaty singing adds a roughhewn edge to an already weathered sound.

Csókolom's boundary-breaking mix has stirred up its share of detractors. Anti confirmed that some Hungarians react to Csókolom with "authenticity hysteria," as she describes it. While some are flattered and enjoy the band's music, others don't quite know what to make of the unbridled bow-flailing rule-benders. Some bemoan, "That's *not* the way we play it!" Others note that Anti is not really Hungarian, and complain: "She sings in a Gypsy accent."

"Gypsies, they love it, but when Hungarians hear that I play and sing in the Gypsy way, they don't want me to associate [the music] with them. But it's

## DISCOGRAPHY

*Ludo Luda (Fools Fancy)*, 2001, Arhoolie #498  
*May I Kiss Your Hand*, 1998, Arhoolie #469

## CONTACTS

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Background photo by Claude Vanheye ©



(L to R) Gregor Schäfer, Anneke Frankenberg, Anti von Klewitz and Sander Hoving on stage.

the Gypsies who kept that folk music alive. Without them it would no longer even exist," said von Klewitz. The unapologetic musician seems comfortable with her chosen lot in life, "I like to sing in Hungarian because it's the most musical language I know. They have beautiful intriguing melodies, and somehow, it's the music I understand best. I don't break conventions intentionally, but I just play it the way I love it, and if that breaks conventions ... well, so be it."


As the band's arranger, composer and musical visionary, von Klewitz is their true leader. Her approach to arranging the traditional Balkan songs and ancient melodies is, expectedly, equally unconventional. "I don't take the head of a song. I take the soul of it. It's a question of the thinking," she explained. "The emphasis in what we play is more on dance, on the feeling, than on a definition of this or that. When you play a song or a melody it's important to know where the accent should be. I listen to the old songs, or things that come into my head. Then, I take its essence and put it into another jacket. It's not my brain. It's my heart, and these feelings I mix." Like all of her bandmates, whose other musical activities reach into a

broad range of directions – from Tango to Cuban, from jazz to Mariachi, – von Klewitz dishes out a little of *all* her musical interests in Csókolom. She explained, "Maybe I will hear an old melody from Hungary or wherever, and I notice that the syncopation is always a little behind the beat. So I may hear it differently, maybe with a Cuban guajero – which is a little riff usually played by a trombone and others solo over it. It's like the 'call and response' in Gospel music. So I might work the song that way, applying that to Hungarian music."

No wonder the Hungarian folkies are baffled. A German woman from Holland with a Gypsy accent is putting Cuban soul into their music!

In addition to von Klewitz, Csókolom's line-up includes Sander Hoving on kontra and Gregor Schäfer on double bass. Each brings distinct undertones to the ensemble's unique sound. The trio is often joined by second violinist and singer Anneke Frankenberg, who adds a touch of tenderness to balance von Klewitz' frantic excursions, with Hoving holding the chords and rhythm with steady precision. They mix jazz, folk and world rhythms with a passionate virtuosity.

Jazz, while subtle and submerged in the overall sound, is infused in Csókolom's sound. Schäfer is a jazz bassist whose style holds the ground with flair, allowing the improvisational meandering of the band. Anti von Klewitz studied jazz with John Coltrane's bassist Reggie Workman, and all members are in some way connected to that genre. Not to say that anyone would mistake their sound for jazz, but von Klewitz does not distance herself from the concept of improvisation, the same freedom that lets Gypsy music, bluegrass and klezmer rise vertically from a melody into free-wheeling abandon. "Jazz opens opportunities. I don't look at our music as folk, or jazz or any of that. Jazz is intentional, like Hungarian music. Folk sometimes wants to tie you down ... to give you a name and to put you in a certain place. Jazz is more open."

Inventive, dynamic, occasionally just a bit startling, this band is an awe-inspiring ensemble. They have successfully toured Australia twice, had a brief stint in the U.S., and wherever they go they seem to dazzle audiences with their unexpected showmanship and exuberant performances. During their short 1998 tour in the U.S. they even played in a biker-bar in California. Von Klewitz recalled, "They didn't know what to expect, and neither did we. Here were all these tattooed Hell's Angels types dancing around to Hungarian fiddle music. They had never heard anything like that before. They loved us and had a great time." 

*Frank Matheis' articles regularly appear in major music publications in the U.S. and Europe, including Blues Access, the Music Review and Folker. He hosts a popular folk/blues roots program called Frank's Picks on WKZE (NY/CT/Mass). Frank's folk and roots music documentaries are heard on German NPR (Deutschlandradio/funk) and on radio stations all over Australia.*

(MUSIC FROM CSÓKOLOM )

# Mahala Arpad

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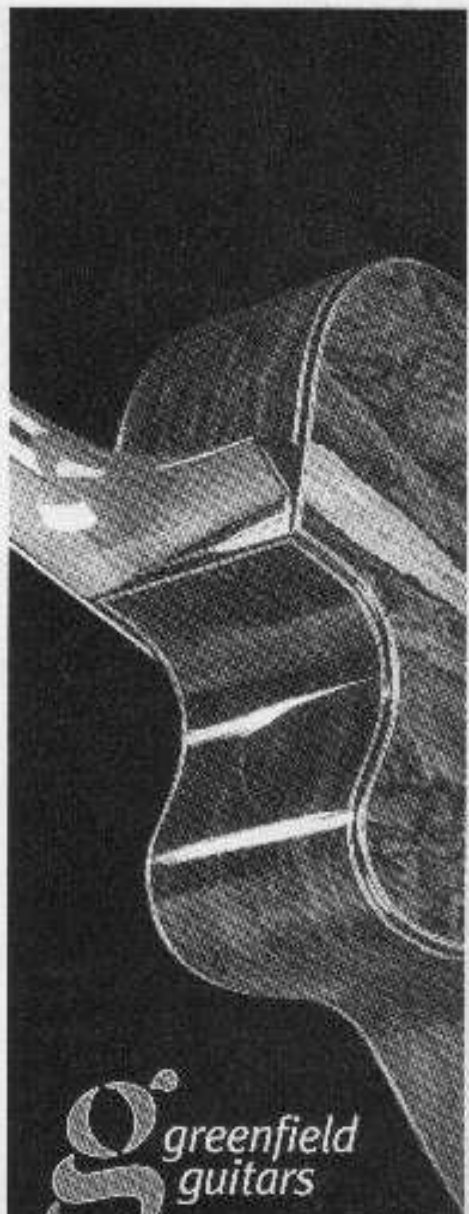
**D**edicated to her dog Arpad, this original tune by von Klewitz demonstrates both her abilities as a firmly rooted fiddler and as a talented composer. The tune leads off Csokolom's latest effort *Ludo Luda ~ Fool's Fancy* (Arhoolie #498; available from 10341 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530. Ph: 888-274-6654; Web: <[www.arhoolie.com](http://www.arhoolie.com)>).

Music by Antl von Klewitz  
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Moderate; ♩ = approx. 100

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of nine staves of music. The first staff begins with a D major chord and a treble clef. The second staff includes a C major chord and the instruction "To Coda". The third staff features Bb major, F major, C major, and F major chords. The fourth staff includes G major, F major, and C major chords. The fifth staff includes F major, G major, and D major chords. The sixth staff has two first endings: "1." with a Bb major chord and "2. (All but last time)" with a Bb major chord. The seventh staff includes a Bb major chord, the instruction "Last time", and a D major chord. The eighth staff includes a Bb major chord and the instruction "D.S. al Coda". The ninth staff begins with a Bb major chord. The score concludes with a double bar line.



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