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## Musings on an old Romanian postcard



### Romanische Tänzer-Roman tanczosok

[World Music Picture, Archive/Collection Christoph Wagner, from the book, \*Ear & Eye - Encounters with World Music\*, Wagner, Christoph \(Ed\), Edition Neue Zeitschrift für Musik/Schott, Mainz 2004](#)

The postcard, a lone fiddler charged with the responsibility of aiding in the performance of the *Calusari* ritual, an ancient healing and fertility rite that has resonances of horse-soldiers and blood combat, fine young men wearing bells and flowers, mock swords an echo of tribal warfare. I wouldn't want to piss off those guys when they're in full thrall of the local rotgut.

The fiddler stands apart, facing the camera. He's wearing a heavy coat, with a fur collar; he appreciates the padding when the village hotheads get drunk and need a *Tsigan* to beat up. He'll start slow, the dancers almost stalking each other, warming up for the fancy footwork; the soldiers are the best dancers. Faster and faster (don't any cultures dance slower and slower?), competition masquerading as cooperation, then a sudden halt, and the slow beginning again, memories of tribal military training exercises. The shouts are the giveaway - they sound like Marines.

I've played this music too, in small *tarafs* and large folk orchestras, for late night parties and staged performances by American folk dance companies, for forty years. But it's the lone fiddler that I remember, playing at twilight in the summer of 1970 for the local teenagers in a small Romanian village, the same tune over and over, that I think about as my sixtieth birthday hurtles closer. He understood his relationship to those kids.

It was at the Athenian Gardens, the hottest Greek nightclub in Hollywood, that I first really understood my own relationship to a group unified by music. Waking up on the bandstand, realizing I had been playing Fender bass on automatic, I had a sudden vision of the dancing crowd as a collection of separate organisms made one by the music. The music was brilliant and deep, Sporos played *bouzoukee* like no other. I got alternating smiles and glares from Lazaros, the keyboard player, for seconding Sporos on the bass. The dancers were following each other around the floor in a freeform endless *tsamiko*, the lead dancer hanging precariously from a twisted handkerchief, supported by Faith, in the form of the next two dancers, who took their age-old responsibility as standard-bearers seriously.

I already knew that *tsamiko* was a serious dance; I had had the privilege of playing Greek Church picnics with Andreas Tsianis' band. It was a hot summer, Fathers' Day in Long Beach, and Andre blew a powerful clarinet, nonstop for almost an hour, a different tune for each father to lead the line. The sweaty glow of pride, the smiles and half-closed eyes of the men, the efficacy of a ritual made whole by ecstatic music played well; this was why I was there. The Greek gigs felt good. It didn't matter if they were a shlep, or the money wasn't great. The music was pay in itself.

But *tsamiko* - that was a thing apart. The rhythm, a slow three, has tension in every bar; it makes you wait, like the slow Macedonian dances where the men seem to hang in the air, waiting for a downbeat heavy enough to dig your heels into. No wonder we willingly wallow in the guilty pleasure of that warm bath of the concert hall, Ravel's Bolero, as shameless and unrelenting a *tsamiko* as ever there was.

Music hath indeed charm, the breast to soothe or the army to mobilise.