



*Cimbalom Unlimited*

**Miklós Lukács/Larry Grenadier/Eric Harland**  
**(BMC Records)**  
by John Pietaro

The Roma people for centuries led a transient existence throughout Europe not of their own making. The culture they carried was adapted to the local terrain as much as the Roma adopted the sights and sounds about them. Their traditional music included the cimbalom, a voice distinctively Romani that remains commonplace in Romania and Hungary. This instrument is constructed of a square sound box containing courses of strings struck with mallets. Roots of the instrument include the Persian santur while Western interpretations such as the psaltery and hammered dulcimer are also closely related. But the cimbalom, uniquely, has pedal-controlled dampers, allowing for far greater emotion and command of performance practice.

Tradition notwithstanding, Miklós Lukács' approach to the cimbalom is wholly unique and utterly virtuosic. In 1999, after years of classical study and performance in Budapest, he endeavored to play jazz at its most modern, casting a new language for the instrument and revolutionizing a millennium of development. Lukács' skills are magically evident on *Cimbalom Unlimited*, a trio with bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Eric Harland recalling piano-centered bands of Sun Ra, McCoy Tyner and other rebels who burst through ensemble confines. In Lukács' hands, the cimbalom, through blurring runs, blue smears, advanced harmonies and stunning accents, is richly, excitably pianistic.

Album opener "Balkan Winds", an uptempo jazz romp, features all of this and can be called post-Don Pullen, post-world music in the best possible way. The band also burns through "Act 3". And yet the stirring, impressionistic qualities of "Lullaby for an Unborn Child" and "Dawn Song", the latter of which is a hushed pastorella, exposes the rawness, the folk core of the cimbalom. It's downright haunting. Through it all, Harland emotes like Elvin Jones, alternately turning the beat on its head or tickling wind chimes effervescently. And the mellifluous Grenadier, out front on some selections, seems to thrive on the woody, resonant sound of his instrument and its wondrous blend with the smoking strings of the leader.

*For more information, visit [bmcrecords.hu](http://bmcrecords.hu). Grenadier is at Village Vanguard Jan. 2nd-7th. Harland is at Metropolitan Museum of Art, Grace R. Rogers Auditorium Jan. 26th with Charles Lloyd. See Calendar.*