

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

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## Three Romanian-American Musicians

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I write as a witness to a new era. Promises of a globalized egalitarian future now seem farther upon the horizon; assurances of a world capable of being managed “objectively,” “realistically,” and without ideology lingers on only as anachronism, anemically proclaimed in bad faith. A new reality has arrived in America, one narrated by a cadre of story tellers, full of fury, whose ultranationalist myths are fed by fear, anger, and despair.

It is of little use to self-righteously locate the hypocrisies and duplicities of this new regime and its ideology—such assertions bear little consequence to myth-making. Rather, we might acknowledge that our own myth entails generosity and courage over cowardice and hate. We would do well to remember the myth of the New Colossus, envisioned by poet Emma Lazarus and engraved at the feet of the Statue of Liberty. Her words remind us that true American strength is not born of military might or economic prestige, but rather by our collective treatment of the tired, the poor, the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... the homeless, tempest-tost.”

Critics may argue that the three immigrants I present here, each a professional Romanian-American musician, are figures far removed from such an image of poor, huddled masses. Indeed, there is no doubt that this group of symphony instrumentalists, conservatory educated in socialist Romania and endowed with more status and privilege than most, is at a distance from the desperate immigrant laborer searching for a better life. As a European, Christian community from a nation barely registering in American politics or popular culture, Romanians slip easily into the mainstream, perhaps even half-blind to the regular barriers those immigrants endowed with the wrong national origin or the wrong relationship with God may face in the United States. Yet, placed in another light, these musicians illustrate the very ideals of the archetypal immigrant conjured by American consciousness. Feeling stifled by the economic and political realities of Romanian president Nicolae Ceaușescu’s draconian version of state socialism in the 1970s and 1980s, they dreamed of a place that would support them in reaching the full potential of their artistic capabilities. An immigrant community of the poor and homeless? Perhaps not. But yearning to breathe free? Surely.

But besides: I offer these stories not as an example of immigrant drive and talent, but as a testament to the American goodwill that encourages immigrant drive and talent to flourish.



*“Constructing the Statue of Liberty, 1882”  
Photo by Albert Fernique*

## Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)

### Cristina\*

I first met Cristina in the Pittsburgh foothills. In her well-manicured home, I dined on *sarmale* cabbage rolls, and began my interview complimenting her career and talent. She diverted such accolades, defining her career as simply carrying the legacy of her past teachers. She placed particular emphasis on her first teacher, Sofia Cosma, a “Russian Jew saved from Auschwitz by Romanian soldiers.” Our conversations around Cosma soon splintered off into other areas, before finally settling on an account of Cristina’s life as a pianist, one which spanned decades and borders. “I had a very good career in Romania for ten years,” she told me. “I played concerts, solos with orchestras, chamber music. A very beautiful social life.” She went on: “except when I had contracts to play outside of Romania. ... I would never get the passport. I was an only child, and they knew I would defect, so I was never allowed out.” Even with a burgeoning career she became increasingly frustrated by this circumstance, and felt that her inability to perform outside of the country hampered her potential to progress as



*Romania Day at the New York World's Fair, 1939-1940*  
*Photographer unknown*

an artist. “The last few years I just couldn’t take that anymore,” she explained. “Romania is small, I was top there, but wanted to see my value internationally.”

During this period, the Ceaușescu regime would allow the emigration of Romanian Jews to Israel in return for a fee, paid by Israel, that “reimbursed” the country’s investment into that citizen’s education and upbringing. Cristina didn’t consider this path out an option, though, as it never occurred to her she might be Jewish. But at the behest of her friends, she decided to look into her heritage, and discovered that her grandparents were not only Jewish, but also quite wealthy before the Ion Antonescu dictatorship of the 1940s stripped them of their lands and placed them in camps. They survived (the Romanian camps were “not like

Auschwitz, not like Poland,” Cristina assured me), but in a desire to protect their children and grandchildren, neither spoke of nor practiced their Judaism. Cristina soon procured documents proving her Jewish heritage, and in 1985 she emigrated to Israel with her mother and cat. The very act of filing the declaration to emigrate stripped Cristina of her position. All of her concerts were immediately cancelled, and it was only through a carefully placed gift of cigarettes and whiskey that she was able to leave the country with her piano.

Within a month of her arrival, she began working as a pianist for an opera company, and soon attained a position as an accompanist at a local conservatory. Yet her time in Israel was a means to an end. “I always dreamt about America,” she told me, “but no hope. So, Israel was good to get out.” At the immigration center, she became friends with a young couple of mathematicians from Bucharest who shared her infatuation with the United States. The couple managed to immigrate to the U.S. within a year of their arrival in Israel, and from there continued to correspond with Cristina. “They kept calling me and sending me letters: ‘Come to America! It’s a great country, you must come to America!’ Of course it was my dream, and I said ‘how?’ ‘Well, apply for a doctorate.’ Doctorate in piano? I’ve never heard of that!” Intrigued by the possibility of attaining a doctorate, Cristina went to the American embassy and compiled a list of promising universities. She then recorded an audition cassette tape and applied to eight schools. She was accepted to them all.

“Then it was a matter of money,” Cristina continued. “Of course being an immigrant there I had nothing.” She needed a full ride, which she received from one school, West Virginia University. “Now that’s another

### Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)

story!” she exclaimed. “The professor there was a Jewish survivor from Latvia. They were from the same town [the professor and Sofia Cosma]. He was sent to Auschwitz, all his family, *kaput*, but because he had extremely good mechanical skills ... he survived.” She continued: “and apparently my cassette made a big wave. They really wanted me.” At thirty-six, she again arrived in a new land, “with one big suitcase and fifty dollars in my pocket.” Waiting for her was the director of graduate studies, along with a student who volunteered to share her house with Cristina.

In West Virginia, Cristina soon got a position at a local church. Parishioners volunteered to pick her up and drop her off every Sunday before she was able to procure her first car. With a growing reputation and, in due time, a car and the ability to travel, Cristina received new opportunities to perform throughout the area. Soon she landed a position with the Pittsburgh Symphony and moved to the city, where she remains today.

Cristina concluded her story with a mixture of regret and triumph. “Unfortunately, I never made it that big to perform with the Pittsburgh symphony as a soloist. I came too late, and time went by” she lamented. Then she remembered, and I saw her smile: “But my student has! I have a prodigy student who is living the life I would have lived if I had been in America from the beginning. She came here as a child of nine years old with her parents, from Korea. She is now the next life of me,” carrying on her teacher’s legacy.

#### Ana

During Ana’s final year at conservatory in Romania, her piano instructor disappeared. As she told me over the phone:

I remember he drove me home, and opened the car door for me, and gave me a big hug. You know, I didn’t really think that much of it but then when he was supposed to come back home [from a concert abroad], I called and he wasn’t there. And I called and he wasn’t there. And a week later somebody else answered the phone with a very rough voice. And I knew something was terribly wrong, and he wasn’t ever going to come back. I was basically on my own from then on.

The defection of her piano instructor was one of a series of events that year that led Ana to the realization that her career as a promising pianist was irrevocably tied to the insular politics of the late Ceaușescu era. She chuckled:

It was a very bad year for me. After my teacher left, they offered me a few concerts in Budapest. And I knew I was in huge trouble because the concerts were coming up, were coming up, were coming up, and I wouldn’t get my passport. And I would go every day and ask about it. They finally released my passport three days after the last concert was over. And the real horrible part about it was I couldn’t even call and say I can’t come. Because that would have been something I said against the government.

The summer before the school year, Ana received a full scholarship to the prestigious Banff Center summer music program thanks to an audition tape she smuggled out of the country. However, the official invitation was predictably intercepted by the Romanian government who, as she told me, “had the balls to say to the people at Banff that they would send their own. Not me, someone else. So they wouldn’t let me go, they refused.”

Yet, this was also the year Ana met her future husband, an American musician on a short tour in Romania. They met sharing the concert stage together, and quickly fell in love despite a significant language gap.

## Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)

Before his tour ended, they were secretly married, but shortly after were separated with his return to the United States. Still in Romania, Ana began the process of applying for a foreign marriage license, which the government made nearly impossible: “You could only apply one day of the month, in Bucharest, and there was a window open for only three hours,” she explained to me. In the process of applying, the government pulled all of Ana’s concerts and took her recordings taken off the radio. Her colleagues, for fear the government would hurt their career trajectories as musicians, dissociated from her. Such alienation was compounded by her continual concern that she was being watched and followed by the secret police. “Every night I woke up,” she recalled, “I was scared to death that they would come and get us, that my parents would be thrown in jail.”

In the United States, Ana’s husband spent three months “going around to politicians and putting in every kind of human rights request.” His efforts ultimately paid off, as Ana’s name was included on a list created for US Secretary of State George Shultz, who leveraged diplomatic relations with Romania in order to get the pianist, among others, out of the country.

In love and barely able to speak English, Ana moved from a small town in Transylvania to a small town in Texas. There, the community embraced her. She received part-time employment at a nearby college, and despite her aversion to singing, was “roped in,” so she told me, to the choir at a local Methodist Church. Six months after her arrival, she arranged her first concert at the college. For her debut, members of the church presented Ana with a gown. “It was the most beautiful gown I’ve ever seen. I’ve played most of my big debut concerts in it,” she told me.

Ana and her husband eventually moved to the East Coast, and continue to collaborate on music projects, having become known as advocates for the promotion and performance of lesser known American music. “I’m attracted to finding gems,” she told me, “finding something truly wonderful that people have missed.”

### Vasile

As I continued speaking with Romanian-American musicians across the country, the uniqueness of Cristina’s and Ana’s stories became increasingly pronounced. Most musicians I spoke with did not or could not find effective means to leave Romania’s closely held borders. Rather, they waited, doing the best they could as artists in the circumstances that were before them, closing themselves off to the possibility of leaving the country. For these musicians, a desire to immigrate to the United States only became re-ignited after the Romanian Revolution in 1989, when the borders opened. But leaving in these new circumstances presented different challenges.

“Somehow I got an LP, it was the Chicago Symphony. And that sound, to me, just the American brass sound, was so nice,” trombonist Vasile explained to me. “Whenever I would hear an American orchestra, the brass had this dark, round, big sound, with a lot of character.” Upon this first exposure to the “American brass sound,” Vasile developed an overwhelming desire to leave behind his life as a professional musician in Romania and immigrate to the United States. But as a citizen of socialist Romania, the opportunity to learn the American brass sound was almost entirely unavailable to him. He told me:

The risk of being killed was like close to ninety percent. If you were lucky, the guards shooting (at the border) miss, and you make your way out. So leaving was not an option, not because you don’t want to, but because it is impossible. The only way you could get out was, you know, if you had some family outside. We had nobody. I did not have the chance of going outside of Romania before 1989. If that would have happened, that would have given me all the courage in the world. I would have defected in a second.

## Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)

Shortly after Vasile attained a position at the prestigious Bucharest National Radio Orchestra, the Romanian Revolution came to the capital. Marching with others in the streets, he was shot at, and he witnessed Ceaușescu's ultimately futile helicopter escape from the roof of the Central Committee Headquarters.



*"The Romanian Revolution, 1989"*  
Photo By Jérôme Fritel

He explained that postsocialist Romania "was such a new concept for all of us, the freedom and being able to say what you think and go where you want. It was like a virus that spread." Sensing that the opportunity was now possible to immigrate to America, Vasile went to the American embassy library in Bucharest and began researching and applying American music schools. "I told myself the first school that answered I would go to, out of loyalty," he remembered.

Vasile's thrill at receiving acceptance into Carnegie Mellon University, however, was quickly diminished upon realizing the financial requirements he needed to meet to attend.

"They offered me a full ride, but I had to prove I had money for living expenses, and of course I didn't." He spent the rest of that year trying to save as much money as he could so that he would be able to immigrate. During tours with the orchestra he took along suitcases of canned food so he could save his per diem. But the gap between the American economy and the fledgling Romanian economy of the 1990s was too great: after a year of effort, he was only able to put aside \$700.

With a heavy heart, Vasile informed the university that he was unable to procure the needed funds to attend the school. The response from the school surprised him: rather than relinquishing Vasile's scholarship, the department, urged by trombone professor Byron McCulloh, continued to wait. The university waited four years, holding Vasile's scholarship until 1994, when he was awarded additional funding from the George Soros Foundation. "I left basically everything behind," Vasile concluded his story, "I left the best job you could have [in Romania]. I had a beautiful apartment, all good friends, and connections." Vasile went from being a top orchestra musician in Romania to setting up chairs and stands for music rehearsals at the university—something his colleagues in Romania could not believe. His time setting up chairs, however, was limited: shortly after graduating from the University, he received a job with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. Always interested in developing as an artist, Vasile has returned to school part-time to learn electronic music production and recording.

### Coda

Cristina, Ana, and Vasile each dreamed of the United States as a place that would give them the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Each overcame great struggles in order to arrive: not only did they negotiate the bureaucratic nightmare of emigrating out of Romania, but faced alienation, austere living circumstance and, for Ana, the continual fear of imprisonment. Each chose to kill their musical livelihoods and start again, all in the hope that they might be resurrected as greater artists in a foreign land. And all succeeded.

## Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)

Yet, in truth, the stars of these stories are not the musicians themselves. The crux of these narratives lies in the fact that Cristina, Ana, and Vasile bore witness to an American generosity that allowed them to immigrate and succeed. They flourished with the help of Americans, great and small, that took the myth of the New Colossus to heart, and lived in accordance with it. Ultimately, this was the story of George Shultz, who found enough merit in a young pianist in love to include her as part of his diplomatic mission. It was the story of Byron McCulloh, who, seeing the drive and talent in Vasile, convinced his music department to wait four years until his arrival. It was the story of the Auschwitz survivor in West Virginia who saw enough in Cristina to offer her a full scholarship, and of the graduate admissions officer and student from the university that greeted her at the airport. It is the story of the church congregation in West Virginia that both gave Cristina a job and volunteered to commute her there every Sunday; and the Methodists in Texas who gifted Ana with a concert gown. While the narratives of these Romanian-American musicians may represent Lazarus's ideal immigrant, it was these seeming side characters that offer something even greater: a testament to a tradition of American generosity towards strangers. It is these stories that bear repeating, proclaiming, and defending, under the shadow of any wall erected to separate and isolate.

### NOTE

\* The names and some minor details of the three Romanian-American musicians discussed have been altered.

