

# Zarafa: Music from the Crossroads of the World

In the years since the Second World War, Australia has experienced an amazing infusion of people from all corners of Europe and the Middle East. These migrants have brought with them the musical forms and expressions of their homelands. As these musical idioms have made their way out of cultural enclaves, into mainstream media and onto festival stages, they have inspired a new generation of musicians to explore the musical heritage of the Old World.

Pioneering bands such Sirocco, Mara!, Xenos and Apodimi Compania have achieved an international following through presenting the sounds of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. In recent years they have been followed by a host of others: Vardos, Doch, Croque Monsieur, Yalla!, Al-Jadida, The Habibis, The Counterfeit Gypsies... the list goes on.

## Zarafa's Music

Since 2001, Melbourne-based outfit Zarafa have been carving out for themselves a unique place within this musical movement. Zarafa specialises in the music of the Balkans peninsula of Eastern Europe - the "Crossroads of the World" where the ancient cultural tides of Europe, Asia and the Middle East meet.

Anyone who has heard the intoxicating sounds of Bulgarian Wedding Music will agree that the Balkans are home to some of the hottest dance music on the planet. This is music that features wild rhythms, haunting vocals and soaring virtuosic instrumental solos that spring "straight from the source" - the fire in the soul.

However, Zarafa is not simply a great Balkans band. The key to



Zarafa's music is diversity: the band draws upon traditions as wide-ranging as Hungarian gypsy violin music, medieval English songs, Sufi trance music and North African bellydance. The result is an exciting mix of traditional and original music and dance from the Near and Middle East – a feast for the senses.

## Tradition and Innovation

Zarafa's music is deeply anchored in tradition. This is most obvious in the band's choice of material, which includes traditional songs and dance pieces from Croatia, Macedonia, Turkey, Greece, Yemen, Brittany, Ireland and elsewhere.

At a more subtle level, the members of Zarafa have a commitment to exploring the cultural roots of their repertoire. This is reflected in the band's original compositions as much as in the traditional pieces.

Zarafa researches and uses the ancient scales or modes of the Eastern Mediterranean, which appear in various guises as the *dromoi* of traditional Greek music, the *makamlar* of Turkey or the *maqamat* of the Arab world. These modes are not simply sequences of notes; they imply particular

melodic progressions and styles of ornamentation.

Zarafa also draws upon traditional rhythms from the Balkans and the Arabic world, ranging from the Egyptian *maqsum* (4/4) to Thracian *pravo horo* (2/4) or Bulgarian *kopanitsa* (11/16).

Instrumentation is also often traditional. Featured instruments include the *oud* (Arabic lute), *ney* (Middle Eastern end-blown cane flute), and Cretan *lyra* (traditional violin), as well as more well-known European

folk instruments including violin, piano accordion and double bass. Percussion again leans towards traditional instrumentation including *req* and *darabuka*.

While Zarafa draws heavily upon traditional elements, the band's aim is not to achieve a "purely authentic" rendition of traditional material. Rather, the band seeks to create a unique sound that expresses a contemporary, cosmopolitan Australian identity. Zarafa sees itself as playing a popularising role, presenting the musical traditions of the Balkans and Middle East in ways that make them accessible to mainstream Australian audiences.

For this reason, Zarafa's arrangements are often innovative. A traditional piece such as the Macedonian song *Zeniv Se U Popa* may be tweaked to incorporate newly-written instrumental interludes or bridge passages. Instrumentation is often creative; the age-old Croatian song *Da Bi Imal Perje* is performed with a solo on the *ney* flute – an instrument that traditionally never found its way to Croatia, but whose haunting sound perfectly suits the melancholy lyrics. A sparing use of electronica, including location samples, adds another dimension to the band's sound.

The use of storytelling is another aspect of Zarafa's popularising role. Many of the band's pieces (both traditional and original) are woven around a story – usually on some universal theme such as love, loss, revenge, or the joy of well-cooked eggplants. The band's name commemorates the story of the most famous giraffe in history, who in the 1820's journeyed from North Africa across the Mediterranean to Paris. Communicating these stories provides a deeper layer to the band's performances and another point of cultural connection for audiences.

The ongoing balancing of tradition and innovation within Zarafa's music gives the band a unique voice that has wide appeal. Audiences from Eastern European and Middle Eastern backgrounds immediately connect with the traditional melodies and rhythms, while audiences from other backgrounds are captured by the 'exotic' instrumental palette, rich musical textures and the emotion embodied in the performance.

### 'Gypsy' Music?

The nature and definition of 'Gypsy' music is a subject of controversy, due partly to the diversity of musical styles performed by Rom musicians but also to the political nature of questions around Gypsy identity.

Recognising this, Zarafa has steered away from claiming to play Gypsy music. However, the need for some succinct way of describing the band's music has led to the coining of the phrase 'Gypsy Fusion'. The phrase refers to the band's ongoing journey in search of great music, crossing political, cultural and religious divides. It draws an analogy with the role of the Rom people, whose journeys over many centuries have played a crucial part in the adoption and dissemination of musical influences throughout Europe and the Middle East.

'Gypsy Fusion' is a reference to a musical style, not to the band members, and Zarafa does not claim in any way to speak on behalf of Rom people. The band is, however, supportive of struggles against persecution and discrimination in many parts of the world, including the struggles of the Rom people.

### Performers

Zarafa is led by two talented multi-instrumentalists. Pin Rada was born in Chile in 1974 to Italian / Hungarian parents. In 1979 Pin's mother fled Pinochet's dictatorship and brought Pin and his sister to Australia. By his early twenties, Pin was performing on guitar, mandolin and didjeridu with instrumental dance band Domingo. His arrival in Melbourne launched his love affair with eclectic music and instruments, and he took up the *saz*, *lyra* and *ney* flutes. Pin has travelled and studied music in Turkey, Greece and India.

Mark Planigale was born in Melbourne in 1971 and has Croatian, Scottish and Norwegian heritage. Classical training in piano and saxophone laid down a musical foundation; connecting with his Celtic ancestry in his early twenties led him to take up guitar and to make the transition from piano to accordion. He is a passionate singer and brings to Zarafa an intimate knowledge of Croatian and other Balkan musical traditions.

Zarafa also features Ashley Jones on violin, Alistair Lord on percussion, and Ben Last on percussion and electronica. Zarafa performs and tours with dancers, including bellydancers Sarah and Tanleea.

### Achievements

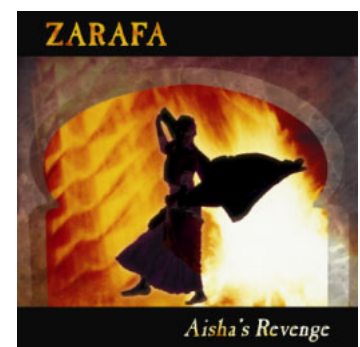
In the five years since its inception, Zarafa has become renowned for colourful live performances combining virtuoso instrumental technique with emotional intensity. Zarafa has performed widely

across Melbourne and country Victoria, featuring at festivals including the Brunswick Music Festival, Chewton Folk Festival, Pako Festa, Hume Winter Festival, Bendigo Easter Fair and others.

### Albums



'I Walked Abroad', Zarafa's first album, was released in February 2002. The album is a wide-ranging journey through the landscapes of European and Arabic folk music, including traditional dance tunes from Turkey, Greece, Yemen, a set of fiery Celtic jigs, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century English song *Miri It Is*, and many original compositions.



'Aisha's Revenge', the long-awaited sequel, was released in July 2004. The album is again eclectic, featuring powerful acoustic dance music from Turkey, Macedonia and Brittany, original bellydance tunes, traditional Croatian vocals, and contemplative instrumental *taksims*. Guest artists include Brahim Benhim (oud and percussion), Colette Mortreux (clarinet) and Tai Jordan (trumpet).

Both albums retail at AUD\$24.95 and are available from selected retail outlets, by mail order, and online at [www.indie-cds.com](http://www.indie-cds.com).

*This article © 2005 Zarafa.*