

Memories of 10 days in Bucharest, Romania in 1993:

- —After traveling for 30 hours, door to door (Carbondale IL to St. Louis MO to Frankfurt to Vienna to Bucharest) my flight landed in Romania. The runway was in dreadful shape, with pot holes and weed beds. In addition, there was a line of soldiers, standing at attention, every 50 yards on both sides of the runway. Each carried a machine gun. It was spooky. The airport was chaotic. I was a little concerned as I went through customs and then “purchased” a visa, which apparently was a necessity. The man at the desk where I purchased that visa demanded the visa in cash – American dollars. Sometime during the next week, I was told that I did not need a visa, and that visas were never purchased anyway. I guess the fellow behind the desk made a quick \$30.
- —After customs, I saw a young woman holding a sign with my name on it. I approached her and then followed her outside. I immediately noticed the smell outside – gasoline and garbage. But as I looked around, Bucharest was a vibrant, gorgeous city. Apparently, its architecture was a copy of that of Paris. Still, many of the buildings had bullet holes here and there, and there were many small platoons of soldiers patrolling the city, with their guns, looking suspicious and tough. I later learned that their presence was part of the confusion. There had been patrols for decades, and the new city politicians didn’t know how to NOT live in an unpatrolled metropolis.
- —after being driven to my dormitory where I was to stay, I was taken to composer Ulpiu Vlad’s home and served dinner with several other Romanian musicians. Dinner was a slice of undercooked pork, some potatoes, and a small salad. To my surprise, every lunch and dinner was that exact meal, no matter where I was eating it, in the dorm where I received meals gratis, or when invited into someone’s home. One afternoon I did buy a small pizza for 20¢ from a guy selling them right out of his apartment window. It was tasty.
- —Out shopping, there wasn’t too much to buy. The stores were empty. But at an outdoor market I found a handwoven rug that I purchased for about \$30. It was beautiful. I still have it. I hoped that I could fit it in my duffel bag so I could take it home. Interestingly, when I paid for it, I was also given a receipt that included some government number and stamp. It seemed that this handmade rug could be considered an artisan item with artistic value and thus belonging to Romania. I would need this stamp in order to take the rug out of the country.
- —before leaving for this trip, I had asked my 10-year-old son what he’d like me to bring him from Eastern Europe. He said “some salami.” One day I was in the city and was looking for a place to buy a salami. I found a butcher shop with salmis in the front window. There was a line coming out the door, for about half of a block, with Romanians waiting to be served. I waited with them, and they stared at me. By the time I got into the butcher shop, I noticed that the shelves were nearly empty. And there was very little in the butcher case, but there were several salamis. I also noticed that the people in line were all buying salami, but just 5 or 6 slices each. Unfortunately, that didn’t really register on me. I also noticed that the salamis were very inexpensive, as per

the exchange rate of Lei to Dollars. When my turn came, I asked to buy TWO SALMIS. The butcher looked a bit taken back, and so did the other people around me. I gave the butcher the couple of bucks for the salamis, and left the store. About a block away it registered. I was the “Ugly American.”

- —Although there were plenty of guys on the street willing to exchange my dollars to Lei, I was told not to trust them, but to go to a specific travel agent in downtown Bucharest to exchange my money. I did so. The travel agent, who thankfully spoke English, exchanged some money for me. She also gave me her card, just in case I’d need anything or had any trouble during my stay. Her card was a bit larger than normal business cards, quite fancy, with elaborate printing and a filigreed emblem of some sort. It looked very official.
- —Bucharest had a very strong musicians union. In MORNING DANCE, just a couple of minutes into the piece (2:08 in this recording), during a very quiet part, a single note (a mid-range Ab) is played in the piano. From that note the orchestra builds, leading into the first cadenza from the organ. It is the only note played by the piano, so in my score (meas. 40), I had given the single note to the percussion, thinking that one of the percussionists could just walk over to the piano, and play the Ab. However, the musicians’ union dictated that that was not legal, and a pianist had to be hired to play the note! During the rehearsals, it became a recurrent joke: the pianist, a young woman, would sit at the piano reading a magazine until measure 40 came by. She would then play her minor yet important part and then return to her magazines. The entire orchestra got a big kick out of this, laughing at each repeat – once the broke into applause!
- —On the last evening of the festival, after the final concert (which included MORNING DANCE), there was a banquet for all guest composers. Each of us had our own translator, to help us during our stay. Mine was a young college coed named Elena. During the banquet, I remember talking with Elena quite a bit. When the banquet dinner was served, it was the same rare pork, potatoes, and salad, plus a warm bottle of beer. I asked her about this. I wondered why we were served the same meal over and over. She told me that it was because pork was currently in easy supply and many other possibilities were not. I thought back to the poverty I had seen, and the line outside the butcher shop, where people were buying only a few slices of salami at a time. I asked Elena, “But don’t you get tired of eating the same thing day after day. Her response was to the point, nailing me again to my Ugly American status: “Yes, of course, and those poor people in the *third* world.”
Yikes.
- —The next morning I was up early, ready to be taken to the airport with an English trombonist and a Polish cellist. I was all packed. The rug I purchased snugly fit into my duffel bag. I also had my salamis and some spare toilet paper, which seemed to be a necessity – always taking a few sheets of toilet paper when going out, just in case it would be needed. There was never any in the rustic bathrooms. At the airport, during the exiting procedure, I was asked to open my duffel. There was the rug. The customs official, with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, pulled the rug

out of my duffel. He began shaking his head, and then indicating that I was not allowed to take this rug out of Romania. I told him I had my certificate and showed it to him. He complained that it was not valid, and that I would need to leave the rug with him. I objected, but there were guards around. They had guns. I began to sweat. I was frozen for a few minutes, and asked him again 'why' and again showed him my certificate. He just sat in his chair staring and not saying a word. He punched my passport, and seemed to be waiting for me to close up my duffel, gather my other belongings, and leave. I started to do this. I remembered the travel agent. I searched for her card in my wallet and took it out. The customs official saw the card as I flashed it. And then I told him I was going to make a phone call. He immediately told me to take the rug and leave. I did so very quickly and made my way to the plane. I was covered in sweat. I'm pretty sure the customs guy thought I was going to call someone important. I'm also pretty sure the guy was planning to bring his wife home a nice present that evening!