

Swept up with the music in St Gervais

Ashley Ray

AUGUST 2-9 WAS MY FIRST EXPERIENCE AT LE Grand Bal de l'Europe in St Gervais, France, but I hope not my last. For the previous two years I had attended the other Grand Bal at Gennetines, and for anyone who loves music and dancing and meeting like-minded people from across the world, though mainly Europe, I can't recommend either strongly enough.

For the dancer, there were workshops offering opportunities to try dances from across the regions of France from Basque to Brittany to Gascony to Alsace to Poitou. So you could have tried dances such as bourrées, fandangos, mazurkas, and schottisches. St Gervais also offered many other dance opportunities. One could try Irish (céilí, old-style steps and sets), Israeli, Swedish, Italian, Belgian, German, Argentinian, Spanish, Catalan, Chilean, Serbian, Cajun, Scottish, Welsh and English dances. In addition, there were special classes to guide couples in how to dance with and turn your partner and also classes to help you understand how to relax your mind and body.

For the musician, there were classes for violinists who play for dancers, for accordionists, for musicians wanting to play Swedish dance music, and, probably most importantly, many ad hoc opportunities at lunch times or throughout the day and night to form impromptu sessions. Often, after the last bal (céilí) usually after 3AM, the members of groups who played joined together in the middle of the floor, with other musicians and singers joining in, as many as thirty plus, and the sessions continued into the morning and offered dancers the opportunity to be swept up with the music.

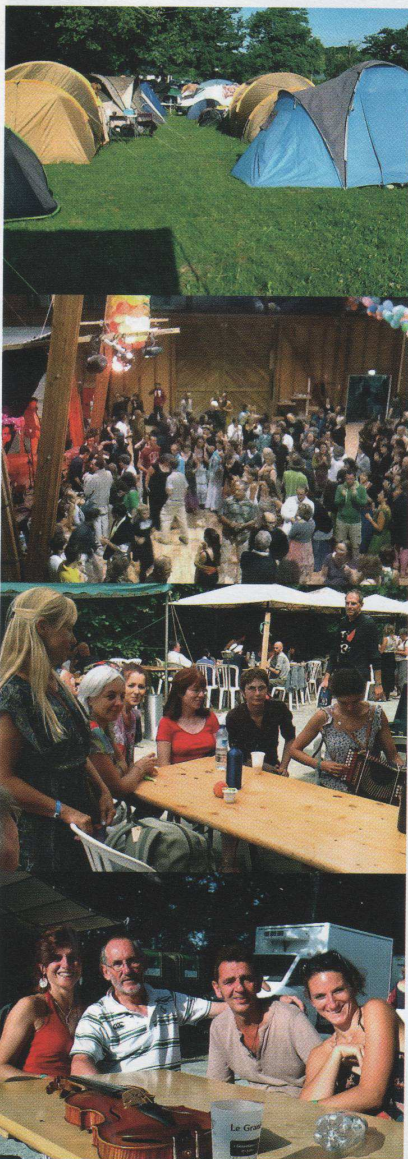
The organisation, all voluntary, was superb. The specially created restaurant provided breakfast, lunch and dinner—a dinner or lunch ticket was €7. At the bar (also specially created) a drink ticket, just over a euro, bought you a beer, two coffees or teas, or an ice cream. Snacks like crisps and biscuits were also available and three drink tickets got you a bottle of wine. Breakfast was three drink tickets.

The price was incredible. For €110 you had access to all the workshops and all the bals for a full week. Each day in St Gervais offered a choice of over twenty different workshops and some sixteen bals every night. The campsite, with good showers and washing facilities, as well as being in a small leisure park with a swimming lake, was only five minutes walk from the event centre, and was free. Apart from the lake, Gennetines offers the same opportunities, but with more dance floors and a slightly greater range of workshops. The difference is that Gennetines is more isolated. The St Gervais event is near the centre of the village, offering easy access, by foot from the camp site, to a supermarket, small shops, cafes, bars, bistros and restaurants.

There were great teachers and great bands in St Gervais. The dance teachers normally used French as the main language of instruction, but they demonstrated frequently, so whilst a lack of understanding French was a hindrance, it was not so great, because by simply watching you could learn a lot. There were bands that played music for the specialised dances that had been taught in the classes, but they also played generally known dances. There was great music for dancing. You could have danced to household names in France, such as Parasol and Philippe Plard (who comes to the Half-Door Weekend in Castletown, Co Laois), and wonderfully different styles with bands like Sons Libres (Senegal) and individual musicians, who on their own, can hold a full dance floor enthralled, like Bernard Loffet and Philippe Plard.

To try and convey the flavour of the variety St Gervais offers and the opportunity for impromptu happenings, I will pass on one of my personal

experiences. One afternoon after lunch, sitting outside at the ranks of tables and chairs, close to the self service restaurant and bar, I was chatting with a couple of friends. A few tables away three musicians were playing some lovely music. They played a jig. We danced the Peeler and the Goat to their music and then got chatting. They were a band called Bal de l'Ephémère¹. Cathy Donin, their leader plays the accordion, Raphaëlle Yaffee, the fiddle, and Gerard Tevenet, the guitar. In addition, they often sing as



Snapshots from St Gervais top to bottom—the campground, one of the dance floors, an outdoor session and Ashley Ray second left with friends. Photos by Ashley.

they play, so adding a further sweet and intoxicating dimension to their lovely music. In addition they write all their own music. They play bal folk (bourrees, mazurkas, rondeaux, gavottes, etc) and the way they play speaks to your whole body and being. Their music goes in through your ears, consumes your body and departs, as you make your own personal contribution, through your feet, as you dance. As a new band to the event, sadly, they had the opportunity to play for dancers at only one bal. However, later in the week, and a day or so after they had played at their bal, by chance, one early evening,

¹ www.myspace/bal-ephemere

outside the bar I was chatting to them again with my friend Christina (dancer, fiddle player and a charming life-enhancing person). We asked what they were doing later. They said that they were going to play for their own enjoyment and we asked if could we come along, listen and perhaps dance. They said no problem. We ended up in one of the seven dance halls, which, whilst packed from 9PM onwards until 2-3AM, was free until 9. They played, Christina and I danced, and people passing saw, joined in, and before long there was an impromptu bal of some sixty people. We danced mazurkas, schottisches, bourrées, waltzes, Swedish polskas, Circassian Circle, chapeloise and finished with the hypnotic but relaxing Gavotte de l'Aven. A wonderful experience.

The Irish contribution to the world of bal folk and traditional music and dance was well represented by a group called Claddagh. They consisted of Michael Tubridy, Maria O'Leary, Sean Leyden, James and Treasa Barron, Annette Collins, Ger Mulgannon, Yvan Martineu and Berni McGinley. The McGinley family were there in full force, with husband, Raymond, taking to the boards from time to time, and their three young children. Cora supported her mother very ably on stage, their son Peter entertained with his accordion and chat, and the youngest Ellen just sparkled all the time. I mention them at length to make the point that St Gervais has something for every age. The rest of the group consisted of Rachel Goodwin, from the group Duo Mad Tom, and Gilles Poutoux, who with Catherine Renard and Michael, provided some great music. I didn't see the céilí (taught by Maria) or solo (Michael) dancing workshops, but did attend a set dancing workshop and two bals to lend a hand. What I saw was great enthusiasm and interest from the many dancers who attended. Also obvious were the good skill levels, even from those who hadn't danced sets before. The challenge for the teachers (Maria, James and Sean) was to find a way to pass on the different movements in each set and through a mixture of French and English and demonstration. Aided by much humour, this challenge was addressed.

Claddagh's spectacle (half hour show) demonstrated what a traditional night in an Irish home might be like with a few figures from different sets, some step dancing and music, including a lovely slow air solo from Michael. The set figures, very ably danced by Maria and Sean, Treasa and James, Annette and Yvan and Berni and Michael clearly showed the fun people can have dancing together. The solo dancing of old-style dances by Berni and Cora, dancing Maggie Pickens, hornpipes and reels by Annette and Berni, and jigs with Maria and Michael, to the lovely music provided by Rachel, Gilles, Catherine and Michael, allowed their excellent skill levels to be fully appreciated. The audience showed their appreciation by their enthusiastic applause. After the event a knowledgeable French musician said to me that it was a superb and very natural show.

The spectacles on offer each evening are well worthwhile attending for the enjoyment they provide and their interesting content. This year I saw a fascinating and amusing show demonstrating the story of dance through bourrées and whether there is one dance or many dances as each dancer brings their own contribution to each dance. Also it amusingly asked the unanswerable question, who is in the lead, the dancer or the musician?

In conclusion, if you are a dancer or a musician, do go. These events have so much to offer with like-minded and very friendly people from so many countries. I decided that this year was my chance to master the asymmetric waltzes. Sad to say the asymmetric waltzes have won the first round, but I will be back.

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