

Pure enjoyment in Saint-Gervais

Ashley Ray

LAST YEAR I WROTE ABOUT MY FIRST EXPERIENCE of the week-long festival of dance and music at Le Grand Bal de l'Europe at Saint-Gervais. I write again following this year's festival, 2–9 August, to give you some of my personal experiences and more importantly to encourage anyone who wants to enjoy a wonderful experience to go there.

Le Grand Bal offers a superb opportunity to be immersed in lovely music and to learn a fantastic range of folk dances from the many regions of France, such as Auvergne, Ariège, Poitou, Gascogne and Alsace, as well as dances from Sweden, Egypt, Catalonia, Turkey, Sardinia, USA, Israel, Portugal, Belgium, England, Wales, and West Africa. This festival is not to be missed. You can dance each day from 10AM to after 3AM the next morning.

The festival is masterminded by Bernard Coclet and his daughter Julie. The organisation is superb. It is amazing to think that, solely with a large band of 250 volunteer helpers, it is possible for such a massive, but smooth running organisation to deliver a seamless and wonderful music, dance and cultural experience for over 2,000 people each day.

A one-price ticket of around €130 gives you access to everything all week (food and drink are extra but not expensive) and there are at least five different two-hour workshops each morning and ten in the afternoon sessions. There are taster sessions too, where you can dip into a new experience for half an hour. In addition to the dance classes there are classes for musicians, with classes for fiddle, harmonica and accordion this year.

In the evenings there are seven different venues where you can dance to *bal folk* music and also have the opportunity to try some of the dances you have learned at the workshops. Each dance hall or dance marquee holds between 200–300 people, offers good acoustics and dance floors, and has at least three bals, each lasting ninety minutes to three hours.

Each bal is likely to have some couple dances in common, like *schottisches* (for the Irish dancer, if you can do the Back-to-Back Hornpipe and can double then you should have no problems); waltzes (normal and asymmetric—the latter are tricky, well for me anyway!); mazurkas (a waltz with a pause in every other bar) and *bourees*. In addition, there are simple progressive dances like the *Cercle Circassien* and the *Chapeloise*. If you go to the introductory *bal folk* workshops you should be able to pick up the rudiments of many of these dances very quickly.

The atmosphere is amazing. The event is incredibly international, but you feel you are always amongst friends. For the non-French speaker, you can learn a lot by simply watching what the teachers demonstrate at the workshops. The teaching is of a very high quality. The teachers pay particular attention to both explaining and showing—a picture paints a thousand words. Certainly you won't absorb all the nuances and detail—I certainly didn't—but you will get the essence of what they are explaining. Also the friendship dimension means that your partner, or those around you, will do their best to help and also, when they can, translate into English.

As I have said, to enable beginners to understand what it is like to dance *bal folk* dances, there are workshops to initiate you into what to expect and you can quickly pick up enough to enable you to enjoy your first *bal* experience. For the more experienced you can try some workshops offering tuition in the dances of different regions of France, and of other countries. Some you will find challenging—last year I struggled with the *valse impaires* (asymmetric



Scenes from Le Grand Bal de l'Europe in Saint-Gervais, France, organised by Bernard Coclet above right. Photos by Sean Leyden, Ashley Ray and Dany Richard.

waltzes), but what I learned last year and the practice I managed to put in with friends in Ireland in the interim, stood me in good stead this year, and generally I managed to find a smiling partner when a *valse impaire* was played at a bal, and the sign of my success was that they were still smiling afterwards! This year the challenge was the Swedish polkas—lovely music and mysteriously demanding dances. I was pleased that from time to time I was able to pick up the rhythms, and from time to time, the steps, but sadly not both at the same time!

There is a degree of difficulty grading for each dance workshop so if you happen to choose a three-star workshop (the most difficult), don't be too concerned if you don't make the progress you want. Last year when I tried the *valse impaires* I found them difficult, but I obviously picked up something because this year I was reasonably successful. This year the Swedish polkas workshop was a three-star workshop so I wasn't too disheartened by my lack of immediate success.

The Claddagh group

FOR DANCERS OF SETS, CEILI, SOLO AND TWO-HAND dances, there is the comfort of being able to settle

back into something familiar to recharge the confidence batteries, and also to be impressed, both by the quality of teaching (mostly in French) and the ability of other nationalities to pick up the steps and understand the terminology so quickly. I would congratulate the members of the Claddagh group of dancers and musicians for their workshops, bals and their *spectacle*, a half-hour performance in front of more than 300 people.

The Irish contribution to the world of *bal folk* and traditional music and dance was well represented by the Claddagh group. They were ably led by Maria O'Leary and Sean Leyden. Brilliant foot tapping music was provided by musicians Eimear Graham (accordion), Donal Savage (concertina and fiddle), Jack Warnock (guitar) and Michael Tubridy (flute).

The dancers with Maria and Sean included the maestro of flute and step dance, Michael Tubridy, Annette Collins, Cristina Crawley, Berni McGinley and yours truly. The McGinley family were there in full force. Berni's husband Raymond was their roadie, but at times the young ones Ellen and Peter, with their older sister Cora, were the ones who kept the McGinley show on the road. The group were also indebted to friends from England, Peter Davies >



More Saint-Gervais scenes top to bottom—Donegal two-hand dancing; set dancing; Claddagh group musicians and their spectacle; Berni and Ellen McGinley; and Bal de l'Ephémère.

Saint-Gervais—Pulled the heart strings

◀ and Owen Williams, and French friends Agnès Haack and Michelle (sorry, I never got your surname), who willingly offered a hand when needed to demonstrate, or to help as people danced.

The workshops in set dancing taught by Maria and Sean, ceili dances by Maria and old-style step dance by Michael were well attended. Maria and Sean cleverly interspersed their French explanation with English terminology and people were soon able to understand the movements. As ever, the demonstrations cemented what was being explained. The bals run by Claddagh worked very well, with a brief demonstration and explanation of each figure preceding its being danced. Once again success can be measured by repeat attendees and smiling faces.

The highlight of Claddagh's contribution to the

week was their *spectacle*—not my words but the words of the many who came to congratulate the group afterwards. The *spectacle* was a brief depiction of a night of music and dance with family and friends in an Irish home. It was just people enjoying themselves and yet came across as a hugely entertaining performance. A few figures from different sets were danced. Cristina, as well as dancing, played fiddle with the musicians and entertained with a lovely song. Maria and Michael demonstrated their steps skills, Jack sang a haunting refrain, Michael played a delightful slow air on the flute, and then Annette and Berni gave a very polished performance dancing hornpipes and reels. But I am sure that all in the group will agree that the sight of Berni dancing the traditional step dance Maggie Pickens with her little Ellen and elder daughter Cora, whilst son Peter accompanied the musicians on tin whistle, was the part of the show that not only entertained but pulled at the heart strings. Some French ladies I talked to afterwards said that it had brought tears of joy to their eyes.

Donegal two-hand workshop

NINA SOLO WILL BE KNOWN TO MANY READERS as she used to write musical articles for this magazine.¹ Some may have danced and possibly played fiddle with her in Co Donegal where she lived for eleven years until leaving in October 2012 to return to France and settle down in the Midi-Pyrénées region in Cordes-sur-Ciel, voted by the French as their Village Préféré 2014! Nina obviously simply changed one Irish bit of heaven on earth for a French one—a sea of clouds even surrounds the medieval city at dawn on some special days to remind her of Falcarragh Bay.

Whilst in Donegal, Nina was schooled in the ways of Donegal fiddling and is an accomplished fiddle player. She also learned Donegal two-hand dances and is indebted to Connie McKelvey and Anne Conaghan for their excellent tuition, which she more than ably passed on at a half-hour discovery workshop. Nina has a charming, gentle but very effective teaching style, and over the first workshop, then two extra ones added during the week on demand, she soon had the class mastering the Erin O, Corn Ricks, Barn Dance, Highland and Donegal Mazurka, all of which were very much enjoyed by well-attended classes. She gave me the honour of helping her demonstrate, which was a real joy. Then at the last workshop, Nina offered me the opportunity to teach a version of the Peeler and the Goat (Donal Savage was very kind and helped with the music) that I had learned in Blacklion, Co Cavan, some twenty years ago. Despite my Ardglass French, all seemed to go well. Nina, thank you for your courage! I am delighted that your success has been immediately recognised and confirmed by the fact that one dancer of the organisation team has already asked that you come back next year to provide a lengthier programme.

Lasting impressions

LASTING MEMORIES FOR ME AS EVER WILL BE THE joy of dancing with like-minded people whose beaming smiles said it all. Dance partners there are like set dancers—helpful, understanding and wanting you to have as much fun as they are having. The music is just magic, such variations and variety—I danced to Alsace, Belgian, Israeli, and lots of French music. I danced Irish dances, of course, Bretagne and Belgian dances, Welsh and English contra dances, attempted Swedish polkas (my poor partners) and managed to pack in very many waltzes (normal and asymmetric), polkas, mazurkas, schottisches and bourrées and many mixer dances.

The musical variety is amazing from the well established groups like Parasol and Cécilia and Philippe Plard and Shillelagh. There are also bals where the incredible music was solely vocal.

For me, and I know that I am biased, there were two particular groups who impressed me hugely, and dancing to their music was a very special experience. One was Bal de l'Ephémère and the other was Deux Sans Frontiers. Why were they special? In their own unique way they both made the music and the dance become one entity. Bal de l'Ephémère consist of Cathy Donin (accordion), Raphaëlle Yaffee (fiddle) and Gérard Tévenet (guitar) and they write a lot of their own music. When their instruments and voices combine, they create a very special and captivating effect which makes dancing to their music such a joy. The other group, Deux Sans Frontiers comprise Mark Prescott (fiddle) and Mike Gulston (octave mandola and guitar). Their music is sensual, emotional and all consuming. For me their music takes over your body; you don't need to think what you are doing as you and the music become one. I get a similar sensation dancing sets to the Tulla Ceilí Band.

I do hope that the legs will keep me going for another year so I can come back for more in 2015.

Ashley Ray, Ardglass, Co. Down

¹ Her magazine articles were signed Nina Watrelot.