

Scintillating Saint-Gervais Ashley Ray



Christian Pacher teaching dances of the Poitou region of France in Saint-Gervais. Photo by Véronique Chochon.

DESPITE A SEVERE THUNDERSTORM AT THE END of the week, Le Grand Bal de l'Europe in Saint-Gervais-d'Auvergne, France, 1-8 August, attracted dancers and musicians in their thousands—another incredible week of music and dancing! Congratulations again to the organisers, led by the ever-present Bernard Coclet, and his massive band of very supportive helpers, who, when not registering new arrivals everyday, were helping cater for thousands each day in the restaurant, serving behind the bar, assisting musicians to store their instruments, generally sweeping and cleaning dance floors and keeping everywhere clean and tidy—not an easy job, I am sure, with a thousand plus people attending the festival each day.

The music and dance experience was second to none, with workshops in every type of French regional dance on offer. In addition, there were dances from many other countries to try, such as Argentine tango, contra dance from Wales and New England, Israeli, Swedish, Portuguese, Catalanian, Italian, Mallorcan, Walloon, Cajun, Irish and eighteenth century quadrilles. You could also learn and develop skills in couple dances like waltzes, mazurkas, schottisches, polkas, pasa doble, Charleston and Java. There were many opportunities to better understand the chemistry of dance, for example with workshops in how to lead and how to follow. The difficulty is that one is spoilt for choice. If you don't want to burn out in the first few days then careful study of the programme and difficult decision making is required. But don't forget you don't have to dance

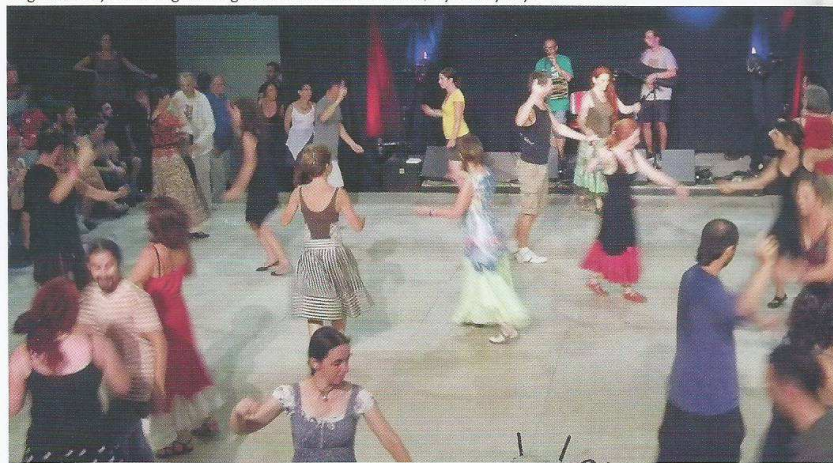
every workshop, you are welcome to take a seat in the sun or shade with a beer, wine, or an ice cream in your hand and just watch. It is amazing what you can learn by watching.

The music amazed with its variety and quality, and not only at the workshops or *bals* (ceilis). There were sessions which sprung up in the many places outside the bar, in the restaurant area or by the temporary ballrooms where you could find musicians

thoroughly enjoying themselves and offering much enjoyment to so many others. The range of *bal folk* music was impressive. For example, you had the formidable Brigitte and Valerie, Les Dames de Nage, who use only their voices to provide the music for their *bals* and who made me even more anxious to improve my understanding of spoken French. This is because their *bals* were a nonstop comedic banter with each bouncing jokes off the other, and off the dancers. Even if you don't understand the jokes there is no doubt that you would still find yourself laughing. What a wonderful gift and skill to have and to be able to entertain so engagingly and inclusively. Indeed, their stage was the whole festival and you would hear them singing everywhere, including the restaurant kitchen.

Another opportunity to be both entertained and taught was at a Parasol workshop, where Gerard Godon's *blagues* (jokes) and repartee with his students added to the fun to be had. Another fabulous experience was attending two workshops by Christian Pacher on the dances of the Poitou region of France. He is a one-man show of skill, entertainment and humour, all combined with a dance and a music genius. At his two-hour workshop, he taught three dances. For one dance, the Ronde de Chantecorps, he encouraged us to sing as a means of helping us understand how to interpret the subtlety of the music and combine the rhythm with the steps. At the same time, he encouraged us to add our own style, emphasising that dance is one's own very personal interpretation of the music. His *bals*, where he sang and joined in on the fiddle and

Elegant and eye-catching dancing at the Mallorcan *bal*. Photo by Ashley Ray.



The Claddagh Group and friends celebrate Michael Tubridy's birthday. Photo by Dany Richard.



accordion with his group Ciac Boum, had the crowds entranced and always shouting for more.

But there was so much. Groups like Parasol and Philippe Plard, with their consummate musicianship and vibrant personalities, continued to attract and enthral large crowds. To swamp the senses, there were also the enchanting dances of the Alsace region, together with the lovely music of Au Gré des Vents. Added to this there was the melodious and clever playing of groups such as Le Bal de l'Ephemere, and Mi Ombre Mi Soleil, providing soul-moving music which just wraps you in its arms and gently clasps you as you drift off into another world whilst dancing round the floor.

A very interesting new addition, for me anyway, was the music of Valentin, almost a one-man show, with a classical music style and skill, bringing a new *bal folk* experience. So novel, in fact, that at times you

seemed to be dancing as if there was only the internal music of the soul sustaining you. In fact, there was one amazing incident at the end of his first *bal*. When playing a haunting version of the *Gavotte de l'Aven* to a packed crowd of dancers, his partner started singing a simple refrain which the dancers then picked up and joined in. The next time I looked up from my dance reverie, there was no one on the stage, the dancers through their voices were dancing to their own music and the two musicians were in fact dancing with the crowd. *Incroyable*. It certainly again raised the age old question of which came first, the music or the dance?

At the Mallorcan *bal*, watching was very much a pleasure, and possibly a must, as without some workshop knowledge, the intricacies of the timing of steps and turns to the music, whilst always elegant and eye-catching, often with the men tapping out



A set dancing workshop led by Maria O'Leary. Photo by Dany Richard.



The Claddagh Group musicians and friends playing for a set dancing *bal*. Photo by Pierre-Jean Muet.

a rhythm with castanets, were a mystery to fathom, to me anyway. Having attempted some Catalanian dances at their *bal*, and having had some success, the Mallorcan challenge was a step too far, but nevertheless created a frustrating longing to be able to join in. The challenges that *Le Grand Bal de l'Europe* creates are essential to its enduring charm and the call, ever present, to come back again next year.

IT WAS HEARTWARMING TO SEE THE ENTHUSIASM and interest in set dancing and old-style step dancing at this wide-ranging and important international festival. The Claddagh Group, ably led by Maria O'Leary and Seán Leyden, did Ireland proud with the range of material and spectacle offered. The group included as dancers Annette Collins, Monique Dal-Col, Agnès Haack and Peter Davies, and with Michael Tubridy, three other excellent musicians, Donal Savage, Eoghan McKenna and Stephen Smith, as well the occasional guest musician and dancer. I was delighted to again be asked to help out as a member of the dancing contingent.

The group represented a mixture of nationalities, Irish, French and English, and as such was itself a microcosm of the international mix prevalent throughout the festival. They offered a real mixture of the Irish musical and dance repertoire, with four well-attended workshops. The first two offered tuition in set dancing, with the Corofin Plain Set taught by Maria and the Fermanagh Set by Seán. Maria also taught a short workshop on céili dances, and Michael taught hornpipe steps in a two-hour workshop with support from Annette, Agnès and Maria.

The high point of the group's contribution to the festival was the half-hour show they were chosen to present to more than a thousand people on the Thursday evening. It included some brilliant music

from the musicians, supported by Danyèle Besserer (from *Au Gré des Vents*) and Mark Prescott (a member of *Vivant*, of *Deux Sans Frontières* and of Philippe Plard's group). The dancers danced a figure from each of the Fermanagh, Cashel and Corofin sets, and then to showcase both the range of Irish dance and music and the group's talent, there was an excellent exhibition of solo dance by Annette, with lovely accompanying music from Mark on the fiddle. The musicians played some floor-tapping reels as Seán had the audience in his hand with some storming solo sean-nós, finishing with Annette, Agnès and Peter joining in to form a half-set and dance parts of the Plain Set. Michael, with the years under his belt only adding to his virtuosity, led a trio performance with Maria and Agnès dancing a hornpipe, and then brought a complete, but very atmospheric, change of mood with a solo slow air on the flute. The show was a great

success and the audience called for an encore. This had not been prepared but, with more great music from the musicians, the dancers danced the third figure from the Plain Set to more sustained applause.

In addition to the Claddagh Group's offerings there was another opportunity to try some Irish dances. Nina Solo, a French woman who lived in Donegal for many years, provided a short workshop teaching couple dances from Donegal, in addition to providing the well-attended and much appreciated classes in relaxation and yoga throughout the week. Her successful workshop allowed dancers to try the Long German, the Donegal Two-Hand Polka and the Back-to-Back Hornpipe. I am sure that teacher Connie McKelvey from Donegal would have been delighted to see these dances brought to so many dancers at Saint-Gervais. Nina's delightful fiddle playing had me thinking I was back in Donegal, and it was a real pleasure to have been asked to help out with the demonstrations and to try out my French again by teaching the Back-to-Back Hornpipe.

THE DANCE WORLD HAS SO MUCH TO OFFER, THE music, the dance, the challenges to persuade your mind, body and feet to understand how to take in what you are being taught and what you see. But festivals like this offer such wonderful opportunities to share the joy of dance and music with others. This is a large part of the fun and the added enjoyment is the joy of meeting old and new friends.

Hopefully, this brief report will have conveyed some of the atmosphere of what the Grand Bal can offer. I have my fingers crossed that I will return again next year. Hopefully some of you reading this will give it a try too. I am sure that you won't regret it! Camping is the main accommodation solution, but if camping is not for you, do try websites for hotel and B&B accommodation in the area, but do it now for 2016 as there are many who will already have booked the same places again for next year.

Ashley Ray, Ardglass, Co Down

A workshop in Donegal two-hand dances led by Nina Solo on fiddle. Photo by Djamilé Lemasse.

