

Scintillating Saint-Gervais Ashley Ray



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

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

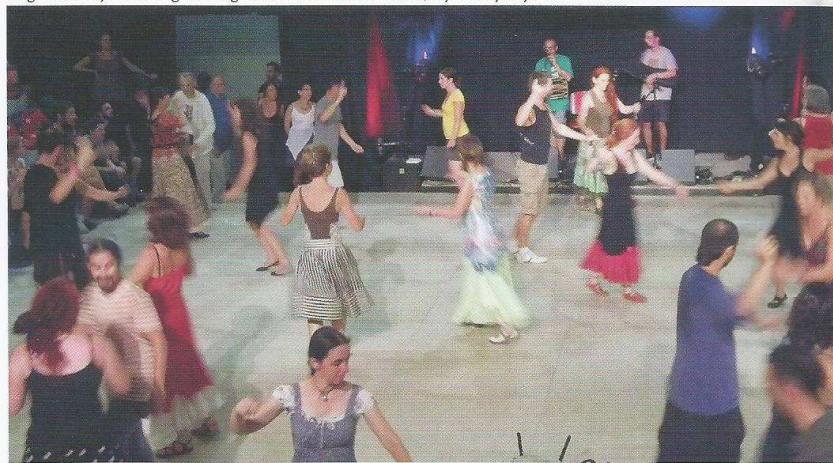
every workshop, you are welcome to take a seat in the sun or shade with a beer, wine, or an ice cream in your hand and just watch. It is amazing what you can learn by watching.

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

