



Remarkable Saint-Gervais

Ashley Ray

At a set dancing workshop at Le Grand Bal de l'Europe in Saint-Gervais-d'Auvergne, France, in August the Cashel Set was demonstrated by members of the Claddagh Group—Sean Leyden, Treasa Barron, James Barron, Annette Collins, Berni McGinley, Michael Tubridy, Maria O'Leary and Peter Davies. Photos by Dany Richard.

ONCE AGAIN I WRITE TO EXTOL THE VIRTUES of an amazing week of dance and music, with the bonus of excellent weather, Le Grand Bal de l'Europe, Saint-Gervais-d'Auvergne, France, not far from Clermont-Ferrand, from August 6th to 13th. All the world (well, I believe over 2,000 people will have attended over the festival's seven days) seemed to be there, smiling, talking, dancing and enjoying the shared joys of music and dance.

The week wouldn't have worked without the attention to detail given by the Grand Bal de l'Europe organisers led by Bernard Coclet and his daughter Julie. Bernard and Julie were everywhere making sure that everything happened as and when it should and that any problems (few that there are) were rectified very quickly. Their leadership was at the forefront of vast numbers of volunteers who were the mainstay of the daily administration needs of registering arrivals and helping bands, musicians and dance teachers and their supporting groups. In addition, it was the volunteers who were there all hours of the day and night, catering and serving in the restaurant and bar, checking in and checking out musicians' instruments, offering a recharging service for mobiles and tablets as well as cleaning floors and toilets. As a participant you don't think about these necessary activities because you are totally absorbed in the wonder of all the dance and music possibilities on offer. You can learn to dance, play an instrument, or simply listen to great music as you enjoy a friendly chat with old or new friends.

All this took place in La Halle Cœur de Combrailles, which was wonderfully transformed into a centre of music and dance with three indoor ballrooms and an adjoining restaurant. The additional five dance facilities were provided in temporary dance halls which were housed in large marquees with detachable wooden wall panels—great for keeping in the heat on cold nights, and they can be cold, or being opened in the heat of the day to allow a cooling breeze to waft over the dancers.

The music and dance offered were excellent. If you wanted to learn there was nothing to stop you; the only constraints were your energy levels and the multiplicity of choice. Once again the choice ranged from those experiencing *bal folk* for the first time to French regional dances of every kind, to couple dances like waltzes (including asymmetric waltzes) and mazurkas and schottisches. This year there were

a number of 'mixer' workshops offering different dance experiences which involved a constant change of partners—great fun and super for meeting new people. This is only touching the tip of the iceberg. There was so much more—you could choose to try Afro-Brazilian, Portuguese, Cajun; dances from Quebec, Flanders (lovely music too), Denmark (for me a bit like a mixture of sets and contradanse, with their super teacher-musician, Robin Seifert); or try your hand at Morris dancing, or take on a range of bourrées where you dance in groups of four or more. These bourrées describe interesting figures with the dancers circling, crossing, turning and making moulins (like star movements in set dancing). Not enough? There was still more with Italian folk dances from Piedmont and Lombardy, Majorcan fandangos, Swedish polkas, and if still not satisfied then you could try rock, lindy hop and the lovely evocative waltzes, marches, fox trots, paso doubles and tangos of the period between the two wars—les bals de musette. Why stop there? Also on offer were dances of Catalonia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia. And of course, through Claddagh, the group led by Maria O'Leary, for those set dancers like me, wanting a little familiarity amongst all this vast array of new goodies, you could keep your hand in with some sets, céilí dances or sean nós.

There was something for everyone from beginners to really experienced dancers. If you wanted to learn then the level of teaching was excellent. For those whose French, like mine, means you may only pick up one word here and there, don't worry, it was amazing how much you could learn by just watching the demonstrations and also from so many people willing to offer a bit of translation or practical, on-the-spot guidance. There was no elitism and everyone of all abilities enjoyed and celebrated the simple joy of being able to move to a musical rhythm.

There were classes for violin, accordion, and that most wonderful instrument, the human voice. I found it amazing that the human voice can supply all the music and variety needed for a *bal*. Once again I was delighted, enthralled and hugely entertained by the Dames de Nage, Brigitte Kloareg and Valerie Imbert. (I learned this year that *dames de nage* translates to 'rowlocks', which hold oars in place on a rowboat.) These two wonderful ladies, wearing elegant, rather Carmen-Miranda-like headwear, abound with vocal talent which they have marshalled into a wide variety of dance material, waltzes, schottisches, Bretagne and Vendée dances and much more. I just wish my French was better because their interplay with each other and with the dancers was heart-warmingly comedic. I missed a lot, but not >

Claddagh group musicians Danyèle Besserer, Michael Tubridy, Eoghan Coghlan, Donal Savage and Antoine Leclerc.



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