



# 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 contradance, 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.



October–November 2016 Set Dancing News 11





Dancing the Peeler and the Goat at a two-hand dance workshop led by Maria O'Leary.

## Grand Bal—Showed their resilience

◀ all. This year they introduced a dancers' choice—they threw a hat in the air, and the catcher had to wear it for the next dance, which he or she had selected blind from a list of possible dances written on slips of paper in their elegant handbags. A simple, but very ingenious way of communicating with and generating a real sense of inclusivity for the dancers. *Bravo les Dames!*

Saint-Gervais 2016 was another very successful year for the Claddagh group—again they did the world of Irish dance proud. At the first set dancing workshop on the Monday, very ably taught by Sean Leyden, some 27 sets of dancers took on board the Plain Set. Whilst there were a considerable number of recognisable set dancing faces, from France and Italy in particular, the majority were new to set dancing but showed their resilience as all round dancers by being able to master the steps and the figures. Apart from some of the group *bourrées* that I have danced and some *contradanses*, I don't think that amongst the *bal folk* dances there is anything really like set dancing for testing your memory as well as dance skills.

The next workshop, two days later, saw leader Maria O'Leary very capably taking a similar number of sets

through another well established set, the Cashel. The teaching methods Sean and Maria both employed included explanations in French, a demonstration group showing each figure and, if required, repeating, via a walk through, some of the more complicated movements. Once again smiling faces all round showed the enjoyment that these workshops had generated. The Claddagh group's input at these workshops and two subsequent ceilis took the form of members either joining a set and guiding from within or aiding one or more sets by prompting and encouraging from the sidelines. It is difficult to know which worked to the best advantage of the attending dancers. However, within the camaraderie of dance, those experienced dancers who had come along to refresh and repeat their enjoyment of set dancing could be seen offering assistance in their sets as and when required. This could be seen happening at the Irish *bals*, as well as the workshops, and for me again confirms the concern and care which dancing, of all kinds, seems to engender in all participants.

The Wednesday evening and Friday evening Irish *bals* were successes with the two taught sets being repeated and more simple and easy-to-follow sets, like the Ballvourney Reel and the Connemara being shown and then ably danced by all present. To balance and add variety, Sean included the Pride of Erin Waltz and Maria added the Peeler and the Goat in a progressive form. At the late Friday night *bal*, Sean showed us how to dance a version of the

Walse Emsaise. The Friday night *bal* was a 10.15 am watching hour but, nevertheless attracted some ten sets, a considerable achievement considering the competition from very popular French groups in the other nearby ballrooms.

The Claddagh group were requested to put on a 25-minute *spectacle* (show) which attracted a full house in the amphitheatre in La Halle Cœur de Combrailles. (People were turned away because additional numbers would have breached health and safety regulations.) The show on the Thursday night was an attempt to recreate a house *ceili* and had everything. The musicians, Donal Savage, Eoghan Coghlan and the ever-young Michael Tubridy, with quality support from Danyèle Besserer (of Au Gré des Vents, a wonderful Alsace group) and Mark Prescott (from the Belfast-based French music and dance group Bal Feirste), provided great atmospheric music in their own right, and super music for the dancers. The musicians opened the show with a few sets of jigs which got the crowd's feet tapping. Linking with the workshops the dancers then kept the tempo going with a couple of figures from the Plain Set. Maria and Michael then danced a delightful hornpipe. This was followed by the dancers showing the third figure from the very popular Merchant Set. After that, a change of mood with a slow air by the musicians, and then a quick burst of polkas for the dancers to dance a rapid final figure of the Cashel Set. Annette Collins then provided an intricate solo dance to Mark's haunting fiddle playing. The dancers then followed with the final figure of the Merchant Set. Then it was back to reels and a real show-stopper of a brush dance by the McGinley family, Berni and her two daughters, Cora and Ellen. Young, uninhibited ten-year-old Ellen was the epitome of performing enjoyment with her vibrant personality and beaming smile reaching out across the floor to everyone in the hall. The evening finished with the musicians playing a charming waltz before the dancers again raised the tempo, and much applause, with a very lively last figure of the Clare Lancers. The other dancers who took their parts at various stages to adroitly show the combined skill and fun of set dancing included Maria, Michael, Sean, Berni and Cora, plus Peter Davies, James and Treasa Barron and this very privileged reporter.

Friday saw the group at work again. At the 10AM workshop Maria took a well filled hall through some *céili* and two-hand dances which included the Rakes of Mallow, the Haymakers Jig and the Peeler and the Goat. At 11AM Michael gave a master class in *sean nós* to a large and enthusiastic group who were rewarded with a very full programme, much of which they mastered—which is a tribute to them and to Michael's teaching and repeated demonstrations. It was good to see so many leave with smiles on their faces and an obvious sense of achievement.

The final Claddagh contribution was, as mentioned earlier, the late night/early morning *ceili* which despite the hour attracted a good number of enthusiastic dancers. In all the Claddagh group offered a most informative and enjoyable taster and experience of various types of Irish dance. *Bravo à nous!*

Obviously, I am a fan, but if you want to immerse yourself in traditional dance and music of incredible variety, whilst at the same time have the comfort blanket of the set dancing you know and love, then Le Grand Bal de L'Europe is a must for you. The spirit of the week was encapsulated in a massive gathering of like-minded people enjoying an amazing afternoon of music, dance and community. Magic.

Sadly, Le Grand Bal De L'Europe at Saint-Gervais will not be a possibility for 2017, but the good news is that the original Grand Bal in Gennetines will be extended, lasting from 21 July to 4 August 2017.

Finally, very many thanks to Dany Richard who took or organised the photos.

Ashley Ray, Ardglass, Co Down

This outdoor gathering of musicians and dancers epitomised the spirit of Saint-Gervais.

