

PROMOTING THE MUSIC, HISTORY & STUDY OF THE BAGPIPES

PIPING TODAY

Highland Bagpipe

Piping Hot

GLASGOW INTERNATIONAL PIPING FESTIVAL

Iain Speirs
Colin MacLellan
 Strakonice International Piping Festival
Josef Rezny
 Bagpipes Italian Group
 A year out Down Under
 PlanetPipe.com



Youngstars

NYPBOS newsletter No.9



ISSUE NUMBER 12 • 2014

THE NATIONAL
Piping
 CENTRE



YUKARI Sasaki is a member of the Tokyo Pipe Band. She joined the Neilston and District Pipe Band for its engagement at the Strakonice International Bagpipes Festival, and above plays a Japanese folk tune — Harichidori (the name of a seabird) — on the great Highland bagpipe for her mostly Czech audience.



HUNGARIAN piper Zoltan Karas gives his pipes a blow for pedestrians near the castle precincts at the 2004 Strakonice International Bagpipes Festival. He is a member of the Magyar Duduzsok ensemble, an old piped and a leading force in the Magyar piping revival.



BOMBARD players with the Breton bagad Kevrenn de Brest St Mark get tuned up and ready to perform at the 2004 Strakonice International Bagpipes Festival.

THE castle clock at Strakonice was keeping good time in the sunshine at the 2004 Strakonice International Bagpipes Festival.



A celebration of p

THE STRAKONICE INTERNATIONAL BAGPIPES FESTIVAL

THE Czech Republic, formed in 1993, with the "Velvet Divorce" from post-Soviet Czechoslovakia of the Slovak Republic, is on its way into the European Union.

Their country's location, at the geographic dead centre of continental Europe has long assured the Czechs of far too "interesting" a history for comfort, and first-hand experience within living memory includes multiple constitutional changes and the brute forces of both Hitler and Stalin.

Despite the turmoils they have known, the Czechs have a rich cultural heritage — think: polka music, fine crystal, classical composers

like Gustav Mahler, Antonin Dvorak and Bedrich Smetana, writers such as Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera, Skoda cars, CZ motorcycles... and torrents of excellent beer.

And, in the south, in Bohemia, they have a strengthening bagpipe tradition.

The bellows-blown Bohemian duda, with its carved goat's head chanter stock, cow-horn drone and chanter bells, and a drone section within which the bore is extended by passing down, up and down again, is an intriguing instrument clearly related to other central European bagpipes. Cylindrical bores, single-bladed composite reeds and a relatively low bag pressure give the duda a sweet, mellow sound

that blends with the clarinets, fiddles and singing that typically accompany it in ensemble.

A century ago, the Bohemian duda, having been closely associated with traditional forms of dance that had fallen from popularity, appeared headed for extinction.

Its heartland was the Prachen Region, and the 14th century town of Strakonice.

Literary references to the bagpipes of Strakonice go back to the 18th century, but it was the dramatisation of a folk tale by Josef Kajetan Tyl in 1847 — *Strakonice Bagpipes, or the Feast of the Wild Women* — that most strongly contributed to a wider awareness. The stage play, about a legendary fairy-taught piper



Photo: Mike Pearson



Photo: Mike Pearson

PRZEMEK Ficek (left) and Jan Brodka are pipers with the Ziemia Zywiecka folk dance ensemble from the southern Polish Zywiec region near the Slovak border. Jan Brodka is also the group's director.

JIRI Sauer is a piper from Domazlice in the traditionally-minded (and bagpipe-playing) Chodsko region in the western part of the Czech Republic. The tradition is similar and closely related to that of the Strakonice (Prachen region) but differs enough to be distinctive.



Photo: Mike Pearson

JURON De Groot will be a Hollandic group from the Netherlands get wagner of the crowd playing the bagpipes at Strakonice, Czech



Photo: Mike Pearson

14 Bohemian dancers make a blaze of colour on stage at the 2004 Strakonice International Bagpipes Festival.



Photo: Mike Pearson

GAUCIAN Diego Prieto, a member of the Banda de Gaitas de Ourense (and the Real Banda) gives a solo performance on the castle courtyard stage at the 14th Strakonice International Bagpipes Festival. He makes two different types of bagpipes, Flemish shepherds' and the oboe-like accomp.

Piping in Bohemia

called Svanda, inspired a range of adaptations, including music, art and film. Schools teach the play as a part of their literature curriculum.

The actual instrument's bridge to the future was secured in the early 20th century by a local elementary school teacher and musician with an enthusiasm for folk music, Josef Formanek. He learned to play and began to actively promote the Strakonice bagpipe. His son formed an ensemble that became the Strakonice Bagpipe Band; it survived until 1946. In 1949, former members established a new group which became the Prachen Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances. This ensemble held the South Bohemia Festival of Songs and Dances in 1955

when 14 pipers from South Bohemia gathered, and organised the first meeting of Czech and Slovak bagpipers in 1956 when 48 pipers from Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and Slovakia met in Strakonice.

An important member of that group was Josef Rezny.

As well as writing a number of scholarly and popular books, articles and papers about the tradition, Josef Rezny, now 80 years old, continues to be the driving force behind the highly successful Strakonice International Bagpipe Festivals, held every second year since 1992 at the castle built at the junction of the Otava and Volynka Rivers by the powerful

Bavor family in the early 13th century and subsequently owned by the Order of the Knights of Malta.

In September 1967, in conjunction with the town's 600th anniversary, the first International Bagpipe Festival was held. An estimated 10,000 people turned out to see performances by five local and five foreign ensembles, including the Breton bagad Kevrenn de Brest St Mark, Northumbrian piper John Forster Charlton from England and uilleann piper Jim Dowling from Dublin, Ireland.

Despite the interventions of history as Czechoslovakia edged its way out of the Warsaw Pact, then separated into the Czech and Slovak

THE 13th century castle of Starkonice, at the junction of the Otava and Volynka Rivers in Southern Bohemia is the principal venue for the biennial Starkonice International Bagpipes Festival.



EVERY dog has its day, and Bad (that's really his name) — like almost every dog — at the 2004 Starkonice International Bagpipes Festival — took the opportunity to down a drop (or two) of Duda (lager) beer made by the local Starkonice Pivovar brewery, one of a number of locally based festival sponsors.

TEJEN Arbal is a dance with the splendidly contorted lines of Folklore Ensemble, from Turkey, at the 2004 Starkonice International Bagpipes Festival.



MICHAEL Cwach is an American of Czech descent who started out on the great Highland bagpipe, then discovered the bagpipe of his own heritage. He plays the Bohemian duda in duo with fiddler Arvan Sheets from South Dakota.



THE DANCERS from the Filip Kuzov Music School in Kotel, Bulgaria, were quick to get people on their feet to join in their traditional horo chain dance.



BAGPIPE maker Timovec Rastislav from Stupava in the Slovak Republic takes his turn onstage at the 2004 Starkonice International Bagpipes Festival.



JEFFREY Brown left directs his film crew. The expatriate American film-maker's UFO Films company was making a documentary about Czech piping traditions. For him the Starkonice International Bagpipes Festival became much more than the "fun summertime shoot" he'd originally anticipated.



IMPROVISATION in central European piping traditions includes making reeds — like this Polish example — from the barrels of ballpoint pens.



The festival turned out to be a feast of gastronomy to which piping was just one of the highlights. The festival programme saw 20 Czech ensembles and 15 groups from across the world — with a number of solo pipers — and the crowd warmly welcomes soloists, District Pipe Bands and...



DANCERS with the I Nuovi Zampognari group from Pegli in Calabrian Italy enjoy a reception for visiting groups at the start of the 2004 Starkonice International Bagpipes Festival. The group, led by Giuseppe Mezzatesta, has as its aim the revival of Calabria's folk dance, music and craft traditions.

Republics, 2004 saw the 16th festival held in Strakonice, and the next confidently scheduled for August 2006. The festivals are organised by the Municipal Culture Centre accredited by the Town of Strakonice, and in co-operation with Folk Art Association of the Czech Republic.

Some 20 Czech groups at this year's festival were joined by ensembles from more than a dozen other countries. Many were old friends of the festival.

Kevrenn de Brest St Mark was back for the 12th time. The Neilston and District Pipe Band from Scotland made its 10th Strakonice festival appearance. Neil Smith had his "Robson's Choice" ensemble of Northumbrian pipers there again, and the Banda de Gaitas de Ourense from Galicia took part, along with groups from Bulgaria, Holland, Italy, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Austria, the Slovak Republic, Turkey and the United States. They come to perform, to be counted as a part of the wider European piping and traditional music community, to meet and make friends, for the internationalism, to enjoy themselves and to learn.

The American representation consisted of Czech descendant Michael Cwach, playing a Bohemian duda — his ancestors migrated in 1867 — and fiddler Arian Sheets from South Dakota. They met through the National Music Museum where Arian Sheets, a violist, is curator of stringed instruments. To accompany the duda, she plays an 18th century German violin with gut strings.

A 2003-2004 Fullbright Scholar, Michael Cwach is now spending a year in the Czech Republic — his fourth and longest visit — studying the history, manufacture, and performance of bagpipes in the Czech Republic with Josef Rezny and other experts. He holds a B.A. in music from Augustana College, an M.M. in musical performance from the University of Connecticut, and a B.S. in education from Minot State University and is now enrolled in the M.M. degree program in the history of musical instruments at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion.

"I grew up with accordion and polka music, aware of my Czech heritage, but had no knowledge of Bohemian bagpipes," he said. "It wasn't until 1998 when I got interested in this. I'd played Highland bagpipes so I had an awareness of bagpipes. When I found there were Czech bagpipes I told my father I was going there to see what they were."

On his first visit, he found a teacher and felt he would like to take the tradition back to Czech Americans. "There were Czech bagpipers in the U.S. from the mid 19th century until the 20th century," he said. Through his research he has found evidence of half a dozen players, and several surviving instruments — one in Nebraska and two in Minnesota — that were played by German-speaking Bohemians from near Pilsen. Another instrument turned up in Chicago and two remnants were sold in an auction at New York.

"I have to think there must have been some in centres like Chicago with large Czech populations; there had to be pipers there, they had to have music."

Audiences come to the festival as much for the attractions of the region, the atmosphere of multicultural celebration, and the fun that is generated, as for the particular content of the programmed concerts. And there is an element of curiosity.

Jeffrey Brown, an expatriate American film maker who now lives in Prague had a documentary crew at the festival. He came to the festival in 2000 and originally saw in it an opportunity for a "fun summertime shoot".

After meeting Michael Cwach, he began to realise that a much bigger story was to be found at Strakonice. "There is an authentic tradition here and we realised that Josef Rezny's story is a good reflection not only of the story of the festival but also of the country as a whole," he said. "Our focus is that people are not doing this for money; they are doing it because it's a real tradition, they love it and they want to do it."

His company, UFO Films, hopes to unveil an hour-long documentary about the Bohemian bagpipe tradition at a Music Film Festival in Prague then sell it on to Czech television and internationally. Piping is a tradition that embraces the wider Bohemian region, Czech and German languages and more modern as well as traditional expressions.

"Sadly, there isn't a big general interest outside of the Bohemian regions," he said. "People don't know that much about it. When we were telling people in Prague we were doing this we met the typical big city mentality — maybe a snicker at first, and 'oddball' is a word that comes up a lot. But more and more people are coming back and think it's kind of interesting."

The festival is a vivid blaze of colours, sounds,

dancing and activity. A busy programme of daytime and evening concerts at three main venues from the Thursday evening until Sunday night, a major street parade, and almost constant informal activity — from cross-cultural conversations over a beer to wild, late night dancing in a bar set up in one of the castle's ground-level casements — create an atmosphere of memorable celebration. The Museum of the Central Otava Basin, in the castle, is a strong attraction, and an antiquarian bookshop. An information centre is kept busy, and there are craft stalls on the street at the castle entrance.

Given the number of audiences and spectators — around 17,000 people over the course of the festival — the level of organisation is outstanding, and the hospitality is considerate. Visiting ensembles, for example, are provided with translators, most of them high school teachers, who also happily cater to unforeseen needs, whimsical or more serious, as they arise, and play an important role in co-ordinating the participants' schedules.

Czech audiences showed a special enthusiasm for Scotland's Neilston and District Pipe Band, the Breton Kevrenn de Brest St Mark and the Galician banda, with their more strident double-reeded chanters, high tension drums and larger corps. The Northumbrian contingent was warmly welcomed, partly for the tradition's long, loyal involvement which was initiated by the late John Forster Charlton in 1967.

The Czechs also appreciate dance, which features strongly at Strakonice. As well as their own traditional dancers, the energetic dancers of Ziemia Zywiecka from Poland, and the Slovak group Ponitran were popular acts, as were the youngsters from Bulgaria's Filip Kutev folk music school at Kotel who also were quick to involve onlookers in off-stage performances of their lively horo chain dance. The Turkish Istanbul Folklore Ensemble — though their lack of bagpipes was a disappointment — presented spectacular dancing and some magnificent costuming.

Costumes are an important part of the cultural display for virtually all of the festival's participants, and photographs from earlier times suggest that many have come a long way from their origins among peasants and rural workers. Fabrics are often of high quality, the colours vibrant and the finished garments highly tailored and detailed.

Concert performances, too, pay attention to detail: their conventions are theatrical, timed



THE Magyar Dudazenekar ensemble from Budapest, Hungary, takes the stage at the 2004 Strakonice International Bagpipe Festival.

to meet programme schedules, and staged with the help of sound mixing and, at night, stage lighting. These are visual spectacles as well as musical events, and ensembles have clearly put a lot of thought into structuring what they will do.

Behind the onstage performances typically lie deeper issues, and all of the performers have their own stories to tell.

Jan Brodka is the director of the Ziemia Zywiecka folk dance ensemble from Poland — more importantly from the country's Zywiec Beskid mountain area in the western Carpathians, extending south from the town of Zywiec. Their culture constitutes one of Poland's several distinctive minority cultures, where deliberate efforts are being made to maintain its own gwara goralska dialect.

It embraces more than 40 villages, including some across the border in the Slovak Republic.

Their single-drone dudy zywieckie bagpipe is mouth blown, and has a thumb hole and six finger holes. Players often add rhythmic pulses by short or longer beats of their elbow on the bag, and their technique includes trills and a form of gracing.

Said Jan Brodka, "We are coming back to our traditions; we teach our dialect and try to keep it alive, especially through the folk groups. At schools, teachers sometimes use this dialect to teach, to keep this tradition."

Piping is a small part of a larger picture and the local bagpipe is one of the instruments to accompany traditional dances. "Because of the musical scale of the bagpipes, there are only a few melodies we can play, the oldest melodies," said Jan Brodka. "Pipes exist in several areas of Poland: ours are the oldest and most traditional."

One modification over the years has been to

fashion reeds from ballpoint pen tubes and blades from cut-down saxophone reeds. Another has been to turn the goatskin bags hair-side out. "The hair used to be inside but the bag stained the players' shirts; now we have the hair on the outside for aesthetic reasons, to keep our clothes clean." Jan Brodka spoke of fewer than a dozen players, all of whom make and maintain their own instruments, taught by older players.

None are professional musicians and there are no commercial recordings.

By contrast, the Hungarian Bagpipe Band (A Magyar Dudazenekar) recently released an album, *Dudasom, Dudasom, Kedves Muzikádom*. Teeshirts and videos are also available. The band — which can muster up to 23 pipers and five singers — was formed in 1989 at a small pub in Buda and has represented Hungary at festivals in Austria, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Ireland and Estonia, as well as in the Czech Republic.

Bagpiping is also supported and promoted in Hungary by the Hungarian Bagpipe Heritage Foundation, formed in 1992. In 2000, it published a handbook of the Hungarian bagpipe that includes chapter summaries in English and sets out a basis for the instrument's heritage and its revival.

In the late 19th century, Hungarian bagpipers still played at Christmas midnight masses and for other village celebrations. But a decline had set in after the failure of the 1848-49 war of Hungarian independence and the ruthless reprisals exacted afterwards by the Hapsburg monarchy. Economic changes further eroded the tradition which had been maintained by the shepherds and swineherds of the rural villages in north Hungary.

The duda was on the brink of extinction

when a few young students from Budapest, part of a much wider Hungarian folk music revival at the time, began to seek out and start learning from these aging players, and the rural tradition's legacy began to blossom in the city.

Though a few traditional players lived on to inform the revival, there were no instrument makers. Piper Zoltan Karakas, a Budapest-based company manager who directs the Hungarian Bagpipe Heritage Foundation, in 1976 made his own first bagpipe. "It was not good... an experiment," he said. A year later, he tried his hand at another set.

"In those years, I think nobody knew how to make a good bagpipe because the old makers had died and the surviving players hadn't made their instruments." But some of the new pipers, including Josef Kozak (who played at the inaugural Piping Hot festival in Glasgow in August), began to specialise in pipe making and good instruments became available. Players and Hungary's five or six bagpipe makers get together at piping camps for workshops with 85 year-old Pista Bacsi, an old-style Hungarian piper and the revivalists' principle source of knowledge of the tradition.

The bellows-blown Hungarian duda has a carved goat's-head chanter stock that takes melody and "contra" pipes formed side by side from a single piece of wood, and a bass drone. The melody pipe or chanter has five finger holes and the contra pipe, one. The drone rests across the crook of the piper's right arm. The bag is usually made from a goat's skin, with the hair intact.

Karoly Vadar, a physicist with Hungary's Research Institute for Solid State Physics and Optics by profession, is a leading Hungarian piper. He was a university student in Germany when he first heard the duda: "a Hungarian folk dance group came to Germany one Christmas and performed Christmas songs and dances with bagpipes, and I wondered what the instrument was. Okay... the Scottish have bagpipes, the Hungarians too!"

"After that I wanted only to play our own Hungarian bagpipe," said Karoly Vadar.

"The bagpipe is magic."

That is roughly what they were saying in the Hungarian countryside 200 years ago, and it is precisely what so many participants and audience members say about the Strakonice International Bagpipe Festival.

And so many of them keep going back, time after time. ●