

Rob interviewing Carl Smith on French Folk Music

Rob: Hello, and welcome back to our series of European folk music, and it's easy to understand where we are this time around. I am still with Carl, Carl Smith, our music expert. Hello, Carl.

Carl: Hello, Rob.

Rob: We are going to talk about French folk music which is very varied, isn't it?

Carl: Yes, it is. In common with many of the European countries we've explored in our previous talks France has a very rich and a diverse history of folk music dating back over many centuries, and there are many regional variations of musical styles and folk instruments which are particular to certain regions. And over recent decades many of these styles have developed, blended and evolved into a more generic, popular style. In the 1950s and 60s, France experienced a great regional cultural revival – Brittany, the Limousin, Gascony, Corsica, the Auvergne – were among regions that experienced a notable resurgence in the popularity of traditional folk music. These traditional styles of music survived more in the remoter areas, such as for example, the Isle of Corsica, the mountains of the Auvergne, as well as the more nationalistic lands as the Basques and the Bretons. And in many cases these folk traditions were revived in relatively recent years focusing on early 20th century melodies and the use of the piano accordion, which we will talk about a little later.

Rob: Okay.

Carl: And, of course folk music and dance now has an established place as a popular pastime in its own right with innumerable festivals and concerts taking place right across France.

Rob: So, take us on a little trip around the country. Where are you going to take us?

Carl: For example, the west of France. In the west, we have Pays de Nantes, the provinces of the Vendée, Anjou, Amiens, Poitou-Charente, and here the traditions of balancing dance songs and fiddle playing have survived and predominantly, especially in the Poitou and the Vendée, and the Marais Breton region of the Vendée is noted particularly for the tradition of bagpipe playing and there are folk dances which are specific to the west of France and these include the qui ronde, the Maraîchine, the Bal at St. Angers, and the Bourée.

Rob: Let's have an example of that, what shall we play?

Carl: I've chosen a beautiful song from the west of France adapted from a Bourée and the singer is accompanied by a guitar and a cello.

(Music playing, with singing)

Rob: So, that's the west of France. How about the centre? What will we find there?



Carl: The centre will include regions of the Auvergne, the Limousin, Morvan, Nivernais, Bourbonnais and Berry, and these areas are home to a significant bagpipe tradition as well as the iconic hurdy gurdy. And there are deep differences between the regions of central France, the Auvergne and the Limousin retain the most vibrant folk traditions of the area.

Rob: Perhaps because of the geography that helps to preserve these things.

Carl: Yes, exactly. Yes.

Rob: So, you mentioned Corsica earlier, that's a very different part of France but it has its own music as well, I guess.

Carl: It does. One of the most distinctive and unusual types of French folk music originates from Corsica, and this is a form of polyphonic singing which means two or more voices singing at the same time. Sometimes they are in very strong harmony, sometimes with dissonances which means that the notes clash with each other, and sometimes each voice sings an independent melody. So, you may have two or three different melodies going on at the same time. And the Corsican style usually is sung by a male trio but there can be more voices added and some of the Corsican musical instruments include the calamusa which is a type of bagpipe, a 16-stringed lute known as the cetera, also mandolin, fife and the diatonic accordion.

Rob: Okay, let's hear an example. What have you chosen for us?

Carl: Corsica has its own anthem, and the anthem of Corsica is an example of polyphonic singing. It's called 'Diu vi salvi regina' from the Italian which means God save you queen.

(Music playing, with singing)

Rob: So, you've mentioned the bagpipe, which we are familiar with in other countries. You've mentioned the hurdy gurdy, why was that such an important thing?

Carl: Well, the hurdy gurdy is a very interesting and unusual instrument. It's found in simpler forms and we've talked about it, from other countries, including Spain, Hungary, Russia, but the French hurdy gurdy is a much more complex instrument. It's known as *vielle à roue* and it's essentially a mechanical violin with keys or buttons instead of a finger board. It's made up of a curved, oval body, a set of keys and a curved handle which when you turn the handle this acts like the bow moving across the strings. And so, as the keys are pressed, they all stop the strings to produce different notes. It also has a moveable bridge and a variable number of drones and hidden sympathetic strings all of which can create a very different musical sound and effects. And the hurdy gurdy is very important and very influential in the origins of French popular music as it became the basis for the Bal Musette music from the Auvergne region. And Bal Musette music arrived in Paris in the late 1870s as a result of the large-scale migration at that time from



the Auvergne to the city. Gradually, the hurdy gurdy began to be phased out and replaced in the Bal Musette music by the Italian accordion which is also known as the piano accordion or sometimes the chromatic accordion. And it is so called because the use of a piano-style keyboard on one side of the instrument which creates the melody line and the buttons on the other side which create an accompaniment in the form of different chords.

Rob: It actually makes it an easier instrument to play.

Carl: It's an easier instrument to play and much simpler I think than the hurdy gurdy. So, very soon the accordion came to dominate this genre of music. The rhythmic texture and the distinctive tremolo of the accordion has come to define French music for many people.

Rob: As we heard earlier.

Carl: Indeed. And since the first World War, American jazz styles began to influence the Bal Musette which later became known as Valse Musette. We'll return back to the Valse Musette a little later.

Rob: So, we've talked about the omnipresent accordion, and how about the bagpipe?

Carl: Well, the bagpipe is found in a wide array of forms in France. In fact, France has more diversity in bagpipes than any other country.

Rob: There's another claim to fame.

Carl: Yeah, indeed. The cabrette and the grande cornamuse from the Auvergne are the most well-known. These forms are found at least back as far as the 17th century. Some types of bagpipe are blown by mouth, others use bellows, some have drone pipes, others do not. The ones without the drone pipes typically they are played alongside an accordion. The bagpipes also vary considerably in size. For example, the chevrette from the Auvergne means 'little goat' which refers to the bag being made from a goat skin. Another type of bagpipe made from a goat skin is the bodega which originates from the Languedoc region and dates back to the 14th century. It's a very large mouth-blown bagpipe made from the entire skin of a goat. And it's made using an unusual process in which the innards of the animal are removed through the neck so that the entire unbroken skin can be used for the instrument. The bodega only has one drone but it's a very curious instrument.

Rob: We could do a whole program, just about the different sorts of bagpipe.

Carl: You could indeed, yes. There's a small pipe called the boha which is unique to Gascony and it's made from sheepskin and this one has the fleece showing. So, the fleece is still on the skin, and it has just a single pipe which is divided into two chambers and on one side of the pipe is the drone, and the other side is the chanter which produces the melody so everything is played from just the one pipe.



Rob: That must be quite something different. Can we get to hear some of these bagpipes?

Carl: Funnily enough I've got a recording for you from central France with a group of folk musicians.

Rob: I'm glad I asked.

Carl: There are four hurdy gurdy players, six bagpipers each one with a different type of pipe, and two drummers.

Rob: Let's see if we can work out the difference between them.

(Music playing)

Rob: Now, we haven't actually been to the most important region, the one that we're in now in Brittany. Perhaps there is an entire program for that kind of music.

Carl: I think there is really. I thought we might save that one for another time when maybe we look at Celtic folk music. But, just to whet your appetite I do have a recording of folk music from Normandy which shows distinct similarities with the Breton style.

Rob: Okay, let's listen to that.

(Music playing, with singing)

Rob: And now you're taking us further down to the south of France.

Carl: Yes. One more recording I have for you is from the Occitane region of France and I have chosen this one for its very beautiful and haunting flute melody and it is so different from the other types of music that we've heard. It makes a lovely contrast.

(Music playing, with singing)

Rob: Before we go ...

Carl: I think we just need to return to the Bal Musette and the Valse Musette style which for many people is what they immediately think of as being typically French. The Musette style forms the crossover between folk music into the music of dance bands incorporating jazz and popular music styles.

Rob: The Bal Musette is, it's actually dance music?

Carl: It is, it is a particular style of dance music and, as the name suggests, it's usually a waltz style.

Rob: And there's a very popular weekly occurrence for a town or a village to have ...

Carl: Yes.

Rob: ... a Bal with this particular kind of music.



Carl: And particularly in Paris around this time of the late 1800s and of course spread to other regions.

(Music playing)

Rob: Well, that's a very typical music to play to introduce the program, and to see us out. Once again, Carl thank you so much for taking us around France in this whistle-stop tour, and we look forward to hearing about Celtic music next time with details about Breton music, I hope.

Carl: Yes indeed. We will look forward to that.

Rob: Thank you, Carl.

Carl: Thank you.

(Music playing)