



Sounds of joy

Marian Mihelic

A ceili with the Abbey Ceili Band in the Redoutensaal during the weekend of set dancing in Erlangen, Germany, in February. Photos by Michael and Christian Forstner and Pat Murphy.

THIS IS MY STORY ABOUT CHANGES, JOY AND EARWORMS. And last but not least, it is about the warm feeling experienced when returning home. What happened? I attended the fourteenth Erlangen Irish Set Dance Weekend in Germany, 19–21 February.

Changes

IHAVE BEEN PRACTICING SET DANCING FOR SEVERAL years now. I met and talked to many other dancers who have been part of this dancing community for much longer. In my early set dancing days, a lady surprised me once when she told me about her many wonderful memories in the world of set dancing; however she warned me not to overdo it.

She talked about her perception of dancing and its enjoyment that had changed by and by. She warned me that when you are so eager to dance you never miss an opportunity, whether nearby or far away, this eagerness could result in dancing in an unspiritual way. Perhaps this is why she left dancing some time after our conversation.

Reporter Marian Mihelic and organiser Andrea Forstner.



Today, I could name several experienced dancers I met in my early days who withdrew from set dancing. Interestingly, however, I also observed that over time some are returning to the dance floor again. You could say these things happen and it's not anything worth mentioning. For me, their return is proof that there is a very special spirit and power in set dancing. I have to confess I've also experienced ups and downs over the last couple of years which blurred the fascination of the early days to some extent.

But I have to say, since that wonderful weekend in Erlangen, that strong spirit has returned to me; it was like coming home again. And by the way, you might want to know what happened to that lady I met in my early days—well she also came back to set dancing and guess where? In Erlangen.

Besides these personal things, other changes took place as well at Erlangen's fourteenth Irish set dance weekend. Those who attended previous workshops here knew how enjoyable the elegant Unicum venue was, with the bar just next to the dancing floor which was open late and was a focal point of sessions, chats and just relaxing. Unfortunately, last year there was a change in ownership, and a new venue had to be found.

Meeting friends

CHANGES ARE ALSO CHALLENGES. BOTTOM LINE, the organiser of the weekend, Andrea Forstner with her family, succeeded in finding a new venue. Andrea convinced Erlangen city authorities to lease the Redoutensaal for her weekend. The Redoutensaal, a beautiful classic ballroom with a wide interior balcony, is one of the cultural rarities in the region, owned by the town since the nineteenth century. It is located in the centre of Erlangen, a short walking distance from Erlangen's shopping streets.

For accommodation, Andrea provided a comprehensive list of B&Bs, guest houses and hotels located close to the new venue, and negotiated special hotel rates. First time attendees received city

maps of Erlangen and the neighbouring metropolis of Nuremberg. My wife and I were delighted, as it took us no more than three minutes to reach the venue from our hotel—something we really appreciated after the late sessions and having had a few pints of beer.

When we entered the Redoutensaal for the first time we were amazed by its interior architecture, size, space and wooden dancing floor. Chairs were set up in a U-shape in front of the stage, with plenty of room to pass by. Overhead there was a roomy two-level balcony which was a convenient place to leave bags and clothing, and also to rest and observe the dancing crowd from a height, similar to a box theatre seat.

Compared to the old Unicum venue, the Redoutensaal is much more spacious. Huge hidden ducts below the balcony along both sides of the ballroom provide pleasant ventilation without freezing you, as is often the case with air conditioning.

Walking through the venue, I was curious about the bar and lunch area. Next to the ballroom, through a

Mary Rohan and Pat Murphy dressed for the carnival ceili.



wide hallway, there it was, a bright area with a big bar counter on the left, and equipped on the right with plenty of tables and comfortable chairs. It was perfect venue for the weekend, not only due to its convenient location but also because these three areas—ballroom, balcony, bar and lunch area—were ideal for dancing, resting and meeting friends.

For me, set dancing opens up a completely different part of life. Getting away from home and heading to the workshop is always like diving into another existence, entering a very special oasis. Set dance weekends contain so many different stimuli, lead to numerous unexpected situations, while offering so many subtle moments of joy. You never know who you will meet, dance with, engage in interesting chats, exchange your thoughts and feelings with, share drinks with, and which of your faulty dance moves will make you and your partner laugh out loud.

Moments of joy

AT THIS FOURTEENTH ERLANGEN WEEKEND, A BIG family of eleven nationalities started a joyful gathering on Friday night, fuelled by the fantastic tunes of the Abbey Ceili Band.

Andrea's weekend always takes place in the middle of the festive carnival season preceding Lent, and each year she gives a specific theme to the Saturday carnival ceili. It is neither mandatory to wear a full carnival costume or accessories, nor is it unusual to appear in your regular dance outfit. The theme is just an invitation to those who want to be part of the carnival mood. Even if you resist the carnival fever, like me, it is always enjoyable and funny watching those you know well suddenly become a completely different character when wearing creative and artful costumes. So, don't be surprised to meet fairy ladies, Hawaiian girls, pirates of the Caribbean or even the authentic cowboy and cowgirl from New Mexico.

A year ago, the band members and our dance master, Pat Murphy, appeared in their true roles. Accompanied by the reverent tunes of the *Hunger Games* soundtrack, his highness, Bishop Patrick, entered the ballroom carrying the set dancing bible (*Toss the Feathers*), followed by the Abbey monks.

This year Andrea's theme was the wild west. Guess what happened to those guys this time? Sheriff Pat arrested and chained the Abbey Ceili Bandits to their place of destiny—the stage. So, I'm already very curious what funny things might happen to them next year.

Soon after the bandits' arrival in the Redoutensaal for Saturday's carnival ceili, they settled in and started playing their Abbey-typical uplifting tunes, unchained and hailed by the dancing crowd.

One of the reasons why I stuck with set dancing after I survived my first few classes was the music. I remember in those days Andrea often used CDs from Michael Sexton Senior and from the Abbey. At that time, while I was seriously struggling with the coordination of my feet, trying to keep pace with my dancing partner through quick sequences of



Pat Murphy and demonstration team at the workshop.

unfamiliar moves, heading to my defined place on the floor in time, without any idea where this place might be, eager not to become a handicap for my dance mates—while all this tumbled down on me at once, the lively music caught me with its uplifting tunes. Later, thanks to the resilient guidance of numerous fearless ladies, I began to understand the intense feeling of joy which comes up in your soul and body when you feel like you are floating with your partner over the floor in harmony with the beat of the music.

Be assured, at that Saturday night in the Redoutensaal the entire crowd was filled with joy dancing to the extraordinarily thrilling tunes of the Abbey. Some of the dancers were lucky with their lighter costumes, while others soon packed away their masks, artful wigs or fancy capes. What remained was pure joy expressed in the countless smiling faces and clothing drenched in perspiration.

It is really almost beyond words to describe the intense feeling created by the subtle and tender melting of the dance rhythm and the instruments' tangible sonic presence. Do you know what I mean by melting? It is when you feel the instruments' sounds in the entire room, in the air, the vibrating floor and in your battering body. You can't single out anything,

but you hear and feel the ensemble physically, like we did this weekend with the Abbey, filled by John's demanding keyboard beat, Robert's galloping banjo rhythm, Andrew's virtuosic fiddlestick-swing and Ger's pushing box-ride across several octaves, leading me and the maddened dancing crowd from one ecstatic height to the next. For me it is such a gift to experience that inherent sweet feeling of joy given by our beloved set dancing.

This spirit lasts for a while after a dance weekend but unfortunately disappears almost unnoticed in a couple of days, swept away by the demanding routine of everyday life. I have my own theory of why set dancing became so popular over the last decades. As soon as you experience the inspiration of a band's brilliant music while in an almost trance-like dance in the midst of friends, you become addicted and you want more of it. That's why you search and try to attend one weekend after the next, hoping to find that inspiration again. There is no guarantee, and sometimes you may miss it—circumstances may not always be suitable every time. But when the pieces do fit together, you experience a strong feeling of being in the right place, being in the midst of your self. It goes without saying, at the Erlangen weekend I felt in the midst of myself. ▶

The Abbey Ceili Bandits—John Coakley, Ger Murphy, Andy O'Connell and Robert Foster.



Erlangen—Rejoiced in a feast for the eyes

◀ Dancing

OVER THE ENTIRE WEEKEND WE HAD 28 DANCES in total, with 23 different sets. However, beyond set dancing, the Erlangen weekend also offered many other lovely experiences. After the last set of the Saturday ceili and before the break, Andrea's idea of this year's wild west theme was revealed. Following the pattern of past Erlangen weekends in which different dance styles such as French quadrilles, Bavarian folk or old Berlin dances were shown, Andrea presented an American dance this year.

The floor was taken over by a lovely group of line dancers from a club called the Erlangen Swinging Boots, performing elegant line dances to charming country and western music, followed by modern disco music. Soon the ballroom was filled with many curious set dancers magically attracted by the line dancers, trying to keep pace with the manifold variations of repeated and relaxed-looking body movements and steps. It did not take me long to make out why my wife suddenly disappeared. She promptly accepted the invitation to join in, and the rest who were watching, mostly gents like me, rejoiced in a feast for the eyes. Well done, and a much appreciated performance!

While observing the complex steps of the line dancers I remembered when I was a set dancing novice. I struggled not only with my feet but also with my ego. In my normal life, I've experienced lots of trial and error over the years, and have become accustomed to facing new situations with relief, knowing the rules of the game, the dos and don'ts. You may know that feeling of having achieved the status of being an expert to some extent when you have gained a certain level of experience and knowledge. The completely unfamiliar new dancing experience, however, reminded me of the long forgotten, albeit not unknown feelings of behaving like a clumsy fellow, clueless and helpless. You can imagine this was an unpleasant situation and needed to be resolved. I tried to change this by attending set dancing workshops on the Continent and in Ireland in addition to my home classes.

For me, lacking the possibility of set dancing every week as in Ireland, workshops are a never-ending source of new insights, tips and tricks on established sets. It is the best place for learning from other dancers and from the best teachers at the microphones. It is ideal for trial and error, for resolving my ignorance of recovered lovely old sets or newly released ones. It is just a relaxing way of becoming familiar with new sets, instead of dancing clueless with an inexperienced partner at a ceili, or just sitting out in order to avoid an unpleasant dancing experience.

At the Erlangen workshops on Saturday and Sunday, as in previous years, Pat Murphy introduced to us lovely new sets, some of which were also danced at the ceilis. With lots of interesting background details, Pat led us carefully through each figure, giving us plenty of opportunity to practice the demanding moves after the demonstration. Open and flexible to the dancers' needs, he repeated figures several times and when possible the entire set. I like that. So, with intensive practice, we became pretty confident with Pat's beautiful, newly composed Carrowbeg Set. The other workshop sets were the Camus Set and the Battle of Affane, and we had the opportunity to get a taste of Gerard Butler's lovely new Sidmouth Set (first figure). In the workshops he also introduced to us the expressive music of Rise the Dust, the Kilfenora Ceili Band and Shaskeen.

I have known Pat for some time now by attending workshops in different venues. However, again and



Line dancing performed by Erlangen Swinging Boots.

again I am amazed by the easy way he shoulders the teaching, staying calm, focused, relaxed and always ready for some jokes, while explaining dances. From his endless repertoire of experience, he effortlessly remembers and carefully calls the dances with the hand-held microphone in one hand, while being on the prowl for nice snapshots with the camera in the other. This time his appearance in Erlangen was highlighted by his authentic wild west sheriff outfit.

Earworms and the brewery

DANCING IS LIVING. DANCING IS JOY. DANCING makes you thirsty. Then, you look forward to comfortably unwinding after the energetic demand of a ceili. That was the condition I was in, ceili after ceili on this weekend in Erlangen. This was when the arrangement of rooms of the new venue turned out to be so conveniently perfect. From the ballroom you just passed through the hallway and entered the big bar area. There I could unwind, chatting with friends, *sláinte* after *sláinte*, and entered a state of deep relaxation.

On that Saturday night—or if you like, in the early Sunday morning hours—on my way from the bar to the exit, just as I started to go downstairs I was captivated by some lovely tunes coming from the ballroom. I followed the sound and came to a session of several musicians around a piano on the stage. I stood there stunned, listening to the sweet

music, regretting not having noticed the session earlier. After some time had passed, I luckily organised myself and pulled out my smartphone and recorded two pieces of the beautiful music, a lively five-time waltz called *Vivre* performed by an accordion, a tin whistle and a piano. The second piece was a slow romantic mazurka played by a fiddle, an uilleann pipe and a piano. I carried this gift with me through the night on my way back to the hotel and presented it to my wife on the same morning before breakfast, again being overwhelmed by the beauty of the music. The following days I was accompanied by these two pieces, sweetening my early morning journey to work, listening to it again and again in full blast in my car. Can you imagine how wide awake I was when I entered my office after this?

Besides these two earworms, there was another one this weekend which got a hold of me: the Abbey's special tune for the third figure of the Connemara during the Sunday afternoon ceili, *Music for a Found Harmonium*, where the instruments constantly rise to high tones, and then suddenly follow up with a deep sound, stamping and pushing you forward, again and again—an awesome sound. It gives you the heebie-jeebies.

Finally, at the brewery a completely different earworm was played. After the Sunday afternoon ceili, it is an Erlangen weekend tradition to meet to chill out together in one of the renowned local breweries, ▶

Singing at the Sunday farewell session in the Steinbach brewery.



Erlangen—In my head all night long

◁ the Steinbach-Brauerei. Here you have a final opportunity to unwind together with your old and new dancing friends. At this occasion, many of the local and some of the visiting female dancers wear the typical Bavarian *dirndl* dress to contribute in a special way to the local tradition.

Usually you have to come early to get a seat in the main room of this comfortable wide subterranean vault, equipped with a bar counter and some space for dancing. This year we had a marvellous combination of contributions. One was a German drinking song performed by Erlangen set dancers to the music of a famous peace song from the early 1980s (*Sieben Tage lang*) by the Dutch folk-jazz band Bots. The entire vault was filled with the song, which I love so much. I was pleasantly surprised to hear it after such a long time there at the brewery, in the midst of my dancing friends. No wonder the melody was in my head all night long.

Express yourself

DURING THAT NIGHT IN THE BREWERY, OF course, set dancing had its place. But for me, the wide range of other styles of music and dance was outstanding. Different passions got their own stage. No doubt Breton music played a strong part. Thanks to the lovely tunes for Maître De La Maison, performed by local musicians, fans of branles could indulge in their dance. After a while, a long chain wound from one room to the other, the two ends getting closer and closer and finally interweaving in a touching spiritual manner, with my dear wife in the midst of it. She loves dancing to Breton music, and is a multi-talented dancer who easily copes with almost any style of dance, unlike myself. So, for her the night in the brewery was a feast of dancing, especially enjoying the opportunity to dance mazurkas with experienced gents. I admire that unique waving body movement, but up to now, I have not come close to trying it. At any rate, I got an inkling that this might be one of my upcoming dance challenges.

Sean nós and old style step dance are other challenges, and I know, they are a distant prospect for me. This is different for my friend, Franz Köppl, who has developed a special passion for sean nós over the last few years and has already achieved a remarkable repertoire. Together with Markéta Utišilová from Prague, he performed some lovely steps on Sunday afternoon, receiving well-deserved applause.

I was really thrilled at having Martial Maillet from Paris in the brewery. He attended the weekend and joined the party with dancing friends from France. Martial spontaneously gave us a taste of his enviable, relaxed interpretation of an old style step dance. Chapeau!

From Frankfurt, young and quite new set dancers performed charming jig steps in the brewery as well. This proved how a strong passion for something can bring you further in your abilities within a short time. Well done!

Last but not least, line dance fans got another chance to practice together with some members of the Erlangen Swinging Boots.

Needless to say, as you see, the brewery provided a perfect opportunity for everybody to express themselves in their own way.

You can imagine now, all in all, for me this Erlangen event was a feast of receiving and giving, a feast of joy. Thank you Andrea and your family for this extraordinary weekend! It goes without saying how much all of us are looking forward to next year.

Marian Mihelic, Neumarkt, Germany



A wide network of friendships

Rachel Curran interviewed by Joan Pollard Carr

Rachel Curran, her family and friends at her 21st party in Fitzpatrick's Country Club. Photos by Joan Pollard Carr

Rachel Curran celebrated her 21st birthday with a mega ceili in Clonmore, Templemore, Co Tipperary, on Saturday 27th March. Over a hundred dancers joined in the celebrations with her parents Tim and Marie, brother Kevin and boyfriend Anthony Coolahan on the night. Rachel is well known and very popular in set dancing and traditional music circles. She always has a brilliant smile and is an exuberant set dancer. I was privileged to interview Rachel and asked her about her set dancing, her music career and her studies.

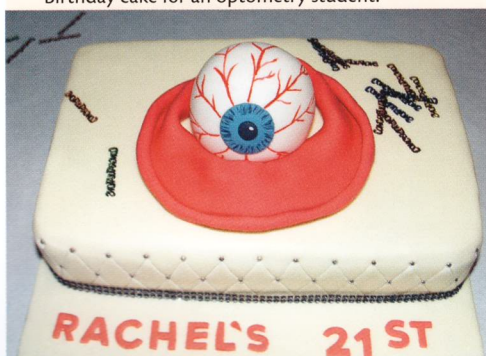
HAVE BEEN SET DANCING SINCE THE AGE OF SEVEN when I first accompanied my mum to local ceilis with Thurles Ceili and Set Club in the Munster Hotel and Band Hall, Thurles, and at Devil's Bit Ceili Club in Templemore. I remember admiring Tim Joe and Anne O'Riordan at the Fleadh Cheoil in Clonmel in 2004 and aspired to grow up to be akin to them. I have enjoyed hundreds of ceilis since then and have made a wide network of friendships with set dancers, musicians and ceili-goers throughout the country.

I attribute my love of traditional Irish music and culture to my grandad, the late Paddy Lawlor of Tipperary town who was a founder member of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Tipperary town and was himself a noted sean nós and ballad singer. *Briseann an dúchas trí shúile an chait.* (Heredity breaks out in the eyes of the cat.)

At the age of six I began to learn tin whistle and flute from Kathleen and John Nesbitt at the Sheain Uí Cheallanain branch of Comhaltas in Thurles. As part of Comhaltas schools outreach programme, I taught tin whistle in three primary schools in Co Tipperary. I also teach piano and saxophone. I am an active member of the Thurles Silver Band for several years playing the cornet and trumpet.

I am currently a student of the BSc in Optometry in Dublin Institute of Technology. I was delighted

Birthday cake for an optometry student.



Rachel and Anthony performed at her party.

that some of my fellow college optoms join on the night in Clonmore. They were pleased to find the set dancing fraternity so welcoming, friendly and helpful when they were in (coerced) onto the dance floor. They had me planning and anticipating the celebration for over a year and soon understood the need to hold the ceili three weeks before my actual day. I will officially be 21 on St Patrick's Day March which is a very busy time for Irish culture.

I would like to thank the many set dancers who travelled from all over to my celebration for their generous presents and presence. Special thanks to Ger Murphy and Ken Cotter for outstanding music, Maureen Cullen for her skills, and thanks to you, Joan, for capturing with your camera. I had an extremely enjoyable celebration and I am delighted that so many shared a wonderful evening of fun, dancing and great

Rachel Curran, Thurles, Co Tip