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FESTIVAL INTERCELTIQUE DE LORIENT

Jane Coyle discovers how this festival on the north-west coast of France has become one of the biggest celebrations of all things Celtic – from *bombardes* to bagpipes

There are few more stirring sights during a French summer than the Grand Parade of the Celtic Nations, which lights up the annual Festival Interceltique de Lorient. Every year more than 700,000 people gravitate towards the historic naval port of Lorient on the south coast of Brittany, intent on celebrating the music and cultural heritage of the Celtic world.

They flock from Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the Isle of Man and Cornwall, from Galicia and Asturias in Spain, from Acadia on the east coast of Canada. Others travel even greater distances, from Australia and New

Zealand, the Far East and the US, eagerly descending upon Lorient either to rejoice in their own Celtic roots, to demonstrate their devotion to the history and culture of the Celts or simply to revel in ten days of great music and Breton hospitality.

On offer every year is a feast of concerts and recitals, large-scale spectacles, traditional music competitions, dance events and workshops. Side by side with the official programme is a lively Fringe scene, which brings musicians and singers of many backgrounds onto the terraces of just about every bar and restaurant in town. Along the quays the little white tents of the Festival

Village rise up, packed with food and stalls selling crafts, books, musical instruments and all manner of Celtic memorabilia.

On the first Sunday in August, the spacious balcony of Lorient's Palais de Congrès makes the perfect vantage point from which to survey the parade through the town of thousands of musicians and dancers. And at ground level, huge numbers of spectators throng the pavements and quaysides, arriving early in the morning to ensure the best spot. The strains of pipes and drums can be heard long before the parade comes into view. It proceeds at a stately pace, the participants

resplendent in traditional costumes and led by the featured nation for the current year. In 2013 that nation will be Asturias.

It is 43 years since the festival first reached out a tentative hand to the rest of the country. Co-founder and long-serving former director Jean-Pierre Pichard recalls the initial widespread derision at the audacity of a group of people in this far-flung western outpost setting out to stage a festival whose music was centred on humble instruments like the *bombarde* and the *cornemuse*. He remembers feeling like a country bumpkin when he went up to Paris to promote it. But in the intervening years, it has grown to be one of the biggest festivals in France and there is now scarcely a venue in the capital big enough to host its annual press launch.

The current director is Lisardo Lombardia, an ebullient Asturian, whose verdant, mountainous home region of northern Spain is this year's featured nation. He took over from Pichard in 2007, having been closely associated with the festival since 1985. Under his enthusiastic leadership, the Festival Interceltique de Lorient is expanding its international profile as it continues to extend into the musical heritage of the wider Celtic diaspora, as well as that of other cultures.

His progressive, searching philosophy is highly visible in this year's programme in August. Out have gone some familiar old chestnuts to be replaced by big-name artists and intriguing new sounds from the current canon of world music.

Among the headline acts are festival stalwarts I Muvrini, the charismatic

Corsican ensemble formed by brothers Jean-François and Alain Bernadini, whose mesmerising close-harmony songs carry unashamedly political messages. They will perform in a vast marquee in the Espace Marine. From Ireland comes the incomparable Sinéad O'Connor, who will be performing songs of love, loss, hope and redemption from her latest album. Also at Espace Marine will be the Donegal family ensemble Clannad, who have been playing together for an incredible 40 years.

And this year the Festival Interceltique de Lorient will catch its first glimpse of Dublin's eminently cool rockabilly singer-songwriter Imelda May, who is not only hailed for having knocked Bruce Springsteen off the top of the Irish charts in 2012 but also for being the first Irish female artist to occupy the No 1 slot since Mary Black almost 20 years previously.

The always-excellent Scottish band Capercaillie comes to Lorient this year to celebrate its 30th anniversary in the business. They have a special place in the hearts of festival veterans, who never tire of hearing the sublime voice of Karen Matheson, one of the finest Scottish singers in the world.

The influential French guitarist and composer Titi Robin is a great example of the festival's interest in embracing other cultures. Heavily influenced by Gypsy, *tzigane* and Arabic music, he and his band will be performing, for the first time in Europe, a variety of numbers from the trilogy *Les Rives*, which draws on Moroccan, Indian and Turkish influences.

The current toast of Brittany, singer

Nolwenn Leroy, will show off her new album *Ô Filles de l'Eau* (Girls of the Water). These fantastical, poetic songs have been inspired by the environment of the surrounding ocean and have a weirdly hypnotic effect when sung by Leroy's distinctive voice.

There will be an entire mini-festival devoted to the musical heritage of Asturias, featuring, among others, the traditional trio Tuenda, the long established six-man band Llan de Cubel, an evening highlighting the gorgeous sounds of the Asturian pipes (the *gaita*) and La Grande Nuit des Asturies, a celebration of traditional music, rock, jazz and reggae led by Llariegu, who have been spreading the word on Asturian music and culture for almost 20 years.

And there are some events without which the Lorient Festival would not be the Lorient Festival: colourful performances by local folk-dance circles; the *cotriade*, a popular mass-supper around the port, serving up tasty fish stew, music and camaraderie; and the passionately contested *bagad* (Breton band) championships, which every year attract coach-loads of musicians and supporters to Lorient from all parts of Brittany to compete for the top spot in the various categories.

The Festival Interceltique de Lorient is a heady mix, a festival like no other. A word of warning, though – the experience is addictive and a first visit is most unlikely to be the last. **N**

DATE The Festival Interceltique de Lorient will take place August 2-11

ONLINE www.festival-interceltique.com