

QUEBECOIS FOLK MUSIC IN VANCOUVER

One of the exciting aspects of music in Quebec is the wealth of traditional folk music. This music survives not only because it has been passed down from one generation to another in rural communities, but also because it is being revived and performed at concerts, festivals and

'boîtes à chansons' throughout the province.

This past April I saw two concerts of traditional Québécois music in the space of one week. The first features **Phillipe Bruneau**, a button accordion player who learned to play from his father. The second concert was a performance by **le Rêve du Diable**, one of Quebec's most popular traditional music groups. Considering that both concerts featured traditional Québécois music, the difference between them was phenomenal.

Phillipe Bruneau is not that well-known inside or outside Quebec (except among step-dancing and traditional music buffs). Consequently the audience for his concert was fairly small: only about 65 people, half francophones and half folkies and other assorted anglophones. The first half of the program was introduced as an explanation and demonstration of traditional Quebec music "from soup to nuts". Phillipe began by playing a long medley of tunes, and then commenced his explanations, interspersed with snatches of tunes to demonstrate his points. Phillipe Bruneau is probably one of the best button accordion players in the world. He has an incredibly light touch—I've never seen anyone fly over those buttons so fast—and his rhythm is flawless. But there were two major problems with his presentation. The first was that his music is meant, first and foremost, for dancing. Consequently, the style in which he plays—his even stresses on every note and his regular rhythm—sounds a bit monotonous after a while.

The second problem was that Phillipe Bruneau knows too much about the music he plays. He is so engrossed in it that he finds it hard to sort out what is important and what is too detailed for an audience that is not familiar with Joe Bouchard (a Quebec fiddler many of whose tunes Phillipe plays), John Kimmel (an American accordionist), or the difference between French-roots and Irish influences in Québécois music. His explanations were fairly disconnected from each other and were often interspersed with comments

like, "Well, I learned to play from my father, but I don't know how to read music or anything about chords. But with music, you either have the talent or you don't. Me, I have too much talent to know about chords." He also seemed to have some kind of objection to the influence of Irish traditional music on Quebec dance tunes: the Irish-influenced music isn't really 'French' so he doesn't want to play it.

Besides being somewhat disjointed, the first set was far too long. After an hour and a quarter, the audience was dying for a break. The second half was much more enjoyable. Phillipe simply played tunes to the piano accompaniment of Dorothy Hogan. It was nice music, but I must say I missed hearing the Irish-influenced tunes that are such a characteristic part of Québécois music.

I think that to present Phillipe Bruneau in a concert was a mistake. He is not a *performer*; he is a *musician*. It would have been far more appropriate (and fun) to have held a dance with Bruneau supplying the music. Failing that, an in-depth workshop for accordion players who could follow what he was talking about would have been very useful.

The concert by le Rêve du Diable was, for me, one of the most exciting cultural events of the year. The audience of about 300 was at least 80 per cent francophone. Francophone audiences are quite different from anglophone ones—they're much livelier. They respond and participate at every opportunity. As soon as the lights went down, before the group was even onstage, the audience was clapping and cheering. Le Rêve began with an up-beat, traditional tune which had people clapping, stomping or playing spoons along with the music.

The group consists of 4 men who between them play 2 fiddles, 2 mandolins, 2 guitars, banjo, button accordion, spoons, harmonica, recorder and 'la planche de plywood' (Gervais ranks with Alain Lamontagne in his rhythmic footwork). Not only are they all excellent musicians, but

they all sing. There is no 'front man'—they all take turns doing the talking (André translated a lot of what was said for the benefit of the anglophones, producing some hilarious results). If there is one word to describe le Rêve du Diable it is *gusto*. The energy and enjoyment that poured from the stage was incredible.

I think what was so exciting about the Rêve du Diable concert wasn't just the music. It was the event itself. It was francophones celebrating themselves (the whole thing had an added poignancy because the francophones there were 'exiles', away from home) and le Rêve du Diable were not strictly performers, they were 'animateurs', catalysts. Being an anglophone in that kind of situation always arouses very mixed feelings in me. My first reaction is to wish that I were Québécois, or that anglophones had as much to celebrate and share with each other. I'm always grateful that I learned French and lived in Quebec for a while so I can at least partially participate in what is going on. It was interesting to get the reactions of other anglophones in the audience. Some of them felt the same way I did, totally enjoying the evening, even though they realized they were outsiders. Others, though, felt quite alienated. When you don't understand what is being said, it is pretty hard to be talked and sung at in a foreign language, especially when there's a joke and everybody around you is cracking up. What bothered some of the anglophones I spoke to was the liveliness of the audience. Someone near them was clacking away on some spoons and others were laughing and talking all the time so that it was hard to hear the music (I guess I was lucky to be sitting in a quieter part of the hall). When you're used to quiet, coffeehouse-type folk clubs or concerts where people sit quietly and listen, that kind of noise is hard to take. But on the other hand, the Rêve du Diable performance wasn't strictly a concert, it was a cultural celebration, so that if you came with the expectation of simply sitting and listening to music, you were bound to be disappointed.

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