

Sharing cultures in Germany

THOMAS ZÖLLER

BA (Scottish Music — Piping) graduate Thomas Zöllner has just opened a piping academy in Florsheim near Frankfurt, in his native Germany.

The school occupies a three-room floor in a two-storey house in the picturesque city.

Scholar and gold medallist Allan MacDonald, who teaches on the degree course in Glasgow, is its patron and it has a team of resource people to call upon, including Sardinia-based piping scholar Barnaby Brown; Michael Klevenhaus, a Gaelic speaker and singer who lives in Germany and has studied with Gaelic singer Margaret Stewart; and a locally-based uilleann piper, Tom Kannmather.

“There is a lot of interest in Germany in bagpipes, said Thomas Zöllner, “especially in Scottish piping but also in French, Irish and medieval pipes.”

He will provide ‘by appointment’ tuition in Scottish Highland and medieval piping, and Tom Kannmather will teach uilleann piping.

“But we will also hold seminars and workshops every two or three months involving other people in the team: Barnaby, Michael or Allan.

“Our first one is in December: a Gaelic song and piobaireachd workshop in Bonn, and we’ll be establishing our own recording studio where students can record their work, a library and other resources.

“I began recording piobaireachd with Allan during my studies at the RSAMD and the National Piping Centre,” said Thomas Zöllner. “So far, we have done the whole of the MacArthur-MacGregor manuscript and started on the Piobaireachd Society and Kilberry books, and the idea is to record all of them so that they’ll be accessible to students of the Academy here.

“But the idea is to present Scottish and Irish piping in their contexts: to move away from cliché to content and context, and towards an understanding of culture, including song, Gaelic language and all of these things that I came to value greatly during my time in Glasgow.

“At our Bonn workshop, for example, we’ll



present Gaelic song and piobaireachd — I will teach some of the pipers the Gaelic song that Michael is teaching to some of the singers, and they can then come together and compare the rhythms of the songs with what is played on the pipes and see how the piping embellishments go hand in hand with the syllabic structure of the Gaelic language.”

Thomas Zöllner recently led a workshop for the Nuremberg Pipe Band pipe corps. He gave them a fairly serious presentation about piobaireachd and the Campbell canntaireachd. He told them about differences between the Campbell canntaireachd and the Piobaireachd Society settings... “and they were very interested,” he said. “Several have already asked to come for tuition all the way from Nuremberg to learn more about piobaireachd and get deeper

into the origins of the whole thing.

“This sort of thing is something a lot of people want to do, especially outwith Scotland I think. There is this idea of, rather than imitating something, understanding and interpreting it.

“I think an important reason for the interest here in Germany, and the number and variety of bagpipes that are being played here, has to do with the problems Germans have with their own identity: issues like ‘what does it mean if I am German?’... ‘what can I do?’, ‘what can I say?’ — because of the Nazis and Holocaust and all of these historical things. That’s still very much in people’s heads, and there has been a lot of cultural importation over the past 30 years.

“All kinds of foreign cultures were examined and assimilated and explored as people tried to create their own cultural identities through foreign cultures because their own culture was a very delicate thing to touch upon,” he said. “Even nowadays, if you go very much into your own culture in Germany, it’s seen as a dodgy thing to do.

“Pipes have a general attraction to a lot of people. They present a very strong image, and people want a cultural identity... something distinctive.

“We see Medieval Markets held in castles every weekend during the summer all around Germany. People show old handcrafts and play German pipes, and that is growing as well: dudelsaks — duday, hümmelchen, schäfferpfeife, bok.

“People are performing a lot of medieval music, and I am interested in that very much as well. For several years now I’ve played in a band, Estampie, from Munich. It plays medieval music but with an updated sound, using a lot of instruments and a variety of tempi.”

When he returned home to Germany in October, however, it was with a new musical sound altogether.

He staged concerts in Hofheim, his home town, and Speyer, of music he had begun developing during his studies in Glasgow where, with his second study teacher, classical tabla player Vijay Kangutkar, a cello player from

Germany who was studying classical music at the RSAMD, Johanna Stein, and a harp student from Alaska, Cheyenne Brown, a shared exploration opened a form of music that was new to them all.

“It was really about creating something, and not imitating something,” he said.

“It is music that draws from rhythms and scales that are Scottish, Indian or European. It fits quite well together and sounds quite interesting, I think.

“But it draws on so many different influences that I still find it difficult to describe with words. Elements from the Indian ragas are combined with medieval influences from Germany; the Gaelic language, with which Allan MacDonald grew up as his mother tongue, meeting the rhythms of Japanese Taiko drumming... highly skilled tabla playing clashing with powerful piping... jazzy guitar chords fuse with classical cello motifs.”

The concerts in Germany brought together two of Thomas Zöller’s teachers from Scotland — Allan MacDonald and Vijay Kangukar — to play along with Pedro Aibeo, a guitar bodhran and low whistle player from Portugal; German percussionist Sascha Gotowtschikow; harpist Ute Rek, and Sascha Gotowtschikow, who are both members, with Thomas Zöller, of Estampie; and classical cellist Joachim Schiefer.

“I was the only one who knew everybody before these concerts, and it was an experimental project — but it worked really well. We all really enjoyed being together and we were delighted by how well we got along as people as well as musically.”

Both concerts, in a municipal hall and a church, attracted packed-full houses of about 500 people. “The first concert had to be delayed for 30 minutes because there were so many people there they couldn’t cope with them all,” said Thomas Zöller. And the reception audiences gave the music was exciting.

“I felt very honoured to have both of my tutors from Glasgow, Allan MacDonald and Vijay Kangukar, over for these concerts. They were very supportive throughout the whole of the course and I am very, very grateful to them,” said Thomas Zöller.

“We recorded both concerts so have all the material for a master — but I haven’t listened to it yet because it’s all still with the sound engineer. But we have got the basis for an album.

“This is something that would not have

taken place had I not gone to Glasgow,” he said. “The degree course broadens your view of music in general and gives you the chance to be around with great musicians, teachers, fellow students, and we all draw from the experiences we’ve had so far.”

THOMAS Zöller also has been engaged to provide piping accompaniment for a modernistic production in French of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* that is being staged by the Atelier du Rhin — a theatre across the border in Colmar, a city south of Strasbourg in France.

The production is already in rehearsal, opens in late January, and then undertakes a five-centre tour in the spring.

“The *MacBeth* engagement is a brilliant job to have,” he said. “And a great way to expose piping to some new audiences.”

The theatre’s director is Canadian-born Mathew Jocelyn.

“Because it’s *Macbeth*, I want very much to have the presence of this strong, harsh presence of the bagpipes, and obviously for the Scottish relationship,” he said. “There’s a strong, urban-contemporary quality to the production I am doing and, for example, the actors are being dressed in very modern versions of kilts.

“I wanted to work with a musician-composer or musician who has a sense of playing with textures and working with electronic techniques, sampling, mixing and so on. Thomas is ideal for the task. And I have somebody on our staff here who’s a very clever arranger with electronic material.”

Uniquely, the theatre is also an opera centre and houses an opera studio for the National Opera in Strasbourg.

“It is a theatre in which there’s full time opera activity for young singers and a full time theatre activity,” said Mathew Jocelyn. “My own theatre activity almost always incorporates in a fairly important way composers or musicians or some kind of musical structure.

“It doesn’t always mean having musicians on stage but it often does; so I spent some time in Scotland this past summer and met Stuart Cassells, who introduced me to the music of Martyn Bennett — and I have been listening very intensely to Martyn Bennett’s incredible virtuosity.

“There’s an exceptional sophistication to the music.”

So, yes, he said, the door may open there to admit a little more piping in the future. ●

SUBSCRIBE

PIPING TODAY magazine is published every 2 months. Subscribing is the best way to make sure that you get a regular copy of this magazine with the advantage of getting it “hot off the press”. Subscriptions are for 6 issues.

UK Subscriptions - £15
Europe - £18 / 30Euros
Rest of the World - £21 / 30\$us

Name: _____

Surname: _____

Address: _____

Post Code: _____

Tel No: _____

Email: _____

Is this a: New Subscription
 Re-Subscription Gift Subscription
 To give a subscription to a friend as a gift, fill the recipients name and address above and enter the givers name here.

Gift From _____

I enclose cheque for _____
 or please debit my
 Access/Visa/Mastercard

_____/_____/_____/_____/

Exp: _____

Signature: _____

We can accept Access, Visa, Mastercard. Also sterling cheques, postal orders, or IMOs payable to The National Piping Centre

Send your application to:
The National Piping Centre
30-34 McPhater Street
Glasgow, Scotland. G4 0HW.
Tel. +44 (0)141 353 0220

ISS 19