

UK Hurdy-Gurdy Festival, Lancaster

On the last weekend in April, the streets of Lancaster were once again buzzing with the sound of hurdy-gurdies, announcing the arrival of the UK Hurdy-Gurdy Festival. I thoroughly enjoyed the festival last year and was delighted when we (Nuada) were invited to play at this year's event. Sam and Ferris (the other two members in the band) met me at Lancaster station on the Friday lunchtime. We were due to play in the evening concert. As they now live in Ireland, practices are a bit rare these days...in fact it was 7 months since we'd seen each other, so we were anxious to have a play through some tunes and songs before our gig. We had been allocated accommodation some miles outside Lancaster. This could have been a problem, but in fact turned out to be a real delight. Our hosts made us very welcome indeed in their beautiful home set in the rolling hills near the village of Tatham, about 30 minutes drive from Lancaster. We managed a decent practice, playing through a bit of all the tunes we wanted to include in the evening set, then headed into town for our sound-check. The venue for the Friday evening concert was the Gregson Community Centre. The building has a large bar area and a hall, where the concert was to take place. There are also a couple of rooms upstairs. We arrived for our sound-check, and asked what time we were due on, but the engineer didn't know. Sound-check finished, we adjourned to the bar, where people were beginning to congregate. Pretty quickly the place started to fill up. The food at the Gregson is very good, but they are not the swiftest when it comes to service, so I opted for chips from the shop next door. I was deep in conversation when the concert started, so missed the first act, Drohne, which was a pity, but it was nice to catch up with friends. I have long been an admirer of Cliff Stapleton. In fact he is the reason why I first became interested in the hurdy-gurdy, and it was at a workshop given by him at the Blowout some years ago that I first played one. I missed the first part of his set, but made sure that I caught the last 15 minutes or so. This latest venture, The Twittering Machine, is a long way from the music that I have heard Cliff play many times. This was something very different. Definitely verging on the experimental, a fusion of electronica, jazz and improvisation, complete with animations on a screen behind the band. Probably not to everyone's taste, but then you can't please all the people all the time. I certainly enjoyed what I heard. We finished the evening with a 90 minute set - a mix of songs and tunes, almost all gurdy-led. Some trad, some self-penned, some English, some French and even an Irish tune for good measure. What was really nice was the number of people who got up and danced when we were playing.

Saturday morning, after an excellent night's sleep and delicious breakfast, we headed back into town. The daytime events took place mostly in the Friends' Meeting House, across the other side of town. There were numerous workshops, everything from French tunes to hurdy-gurdy maintenance, from French dance to Hungarian tunes. I opted to go to the Mediaeval workshop led by Steve Tyler. I wished that I had had time to play through the pieces over the previous few weeks, but just about managed to keep up. There was some excellent food available at the Friends' Meeting House, and after a good lunch, I left my gurdy with Sam, who wanted to go to the beginners' workshop, and walked into town. The market square was busy, and right in the middle was a small marquee where Piggery Jokery had just finished one of their brilliant shows. Very clever stuff! There were various other things going on at different venues around the middle of town, but I didn't have much time before having to be back at the Friends' Meeting House.

I had been asked to run a workshop on English music. I confess that I don't really play much English music, although I have a love for English traditional songs, and I used to be a morris dancer. I'm not sure whether tunes that I've written count as English - I suppose they do. I had said on the pre-festival information that the workshop would be suitable for

beginners, for both gurdy tunings and also that other instruments would be welcome. Having given it some thought, I came up with a couple of tune arrangements - Monk's March and one of my tunes, Piort Rush Jig, with the D gurdies having the tune in one with the harmony on G gurdies, and vice versa for the other tune. I had printed out plenty of copies of the tunes, which was just as well as the workshop was very popular. Sam and Ferris joined me, playing along on various whistles, recorders, bagpipes and bouzouki. We also looked at different ways to accompany English traditional songs on the gurdy. I was amazed at how fast the time went, and it was soon time to finish the workshop.

We had arranged to go for a meal with a group of friends, and a table had been booked at the Whaletail, a rather nice vegetarian, wholefood restaurant in town. This meant that we would have to miss the twilight concert, which was a shame, but the meal and good company were worth it. The walk back to the Gregson for the evening events was a good idea after the large dinner! I had hoped to get to see the Balkanics, who opened the evening concert/dance, but we got there too late. I did attempt to get in to see Steve Tyler and friends, but the hall was absolutely packed and very hot, so I gave up and went instead to play in the session in the bar. I did get to see part of the set by Red Dog Green Dog, who I hadn't seen for several years (the previous time would have been at the Blowout, back in the days at Great Linford). I managed one dance, but it was rather too crowded and hot for my liking.

Sunday was a much more leisurely day. We went into town in time for the AGM of the Hurdy-Gurdy Forum, which was all done and dusted in 30 minutes. Sam and Ferris joined in the Grand Orchestra de Lancaster, run by Ian Claburn of this parish. There were a couple of other workshops going on in the upstairs rooms at the Gregson (Michael Muskett ran a workshop on baroque music, while Steve Tyler did an advanced trompette class). I was beginning to feel 'gurdied out' and opted to sit quietly with some friends in the bar talking about what a good festival it had been, and comparing notes on what bits we had particularly enjoyed. I decided to opt for the food at the Gregson Centre for lunch...and hence missed the Grand Orchestra de Lancaster who, I believe, opened the concert. My lunch arrived just as the concert was starting. Ho hum. The afternoon concert was a very relaxed, informal affair, with the GOL being the only official programmed item. The second act were Drohne, who I did get to see this time. After Drohne, Michael Muskett and Cecilia Patko (one of the festival organisers) played a couple of delightful baroque duets. Hungarian instrument-maker Balazs Nagys played a few tunes on gurdy and tekero (the Hungarian hurdy-gurdy). He even managed to get the now dwindling audience singing the chorus to a traditional Hungarian song. "Pandur, pandur, andandoria" we sang with great gusto...well, as much gusto as people can manage after a weekend of festivities! Next up was a very talented young woman, Jane, who had come over from Australia for the festival. She is all of 18 years old, had just spent a couple of weeks studying hurdy-gurdy in Austria before coming over to the festival, and is already an excellent hurdy-gurdy player. She and Neil Brook played a couple of tunes together and she also sang very nicely. And then, it was all over... Farewells were said, promises to keep in contact were made, and people headed off in all directions, heads full off tunes, songs and wonderful sounds. We had arranged to stay for an extra night as it's a very long drive which we couldn't quite face on a Sunday afternoon/evening, so we headed into town for a curry, and then made our way to the Golden Lion where we had heard there was a session. Indeed there was and we had a grand time finishing off the festival in style. What a lovely weekend it had been. A great variety of musical styles from many countries. Good beer, good food and excellent company. What more could we ask!