



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



Interviewee Jean Charles Beauverger

Interviewer Angus MacKay

Date of Interview 24th October 2012

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So, I'll just start, just now. I am Angus MacKay and I am speaking with Jean Charles Beauverger. I am in Glasgow and Jean Charles, where are you at the moment?

I am right now in Mol, in Belgium, it is in the France part of Belgium.

Okay. And, it is the 27th of November and I am just going to ask you a little bit about your experiences in bagpiping, so, I mean, first of all, can you tell me how you got into piping?

I started, I was about twenty years old, so I did not come from a family who plays the bagpipes but my family was a bit related to Breton culture. I went to Boy Scouts group in Quimper and this Boy Scout group, there is a bagad so I do not know if you are familiar with this term, bagad?

No. Can you tell me what it means?

So, principle it is kind of Breton version of the pipe band, so it is a band where you put together Highland bagpipes, then the drums as it is in the pipe band added to that you put the bombarde which is, kind of, typical Breton instrument who is traditionally played with Breton bagpipes, so at the end you have a quite large band, similar to pipe bands in the boy scout group, they have this kind of band, so firstly I joined the group for the Scouts and then I had the opportunity to start this instrument.

And so which of the instruments did you play in the band?

So, for the first year I started with the bombarde because I was told it was the most easier one and after one year, I was not sure that I wanted to keep on playing the bombarde and I saw my brother, my brother who is three years older than I. He plays the bagpipes and I found this instrument quite interesting, so therefore I decided to switch over to bagpipes.

Okay, so was that what we would call the Highland bagpipe?

Yes, exactly, so it is exactly the same bagpipes as the ones you can find in Scotland, so most - so there is a few manufacturers of Highland bagpipes in Brittany, but most of the bagpipes are bought directly in Scotland so it is really the same one as you can find in Scotland or in a pipe band

Okay, and can you tell me a little bit about the band, you know, the name of the band, the type of music that they played and again your part in that?

Yes, so in Quimper we are quite lucky because it is not very large town, about sixty thousand inhabitants and I think we are quite six bagad, I think, so from different levels, quite high levels, low levels more for the youngsters, bagad for the senior and we have this bagad for the scout, so in this, the bagad was called St Patrick which is the name of the scout group and the level was not very high because, as you know, the potential is quite limited because you have to find the players among this limited amount of people within the scout group, so only the people who are willing to play, start playing and then already once you play, keep on practicing and so on. Therefore the level was not really right but not very high, but it was quite interesting experience because each year we went out of Brittany to-for a camp for three weeks and we had always had this band with us, so we are playing bagpipes and bombarde and drums and it was very interesting to see all this peoples over, all over France, so the rest of France who did not see any such music before so it was very interesting to do, so principle we do-we play some Breton music, so in Brittany we took the Breton, with it, sorry, it is a Scottish Highland bagpipes and we play some Breton, we think, that we would have played music with first some Breton bagpipes plus bombarde.

Okay, and can you give me the names of some of the well-known Breton tunes that you would have played.

Oh, it is not easy but it is just because unlike Scotland, we do not have such big standards that everybody has to know from the beginning, in that everybody has to just play together. There is a few of them which is, I think or some of the - I cannot remember the first minutes, but it is not very exciting to play some tunes that we try to have them in common with all the bagads, so that we are kind of able to do the same things are you are doing in Scotland putting a lot of mini-bagads together and hoping that they play the same thing at the same time, therefore we do not have that many common tunes to play.

So is there a strong culture of individual bands make or writing their own tunes and making their own music?

I would say so, yes. So the basis is Breton music, so we are lucky to have quite a large archive of Breton music so from singers, from bombarde players, from accordion players, from clarinet players, from any kind of instruments or songs and all these tunes have been recorded and we have huge database, which is quite easy to access and principally all these people who wants to play Breton music, they go, they dig quite deep to find some already created tunes but which have never been played before and then they try to put them together and to build a street, or composed of some dance, some kind of march, some melody, for different kind of tunes and you try to put them together in a let us, say ten or twenty minutes show.

Okay, and sorry, I was just going to ask where is this database of tunes kept?

I think it is called Dastum. In Brittany it means...

Is it online or...?

No, I have never been there. So I know that some people will put together the suites as, I think you have to go there to access the recording but I have no idea how to access it, if it is completely online

or you go through some shelves to catch some cassettes or...I have no idea.

Okay, I have another question about the Breton music as well and that is obviously, well you were, in a band but I would like to know if, first of all, if there is a culture of solo playing within Breton music and then secondly if there is any perception of some of the music being higher music or slightly more favoured if that is clear.

Yes, it makes sense. Yes, so I will say we have a tradition of solo music. So, I would say, so in traditional music the lead is bombarde and the pipes is just there to play when the bombardes need to breathe. So the traditional part of the Breton bag pipes, then when we introduce other Scottish bagpipes to build the bagad, it was first to have some bands and then we did as you do in Scotland to play some solo music, for the first aim of, so maybe I am not the right person to choose to say that but I am not an historian or anything like that but my interest is on the first goal was to play Scottish music in a solo exactly as it is done in Scotland.

Okay...

Also, got some championship or competition has been organised for solo piping in there were a different type of music either, some Scottish music, like march, strathspey, reel, piobaireachd then some more Irish music and also some Breton music, but within the Breton music there is not like high standard music and low standard music. There is more like difficult tunes to play and more easier tunes to play.

Okay, I have a quick question. It is a little ad-you can make a little advert for your-the bands you use to play and you burned a CD for me of a band, you know, you were a part of the band that

made the CD, can you tell me the name of the band and the name of the CD, please?

Yes. The name of the band is Bagad Penhars and name of the CD is Arvest Kentan, no sorry, it was the first harvest, I think, but I do not remember the name of the CD.

[Laughter]

Yes, I know, I will look it up, presumably, available in all good record shops.

Yes, I can imagine. Yes, so I have started by the Scouts but then you are quite limited so far, because at one time you have to leave the Scouts, because we are too old for that, and then the level was not that high, so I had the opportunity to join other bands in Quimper which was at that time just created, so I joined them when I started and the level of the band was more or less the same level as my level and then the levels of the band improved, improved myself, so it was a quite a good experience to join Bagad Penhars because we are slowly build up my better level and at the same time, the bagad was able to start from the lower level and then to reach upper level where the bagad is right now.

And did you play around France, did you go to events throughout France?

So, yes. Sometimes, so mainly we play in Brittany. So we have a quite a lot of events, all over Brittany, so like Festival de Lorient, Festival de Quimper, de Camray, so which takes place in Quimper and some other smaller or bigger festivals and then once a year or every two year we had some opportunity to go, for a longer trip so outside of Brittany for a few days or longer weekend, so went down to, so last time I went with them, it was down to Asturie in Spain. It was quite nice one, it was like the tour of, I think, it was Celtic, kind of Celtic festival, where another pipe band was there as well and some

other musicians, where it was very, very nice experience, because I shared it with the bus, with your friends.

A few drinks.

Yes, a few drinks, playing music, a few drinks, you play music, that is all or walking round.

Yes, Okay. Now, it is very interesting. Okay, so after you had taken your engineering degree, was that when you went to Germany.

Yes, exactly.

And did you play the bagpipes in Germany as well?

To some occasions, yes, but not that much. The issue is, so when I was in Quimper doing my work in the high school, I had plenty of time so I was doing quite a lot, then I moved out of Brittany for the study in Lille. At that time, I had less time, less opportunity to play and then out to Germany, even worst so I had the occasion to play for, I do not know, for a rugby game or for a party for any kind of events but not very regularly but within a band.

And, sorry, I was just going to ask was the instrument recognised in Germany, did people know of the instrument.

Yes, yes, definitely so. The Scottish bagpipes is quite well known, it will have been different if I had played the Breton one, which is a bit more confidential but the Scottish one definitely everybody recognises, oh it is a Scottish band, bagpipes and then they ask themselves, but you are French why are you playing Scottish bagpipes, does not make any sense.

Yes, of course, okay. And so, I think, perhaps if we move on then to, what, I think, your next overseas move was to come to Scotland to work in renewable energy consultancy where I was

also working and that is where we met one another. I think first of all you moved into a team just at the time when that, when the leader of that team was leaving work, but he was also a piper, can you tell me a little bit about him?

Oh, I know very few about him, just that he was the one who decided to hire me and then when I joined the company, he had already left. He gave me some education to find a pipe band in, round Glasgow, so it was quite nice from him. But then, you know, I thought now it was difficult to play the bagpipes in Lille, to play the bagpipes in Germany in between, I went down to Toulouse, so now I am in Scotland, it will be quite easy until I will do it. Unfortunately, not, either I was too lazy or mainly because I was too lazy, I think.

Okay.

So I had the opportunity to join a band actually, which bought the livery I had, yes, which was quite nice but I should have put more effort into it, you know, to be able to play with them and try and enjoy it more.

And what was the name of the band and did you find them, you know, welcoming and encouraging of you?

The name of the band, I should have prepared it better, I do not recollect.

That is okay.

Sorry for that. It is in the south side of Glasgow, so that is...

That is okay, if you do not remember it and how did you find playing with them?

Sorry, I did not get the question.

Yes, I think there was a little break in the line, there. I was just asking how did you find playing with them and what sort of music did you play with them?

So they are in Grade Three, so I started playing with them during the tune they played for the competition, so it was hornpipes, jigs, reels and slow airs, which was very good because it was right on my level but I joined them.

I think it is broke the line, the line has broken up there again, just, yes.

They were very welcome because when I went...it was just, I can lend you a bagpipe for a few weeks or a few months and when you are decided to come with us and it's not a problem, so you can buy one if you want. In between you can play with us, it is not an issue so have the bag pipe with me as you manage to play with them and they were very nice. I should remember the name

Good, oh, that is okay. You know we can look it up later. And so just to come up to date now, you are now living in Belgium for work purposes. Are you still playing the chanter and are there any opportunities to play the pipes in Belgium?

Yes, so, so in Belgium as you might know it is not very well known and not very well developed, so there is some, a few pipe bands. Here in Belgium I do not have any bagpipes, I just have my practice chanter, and the idea I might have because every day I commute to my work, about one hour train. I might buy, get for Christmas an electric practice chanter, in order to be able to practice in the train, it is not a bad idea actually and then if I do as well enough, I will be able to play again with my band in Brittany.

Okay, yes, you would be able to travel back and play with them.

Yes, because right now they are quite... - they have reached quite a good level, so I cannot come just like that and say, yes, we will play with you, I will have to practice quite a lot because all the guys now are very top players so there is quite a big step between where I am right now and where I should be to play with them so if I can practice here, it should be a good opportunity to play with them.

So perhaps in early two thousand and thirteen, there will obviously be some very confused Dutch people looking at, sorry, Belgian people watching a Frenchman playing a largely Scottish instrument on the train.

Yes, but I do not know if they will be able to recognise it because it will just be a practice chanter and headphone, so...

No, it sounds good, it sounds good.

And so I find that the reason not too far away from here, about twenty kilometres there is a pipe band so I think about going there, actually to see what they are doing but it is not too close, so I was not able to make the step in Scotland so I do not know if I will be able to do it in Belgium, twenty kilometres to go to...training a few nights a week, so but we will see, we will see.

Yes, okay, well, good luck with that, thank you very much that is really everything we have kind of taken it full circle and thanks for taking the time to tell me about that, you know, we will see what happens in two thousand and thirteen and see if you join a band.

Yes, we will see and we can discuss that around a beer if I come to Glasgow.

Well, I think I am due to come over and hopefully visit you, I think around about April two thousand and thirteen, so we will have a beer then.

Yes, exactly.