

Pipe work

When Barnaby Brown started researching the links between the triplepipes and the Sardinian *launeddas* he didn't realise the cultural storm he was going to create. Adam Smyth joined him in experiencing a living part of an ancient Celtic-Mediterranean tradition

One bulky Sardinian man is yelling and gesticulating at another Sardinian man. My few words of Italian notwithstanding, it is evident these men are not enquiring after each another's health. The head-to-head has been raging for some 45 minutes, and the crowd has started to join in. I make a mental note of the nearest emergency *uscita*, and consider the ethics of denying all acquaintance with a man who only two hours ago bought me lunch. Because if blood is shed, everyone is going to blame Barnaby Brown.

But actually, that's unlikely. This is, after all, a lecture, hosted in the Sardinian capital Cagliari's archaeological museum and co-sponsored by my hosts in Sardinia, the Associazione Culturale Italia-Inghilterra. Nonetheless, I seem to be witnessing a rather more heated exchange of emotions than one would normally experience in your average early music forum AGM.

Brown has not stirred up this hornets' nest just for musicological kicks. A piper and piping expert, he is here to hunt for the roots of a shared Celtic-Mediterranean piping tradition: something he believes he has found in the triplepipe, known here as *launeddas*. This event is showcasing the results of his research, and he has also brought along some of his own triplepipe compositions to play to this highly discerning audience.

Encouraged by the eminent Scottish music historian, John Purser, Brown moved to Sardinia for five years in order to study the triplepipe full time. Now back teaching in Glasgow, his theories on the instrument's history have coalesced into two main themes.

Firstly, that the triplepipe is musically and culturally the precursor of the bagpipe in the Gaelic sphere. This seems not only logical (without the bag there is little difference between bagpipe and triplepipe) but also evident, supported by a substantial number of medieval Celtic carvings. Logic and evidence aside, however, it runs contrary to the conventional wisdom that the harp and its canon formed the basis of the *piobaireachd* (or 'pibroch'): the elite Gaelic piping tradition.

Secondly, Brown noticed that the medieval pipes depicted in Scotland and Ireland are very similar to those still played in Sardinia today, and that – even if this is a coincidence – it provides an unmissable opportunity for new musical paths – not just traditional Sardinian ones.

It is this second point that is causing the fireworks; the Sardinians (some of them) believe that Brown is expropriating their heritage, telling them their iconic instrument is not in fact theirs. Which is somewhat on a par with telling the Scots that they had no cultural claim over the bagpipes. Or the haggis.

But many Sardinians do not feel this hostility. Just 24 hours earlier found me sitting in a folk music venue in Quartu (the old part of Cagliari), watching the same event – same

music, same message – being applauded by an audience not only charmed by the music, but delighted that anyone would take the trouble to study any aspect of Sardinian cultural life. It's a good crowd, too, especially since the triplepipe, by Brown's own admission, is 'not everyone's cup of tea'.

A word about the triplepipe, then. Imagine the bagpipes, but higher and more nasal (and with a staccato option that brings to mind two cats fighting on a bed of nails). Rigged to play highly repetitive music, this cane instrument produces sounds that might best be described as sounding like a sort-of musical binary code.

And on paper, it even looks like binary. The repeating melodic patterns form a sort of binary-plus; the ones and noughts are not consistent values but relate to what has come before. The notation is an indication of framework, not detail: a sort of musical grammar. And, like hymns, Brown's repertoire is indexed according to this metrical framework for composing variations, with 'names' identifying the code rather than any 'tune' (my favourite, of course, being the famous *11001011•11001011*).

The extreme impact of the sound is largely shock factor and is dependent, in any case, on your listening to triplepipes proper. But Brown, for various educational and pragmatic reasons, steers clear of the purist traditional approach; so what we are hearing in Quartu is Band-Re's own special hybrid.

Band-Re is Brown's adventurous collaboration with guitarist Gianluca Dessì. If Brown is the Sardinian voice of Scotland, Dessì is the Celtic voice of Italy, and the pair have recorded an album together: *Stratosphere*. Apart from being an interesting stylistic innovation, their eclectic approach is key to Brown's educational angle; a wide selection of styles and instruments here demonstrate a transferable musical background, regardless of country or instrument. And odd though this looks from a medievalist's point of view, the duo seem to have history on their side: the very same Celtic carvings on which Purser and Brown found triplepipes regularly show them being played in conjunction with a harp-like instrument – they have merely moved the accompaniment along by a generation or two.

This is not, of course, a pure *launeddas* sound. Based largely on Gaelic theory, Band-Re's approach is not going to be endorsed as strictly legit by the local *launeddas* crowd. But then compared to the borderline-heretical discussion over national ownership of the instrument, this almost appears a minor detail.

The recital over, there is dancing, a useful reminder of what *launeddas* once meant to local life all over the island. Once, every village had its own *launeddas* player, who was employed by the bachelors to whip up a storm for semi-ritualised courting. Everyone dances in a circle, the men try to strut their stuff, and occasionally it works. It's all very



'Adventurous collaboration':
Band-Re

Mediterranean (not to say Celtic). But when I ask Dessì how many people in the bars of Cagliari know anything about triplepipes, he shrugs and laughingly replies, 'None!'. The Quartu district, it turns out, is not indicative of the rest of the island.

The following morning I ask to see the pipes being made, one of the reasons why Brown has come back to Sardinia. The process is disarmingly simple, like a science project for children (something Brown puts into practice in Glasgow, in fact). The double pipe – the 'triple' is the drone – is just like a recorder cut into two, one chanter for each hand. To make each one, all you need is some beeswax, cotton thread, and two types of locally grown cane (hard and soft, or male and female, for tube and reed respectively). You carve your finger-holes according to the pitches you wish to achieve, cut a flap of softer cane for your reed, and then bind the various sections together with the cotton thread.

Depending on care of usage, the reeds can last 10 years and the tubes over a century. There is a plentiful supply of materials and the whole process costs next to nothing. The instrument is even self-sufficient in a sense: the same blobs of wax that form the airtight seals (especially important at the mouth, to enable the requisite circular breathing), can be poached from to tune the single-bladed

reeds. It's not glamorous, but it encapsulates the rustic origins of the instrument.

Making – or even merely adjusting – your triplepipe is not like nipping out to the Yamaha shop for a half-size violin. Apart from anything else, it is much, much more fun. Even watching it being made, and contributing to its design and tuning grants an understanding of the instrument not found with a shop-bought instrument.

Brown's involvement here is more-than-usually important because the pipes being made are not standard Sardinian *launeddas*; these are – as emphasised by the uses to which Band-Re puts them – variants, hybrids, reconfigurations. Sevenths have been flattened, fingerings adjusted, music reworked, all with the expressed purpose of exploring the links between Scottish and Mediterranean music.

One of the instruments being made is a synthesised hybrid, a non-instrument fitted with a durable plastic double-reed, for practice-chanting. This is partly a trick on Brown's part to lure Highland pipers into triple-piping, or at least into exploring some of the *launeddas* repertoire, but it is also part of his general educationalist's approach: this easy-to-play single pipe is specifically designed to be played in D, thereby rendering it compatible with school xylophones (in C, but they feature F# and Bb). It is all part of a coherent scheme that takes in everything from lowland bagpipes to the silver pipes of Ur.

If the *launeddas* piper must take a disproportionately hands-on approach to manufacture, it is more than matched by the musical skills required of his accomplice in the workshop. In Brown's case, this accomplice is Luciano Montisci, a bus driver who makes about 30 pipes a year – only for professionals – including Sardinia's No 1, Luigi Lai.

The pipe-maker must be able to do everything, from fashioning the drone out of a piece of raw cane – the harmonics of which are essential to the tuning of the two chanter pipes and the hypnotic nature of the instrument – to whittling the minutiae of the reed, to playing the instrument well enough to know that it will fit a specific part of the repertoire (which he must also understand). And yet, in this room, there are no charts, no diagrams, only a set of templates for fingerhole positions from the instruments of an old master; everything else is intuitive.

For all that, there is surprisingly little emotion in Montisci's rarefied craft. He tests the tuning, makes the prototype, makes it longer, edits it with masking tape, makes the new pipe, adjusts that one, all the time chatting and pouring coffee and discussing the sound with Brown. And interestingly, he never once demurs at his involvement in this challenge to the *launeddas* tradition.

Which brings us back to the museum, and this unlikeliest of causes for a bunfight. This is not a ticketed event, but is nonetheless packed. These people are not music boffins,



Triplepipes: Hunterian Psalter, York, late 12th century

but they are passionate about their music. They are taking Brown seriously and, arguments aside, it is evident that they are buying into what he is attempting to achieve in terms of academic enquiry.

As the diehards debate how best to protect Sardinian heritage from imitation and expropriation, the director of the museum astutely points out that a culture needs regular injections of fresh material to keep itself vital. This is well received in principle, but though Brown's Italian is evidently very much better than he claims, everyone, I feel, is leaving room for the possibility that something has been lost in translation. Is *piobaireachd* (or a variant) taking over from *launeddas*, the music? Are triplepipes really the same as *launeddas*? Is it the instrument, the player or the music that distinguishes one from the other?

These are fair questions from a proud minority civilisation, concerned that more than nomenclature is at stake here. But by the end of the evening Brown has done a good job of allaying suspicions of a cultural hijacking. As for the distinction between the instruments, the answer seems to be: all three – if not necessarily in equal measure.

Brown finishes the evening by singing a *piobaireachd* chant from *The Comely Tune*. Fittingly for his entire project, the words – 'Hinbandre hobandre' – are vocalised learning chants for medieval bagpipers. As he sings, his eyes half closed, his hands wildly demonstrate the ornamental fingering on an invisible triplepipe.

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Sardinian *launeddas*, 900-500BC