

The bagpipes of Paris

FRANÇOIS LAZAREVITCH

FRANÇOIS Lazarevitch is a professional Parisian musician whose quest to rediscover the heart and soul of the early music of France led him to the Baroque flute, and to two bagpipes: the Baroque musette and the cabrette.

The first is a highly crafted ‘chamber’ instrument; the second is, said François Lazarevitch, is “the richest of France’s popular bagpipes.”

The Baroque musette is a complicated, shuttle-droned, bellows-blown instrument also known as the ‘court musette’ — the ‘musette de cour’ — “but ‘de cour’ is not a perfect term for this instrument,” said François Lazarevitch, “because it was not played solely as a court instrument.

“The cabrette is a bagpipe originally from the Auvergne region that was further developed and given greater sophistication in Paris during the 19th century.” Auvergne is a steep, well-forested rural region — an historically independent county — on the volcanic backbone of France’s Massif Central.

“I like power of the sound, the feeling of making the sound with the fingers, the vibration, with bagpipes,” said François Lazarevitch. “The drone is interesting, to be inside the sound. One thing strange with the Baroque musette is that there are drones, often with three or four drone notes sounding, and we play tonal music. Sometimes there are pieces that begin, for example in C, and move to A minor and back to C, and the drone does not move, so it makes for very distinctive music.”

François Lazarevitch’s first involvement with making music was learning the recorder when he was five and six years old. And, by the time he was 15, he knew that he wanted to make music his career. “At that time, I was playing trumpet, piano and recorder.

“And then I met Daniel Brebbia, my recorder teacher, and Antoine Geoffroy-Dechaume, who interested me in early music, showing me the profound links between early and traditional musics. And I started playing the Baroque flute.

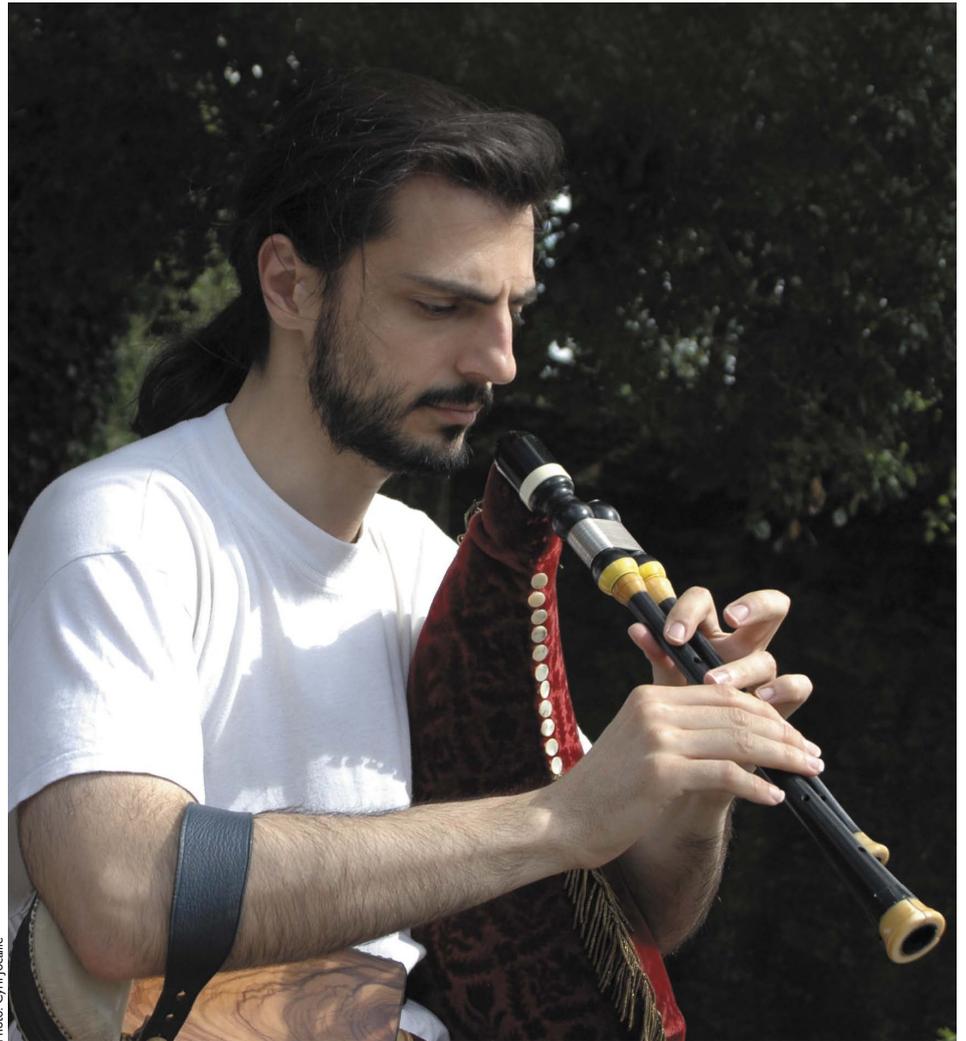


Photo: Cyril Joraille

FRANÇOIS LAZAREVITCH plays the cabrette ... “The cabrette is played with open fingering and, when we play, we use the feet to mark out a rhythm: the first beat with the left foot and the other beats with the right foot, to help dancers. I think the Quebecois tradition in Canada, where they do a lot of things with their feet, probably comes from the Auvergne.”

Photo: Mike Paterson



THE SHUTTLE DRONE of François Lazarevitch's Baroque musette containing five reeds and having six tuning slides... "The difficulty for makers is in the drone: constructing a lot of bores that loop backwards and forwards inside a very small piece of wood, sometimes with only a millimetre or two between two bores, is an incredibly difficult challenge for craftsman."



THE 'GRAND' and 'petit' chalumeaux (chanters) of François Lazarevitch's Baroque musette: a front view at left and a back view at right, showing the keying arrangement... "It requires a lot of practice. The technique has to be very precise and I think the closed fingering is perhaps more difficult than open fingering. A difficulty on the musette is the keys, and the fact that you can play two voices at the same time. There are things like the way the little finger is used to support the pipe when the thumb is busy."

"From the time I was 20, I also became interested in the Baroque musette because I knew that flautists and oboists in the 18th century had also played the musette in Versailles, in Paris. But I began with the cabrette because it was so very difficult to find a musette. And I started with the cabrette in particular because my mother is from Auvergne."

François Lazarevitch said the instrument seems to have arrived Paris with an influx of urban migrants from Auvergne in the 19th century. "And, having brought the cabrette with them, they put the shape of the musette onto their own pipes: the bellows, the shape of the bag and the tops of the pipes.

"Today, a lot of different music and a lot of different bagpipes exist in Paris because there are a lot of immigrants living in Paris. But the cabrette and the musette, these are Parisian instruments. They represent the Parisian piping tradition, certainly from the 17th century: the musette among the aristocracy and the cabrette during the 19th century in popular contexts.

"Both are challenging instruments to play well," he said. "Playing the flute makes it easier to play the bagpipes but, it is important to understand and to feel how to make the bagpipes fit in. You need more than your knowledge of the flute.

"One of the things that has been of great interest to me in Scotland was that, in a lot of old treatises, there are a lot of things described like the ornamentation, the rhythmic ways to make dance music, used today in traditional music."

After two or three years of playing the cabrette, François Lazarevitch obtained and began

Photo: Mike Paterson

to play the Baroque musette.

“The Baroque musette is a classical instrument for which there is a big repertoire by composers like Jean-Marie Leclair, Jean-Philippe Rameau, Nicolas Chédeville and others,” he said. “This instrument is played in classical contexts. It is an elite instrument that was used, like other classical instruments, to play compositions like sonatas, suites for musette and harpsichord and viol da gamba, and it was used in the opera too by several composers.”

It is, however, an exceptionally complicated instrument to learn, to set up and to play.

“It requires a lot of practice,” he said. “The technique has to be very precise and I think the closed fingering is perhaps more difficult than open fingering. A difficulty on the musette is the keys, and the fact that you can play two voices at the same time. There are things like the way the little finger is used to support the pipe when the thumb is busy.”

The Baroque musette has two parallel chanters, each with its own double-bladed reed. “The ‘grand chalumeau’, the big one, can play more or less one octave, chromatic, with six or seven keys,” said François Lazarevitch. “The ‘petit chalumeau’, the smaller one, gives six notes in the higher register that you cannot make with the ‘grand chalumeau’. And, it only sounds when you press on a key. So there are three keys on the front and three on the back. Maybe at the beginning, when it was keyless it may have been a folk instrument, it is difficult to know.

“I also play a larger instrument, a third lower than the standard one, with two more keys on the petit chalumeau to make two higher notes. Although the fingering is closed fingering, like on the Northumbrian pipes, the back is not closed like on the Northumbrian pipes.

“Originally, there was only the ‘grand chalumeau’, rather like the Scottish smallpipes but, during the 17th century, French makers added keys for flats and sharps and added the ‘petit chalumeau’ and imitated aspects of the sordellina, a very complicated Renaissance double-pipe bagpipe from Italy. So it is possible to play two melodies at the same time: one on the ‘grand chalumeau’ and one on the ‘petit chalumeau’.

“And, in the shuttle drones I play, I have five reeds and six tuning slides: the bores go back and forth like a labyrinth. On the standard instrument, I can play low C, low G, high E (of the same octave as the third octave G), middle



Photo: Cyril Jocalle

LES MUSIENS DE SAINT-JULIEN — vielle à roue (hurdy-gurdy), violin, diatonic accordion and cabrette... François Lazarevitch's Baroque musette: a front view at left and a back view at right, showing the keying arrangement... "Dancing was popular. And people would go to the dance — the 'bal' — and the 'bal musette' was the place you went to dance to the sound of this pipe (cabrette). The accordion and guitar were added to the ensembles, and the music they played became the 'musette' style."

G, C or D and third octave G.” The sound of the low G and the low C on this drone both derive from the same reed.

“My instrument is of African blackwood but ivory was often used: the sound is soft and the instrument requires very precise craftsmanship to make,” said François Lazarevitch.

“From the 1750s-60s — like the harpsichord, viola da gamba and recorder — the Baroque musette fell from use.

“The difficulty for makers is in the drone: constructing a lot of bores that loop backwards and forwards inside a very small piece of wood, sometimes with only a millimetre or two between two bores, is an incredibly difficult challenge for craftsman.

“Up to 21 slides, each serving its own bore, are described from the beginning of the 17th century, Marin Mersenne in 1636, in his book *L'harmonie universelle*, carefully described several types of bagpipe including the Baroque musette, which he called the ‘musette royale’. He described an even bigger drone.

“It must have been crazy to get and keep an instrument like that in tune. I find my six-slide drone crazy to set up. The problem is not really the tuning, but in setting and adjusting the reeds all together,” he said.

“I think people used this extreme kind of intricacy for status or show. Six slides are enough. With three or four or five, even seven reeds playing at the same time, it's dangerous, and sometimes they do not respond together in the same way. The weather changes or people breathe in the room, and things can change with the reeds... and it gets very difficult.

“But,” he said, “the cabrette is not so easy either.

“The cabrette is played with open fingering and, when we play, we use the feet to mark out a rhythm: the first beat with the left foot and the other beats with the right foot, to help dancers. I think the Quebecois tradition in Canada, where they do a lot of things with their feet, probably comes from the Auvergne.”

Over recent years, interest in the cabrette has been growing to the point where it has attracted one of the largest followings of any of France's traditional bagpipes.

“There are about 15 types of bagpipes in France,” said François Lazarevitch. “In the 1950s and '60s people stopped playing these pipes because of the craze for American pop music, but the Breton pipes, the biniou, and the cabrette survived and there is now a strong cabrette tradition.

“The technique, the ornamentation, is very rich.

“The ‘valse musette’ style — accordion type music — started with the cabrette.

“The cabrette was called ‘musette’ in Paris during the 19th century. The word ‘musette’ has meant ‘bagpipe’ in French since the Middle Ages. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the ‘musette’ was the instrument I call the Baroque musette.

“But, during the 19th century, the word ‘musette’ became the usual name in Paris for the instrument we call today the ‘cabrette’. ‘Cabrette’ was and is the Auvergnat name of it,” said François Lazarevitch.

“Dancing was popular. And people would go to the dance — the ‘bal’ — and the ‘bal musette’ was the place you went to dance to the sound of this pipe. The accordion and guitar were added to the ensembles, and the music they played became known as the ‘musette’ style.”

François Lazarevitch described a growing interest in traditional music in France from the end of the 1970s, in early music and in bagpipes. “Now, a lot of people seem to play the cornemeuses of Berry,” he said, “and young people in the Auvergne community play the cabrette. But only a very few people play the Baroque musette: I am one of five or six I am aware of in France who play the Baroque musette.

“Now I play different bagpipes, the bagpipes from central France, the musettes du Centre, from the Berry and Bourbonnais regions, the chabrette, which is the pipe of the Limousin region further to the south, the cabrette and the Baroque musette.

“And music is my job. I play early music on the flute and musette and traditional music on the French bagpipes, and a little bit of Irish flute.”

François Lazarevitch is a graduate of the Conservatories of Paris, Brussels, Toulouse and Versailles. He also holds the Certificate of Aptitude in music and former State Diploma in traditional music. For 10 years, he taught. “But I have stopped,” he said. “I have a teaching certificate but I am not using it. I am just too busy, although sometimes I have pupils at my home.

“And sometimes I play for dance summer schools.”

He has won competitions for bagpipes in Paris and at Saint-Chartier and is at home in

both traditional and early music concerts. He is especially in demand as a Baroque musician. And, while he plays flutes and musette in Baroque orchestras and for solo engagements, he also plays in ensemble with Fawzy Al-Ayedi, an Iraqi ud (oud) player, performing a fusion of French traditional and Arab music.

Recently, too, he has made a number of international appearances in a programme called *Four Nations* with Irish piper Mick O’ Brien, Northumbrian piper Pauline Cato, Barnaby Brown playing Scottish smallpipe and medieval triple-pipes, and Javier Sáinz playing Renaissance and early Irish harps.

With his own ensemble, ‘Les Musiciens de Saint-Julien’ — that includes instruments like hurdy-gurdies (the ‘vielle à roue’), violin, harpsichord Baroque bass, and diatonic accordion and singers — he has presented numerous concerts in Europe and the United States, and is producing a series of albums under the title *1000 years of bagpipes in France* with the French Alpha label, supported by the Mécénat Musical Société Générale.

The first two albums of the series have been released: *Danses des bergers, danses des*

loups (Dances of Shepherds, Dances of Wolves), subtitled “traditional music of the heart of France”, and *A L’Ombre d’un Ormeau (In the Shadow of an Elm)*, subtitled Brunettes and contredanses. “Brunettes” or “petits airs tenders” are songs of form that was popular in 18th century France.

The first album, its title reflecting a French legend that bagpipes have special powers over wolves, presents traditional music from central France and the Auvergne, with an emphasis on the bourrée, a dance that originated in the early 17th century and has many permutations, and can be in double or triple meter, depending on its source.

Over the seven volumes that are proposed, François Lazarevitch and Les Musiciens de Saint-Julien will showcase the diversity of French bagpipes and the richness of their repertoires.

Said François Lazarevitch: “In times of standardisation and globalisation, when things fade and get diluted, it’s crucial to make every effort to present and sustain music that holds so much interest and, moreover, is a fundamental aspect of our identity.” ●

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