As a birthday surprise for his mother, Maria Theresia, Archduchess of Austria and Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire and wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Francis I (who reigned 1745–65), the future Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II recruited 300 bagpipers to play in front of Schönbrunn Castle in Vienna, having first arranged themselves in the form of a giant monogram: the letter ‘T’ for ‘Theresia’.

“It’s significant that in the 1760s you were able to find 300 pipers in the area of Vienna,” said Michael Vereno, a player of the Austrian bock. “It’s something that was not possible 100 years later.”

At the beginning of the 20th century, although there is evidence that hurdy gurdies survived, bagpipes seem to have no longer been played in Austria.

But when Michael Vereno was growing up in Salzburg, he did hear bagpipes. “I remember someone playing the pipes — I don’t know if he was Scottish or not, just that I adored this instrument. Bagpipes fascinated me.”

He began pestering his mother, Helga, with his desire to play bagpipes.

“She teaches English and French at a tourism school in Salzburg and a pupil of hers, a student from Pakistan, told us he could get us very cheap bagpipes,” he said. “He brought us a set of Pakistani pipes for about 700 Austrian schillings, around 50 Euros, and they didn’t work.

“But it interested me so much that I wanted to bring this instrument to sound.”

Then Austrian television began promoting a show called Glückskind (‘Lucky Child’), inviting children between seven and 12 years of age to submit a wish and the show would ensure selected wishes came true. “I didn’t believe in this stuff,” said Michael Vereno, “but my mother wrote to them about her little boy who

MICHAEL VERENO… “My grandmother is from Bohemia, my father’s family is from Hungary so basically you can say I am the average product of the Habsburg Empire. And many Austrians, I would say, have a grandmother from Bohemia and a grandfather from Hungary, or the other way round...”
wanted to learn to play bagpipes and would have to go to Scotland in order to learn… and it worked.”

A 10-year-old Michael Vereno, his mother and a television team were soon on an aircraft bound for Scotland. “They took us to Tain in Inverness where I met Duncan MacGillivray who, I later learned, was a very famous piper and had played with the Battlefield Band,” he said. “I learned the bagpipes I had were useless and we got an instrument from Logan Pipes in Inverness.

“We got to Scotland for two weeks each summer for several years and I learned a little bit of technique from Duncan and then from Bobby MacRae.

“Then one day, I accidentally sat on my pipes and broke the blowstick.”

A friend in Vienna told the Verenos about a bagpipe maker, Stefan Widhalm, in Vienna and they went there to get the blowstick repaired or replaced. “But he was not making Scottish bagpipes,” said Michael Vereno. “He was making Renaissance bagpipes from the German Renaissance and that was when I discovered there were more than just Scottish bagpipes.

“People have thought I was driven into bagpiping by my mother. It was the other way around. I was pulling her into all this music and she supported me, not least with money for the instruments.

“She bought me a set of Renaissance bagpipes and I began to learn. Then, in 1997, I got my first set of Bohemian pipes, which I learned were also the Austrian pipes.”

Michael Vereno met and began taking lessons with Rudi Lugofer, who had launched the revival of the Bohemian bagpipes in Austria nearly 30 years previously.

“Rudi Lugofer always felt very close to the Czechs,” said Michael Vereno. “But he says he loves and hates them — a feeling that many Austrians have about the Czechs and that Czechs have about the Austrians.”

Bellow-blown bagpipes originally entered Austria from Poland, by way of the Slavic minority culture of the Sorbs in eastern Germany, and came into use during the Baroque era.

“During the Baroque in France, bagpipes were welcomed at the Court of Versailles, and the German princes felt they needed something equivalent. They got themselves Polish pipers,” said Michael Vereno. “Suddenly the Polish bagpipes were very stylish and, during the 17th century, they replaced the earlier mouth-blown German bagpipes, which were more like the Flemish bagpipes, which were also played in Austria.

“During the Baroque, bagpipes in France became very highly refined… look at the Baroque musette, for example, that became a sort of model for the Northumbrian smallpipes. In Austria and the German-speaking countries, this sort of refinement never happened; the bagpipe remained a very rural instrument but the nobility liked the sound.”

Percy Scholes’ *The Oxford Companion to Music* includes the observations of Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767), a leading composer of the German Baroque, about the popularity of the Polish bagpipe in Prussia: “I have heard as many as thirty-six bagpipes and eight violins together,” Telemann wrote. “It is unbelievable what extraordinary musical fancies the bagpipe and violin players introduced when they were playing whilst the dancers rested: any composer who might care to note them down would in a week have enough ideas to keep him supplied for the rest of his life… All this proved later of service to me in many serious compositions.”

Said Michael Vereno: “It was through Germany and Bavaria, that this new bagpipe, which is easier to handle and easier to tune, came to Austria and, during the 19th century, the Czechs adopted it. Until then, the Czechs were playing high-pitched mouth-blown bagpipes. The old people in Bohemia called this new instrument ‘n mecké dudy’ which means ‘German bagpipes’ because it came from German-speaking people.

“After the instrument got forgotten in the German-speaking countries, it was brought again out of Bohemia and became our ‘Bohemian’ bagpipes. But, originally, they had passed by way of the German-speaking people into Bohemia.”

In Austria, these pipes certainly had their day. “So we have music like Leopold Mozart’s *Bauernhochzeit (Peasant Wedding) —* a piece for orchestra, bagpipes, hurdy-gurdy and dulcimer, a combination of rural and classical music,” said Michael Vereno.

Until 1918, the interplay between the cultures involved in these shifting bagpipe traditions was relatively unrestricted. They all were a part of the Habsburg Empire, a dynastic hegemony that had lasted more than 600 years.

At the end of the First World War, however, the Empire was dissolved and Austria became a short-lived republic. In 1934, its right wing government adopted a Fascist constitution and, in March 1938, German troops occupied the country. Only in 1955 did Austria regain full independence from the post-war Allied occupying powers (Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union) and, in 1995, it became a member of the European Union.

Bohemia, its name originating from the culturally assimilated Celtic Boii tribe, now accounts for what is essentially the western two thirds of the Czech Republic, and is home to 60 per cent of the republic’s 10.3 million people. Germany is to the west, Austria to the south, Poland to the northeast and Moravian region of the Czech Republic to the east.

After Habsburg rule, Bohemia was incorporated into Czechoslovakia. Its German-speaking Sudeten borderlands were annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938 and then Bohemia was wholly occupied as a part of the “the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia”. At the end of the Second World War, its German speakers were expelled and it became a Soviet satellite state. Since 1993, with the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, has it been a part of the Czech Republic.

While Austria’s official language is German, a number of regional dialects are spoken, and Slovene and Croatian are recognized locally. Austria’s population is a little under 8.5 million.

“Until nationalism arose 150 years ago, nobody would have thought that speaking German was a reason not to feel oneself Bohemian,” said Michael Vereno. “This feeling lasted until the end of the Habsburg Empire. Then, when Adolf Hitler took power in Germany and German nationalism was extreme in Germany and Austria, the people in Egerland in western Bohemia wanted to be a part of the German Third Reich, and that’s why the Czechs expelled them after the Second World War.

“The Czechs expelled anyone, in fact, who was unwilling to declare himself or herself Czech or Slovak, and Hungarians were expelled too. And this German-speaking Bohemian culture, which was playing bagpipes on a daily basis, died out.

“The regions near the Czech border to the German-speaking countries were re-settled with Czechs from eastern Czechoslovakia who didn’t belong there or feel at home there. Then, when they did feel at home, the Communists came and took everything from them, and it took a
long time until this situation normalised."

Meanwhile, during the Cold War, for as long as it was possible, Rudi Lughofer would drive to Czechoslovakia. In August 1968, just days before Russian-led Warsaw Pact troops moved into Prague to re-assert Soviet power, Rudi Lughofer went back to buy a bagpipe he had seen in a music shop there.

“He got himself a recording of the Konrádýho Dudácká Muzika ensemble from Domážlice and, with no instructions and not knowing how to handle the instrument, began teaching himself to play,” said Michael Vereno.

“About 10 years afterwards, when his first instrument broke, he bought another instrument in Germany but then managed to contact the maker of his old Bohemian instrument and bought a new set of pipes that had to be brought out through the Democratic Republic of Germany with diplomatic mail to Bavaria, where he then had to go to pick the instrument up.

“Later, along with a colleague who was playing the hurdy-gurdy, he formed the Kremsmünster Bock und Leiermusik (bagpipe and hurdy gurdy) group, which played with two clarinets, two violins, a double bass, bock and hurdy gurdy. He became very famous because the music he made was Austrian but with a Czech touch that was not known because the border was closed and people had no access to good Czech music.

“He then began teaching in upper Austria and the number of bagpipers increased rapidly. Other styles of bagpipe music also became known, using more French-like German bagpipes for example, the sackpfeife, and now there are two main piping interests in Austria.

“One plays the Bohemian bagpipes — the bock or dudelsack — with which you are not able to play the full range of European-wide folk music, but only Austrian folk and Bohemian music. The other interest, represented by players like Sepp Pichler and his group, uses French-like bagpipes — the sackpfeife — which can play in minor keys, and have a greater range so you can play European folk music. As well, we have people pursuing early music interests who play with Renaissance or early Baroque consorts, and the new so-called ‘medieval’ style that you see too in Germany.”

A student at university in Salzburg, Michael Vereno is studying historical linguistics. “It became interesting to me when I realised that the German word ‘dudelsack’ comes from the Czech ‘dudy’,” he said. “The original term for bagpipes was ‘sackpfiefe’, literally the same thing as ‘bagpipe’; but this new instrument that came into use in the 1700s carried the name ‘dudy’ and became known as ‘dudelsack’ — and that’s now the only usual, popularly used term for bagpipes in the German-speaking countries.”

NOW, said Michael Vereno, who intends to make his full time career in music, cultural links, artificially broken by the East-West divide of Cold War era, are being re-established and traditional music in central Europe is much the healthier for it.

“You see this especially when you look at Austria and its neighbours in the east, the north and south. All of these countries were united under the Habsburg Empire and the feeling that closer relationships between these peoples are coming back, and it is strong with the Czechs now.”

His own love of the Bohemian pipes, he said, originated the value he places on his own heritage.

“My grandmother is from Bohemia, my father’s family is from Hungary so basically you can say I am the average product of the Habsburg Empire. And many Austrians, I would say, have a grandmother from Bohemia and a grandfather from Hungary, or the other way round...

“You can see this in the names. If you open a telephone directory in Vienna, you will have many Slavic names, and if you open a phone book in Prague, you will have many German names. And it’s the same in Hungary. So you can’t really tell what is Czech, what is German, what is Hungarian; it’s more like one big culture with different member tribes and regions, and piping is, for me, a cultural identity thing.

“So I also play Hungarian bagpipes. One needs time to get used to it because it’s a very special music the Hungarians play and there are...
regional differences. The Hungarian chanter mouths have a ‘lea hole’, just like the bagpipes from Bulgaria. The music is based on pentatonic scales because the Hungarians originally came from central Asia and in some tunes you still find these old scales that don’t use any half steps. When you compare the Slovaks and Croatians, north and south, they have more or less the same music, similar bagpipes to the Hungarians. But the Hungarians are on their own with the bagpipe style. You can’t compare it to Slovak or Croatian piping. It’s my favorite, next to the Bohemian bagpipes.”

As well as appreciating the pipes’ significance as vehicles of heritage, Michael Vereno has a love of the music and of the sound of the instruments. “I do very much like the sound of the Bohemian pipes,” he said. “And I think that the older the instrument gets, the better the sound is.

The bellows-blown Bohemian duda, or bock, with its sometimes elaborately-carved goat’s head chanter mount, ornamented cow-horn drone and chanter bells, and a drone connection within which the bore is extended by passing down, up and down again, is an intriguing instrument clearly related to other central European bagpipes. The drone is in three main sections: the first goes to the player’s right shoulder, the second, at right angle to the first, crosses the shoulder, and the third hangs down the piper’s back, where if ends in the upwards turned bell. The bag is of goat skin, with the hair outwards. Cylindrical bores, single-bladed composite reeds and a relatively low bag pressure give the duda a sweet, mellow sound that blends with the clarinet, violin and it’s a very groovy sound.”

Mike added, “It was played with high-pitched bagpipes, clarinet, violin and it’s a very groovy sound.”

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