



No drones, no happiness

Piping In Asturias

SPAIN'S rugged northern coast is home to five contrasting piping-related cultures: Galician, Asturian, Cantabrian, Navarran and Basque, although the *gaita navarra*, like the Basque double-pipe "*alboka*" has no bag, and the Basques' *xarabiel* bagpipe is believed extinct.

Not far away are the Catalanian *sac de gemecs*, the Zamoran-Portuguese *gaita de fole* and the Aragonese *gaita de boto*.

Asturias, bordering eastern Galicia, owes its distinctive historical identity to the combative tenacity of its eighth century Visigoth overlords.

In 718, a war band of Visigoths, clinging to their last stronghold, routed an army of Moors from the mountain glen of Covadonga and established a small, independent Christian enclave. The battle was one of history's magic moments, inspiring the "Reconquista" that would ultimately oust the Moors from the whole of Spain.



FAÇADE of the Casa de los González de la Vega, home to the Museo de la Gaita in Xixón... "the piper is the most important figure in the Asturian popular landscape. It's not possible to understand traditional music here without the bagpipe. It appears in every celebration, religious or secular."

Around this background Asturias formed an enduring identity, different from those of its neighbours. It remained a relatively poor, obscure region until iron and coal mining began changing the hitherto agricultural economy in the 19th century.

Industrialisation helped prime Asturians against the fascist regime of General Francisco

Franco y Bahamonde, Spain's dictator from 1936 until his death in 1975. Under his policy of suppressing minority cultures, Asturias became the "Province of Oviedo". When Franco finally died, its old, more culturally assertive name was restored and Asturias became an autonomous community (a form of regional government created by Spain's 1978 Constitution). *Asturiano*, its unique language, is not officially recognised but it is protected and, today, Asturias enjoys a reputation for its excellent seafood and cheeses and, particularly, for its tasty, head-spinning cider.

Fieldwork began in the late 1970s to recover the long-suppressed traditional culture of Asturias, but piping enjoyed little support of the sort that Galician authorities were pouring into piping there.

"The Asturian upper middle classes despised the bagpipe as a vulgar instrument, too noisy for their sensitive ears," explained Juan Alfonso



Covadonga Lakes in Asturias

Fernández García, director of the Museo de la Gaita in Xixón (*Gijón*, in its usual Spanish rendering) when I first visited Asturias in 1999. “A consequence has been the slight interest of our cultural and political institutions.

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The traditional teaching system had survived and the local Universidad Popular was at that time offering six to ten places a year on its bagpipe courses.

“While Galician pipers usually use open fingering for major keys and closed fingering for minor keys, the traditional Asturian chanter is diatonic and pipers use a half-closed fingering technique to play in the major keys,” added the museum director. “Recently, leading Asturian pipers have developed new fingering techniques, involving half holes and ‘*tranquillas*’, to produce the complete chromatic scale.

“There is a new generation of baroque pipers very interested in the development of a flourishing personal style which amalgamates different influences, even Scottish. In spite of this,” he said, “there are still important differences be-



LLAN DE CUBEL from left: Xuan Muñoz, Xel Pereda, Marcos Llope, Simon Bradley, Elias García and Fonsu Mielgo.

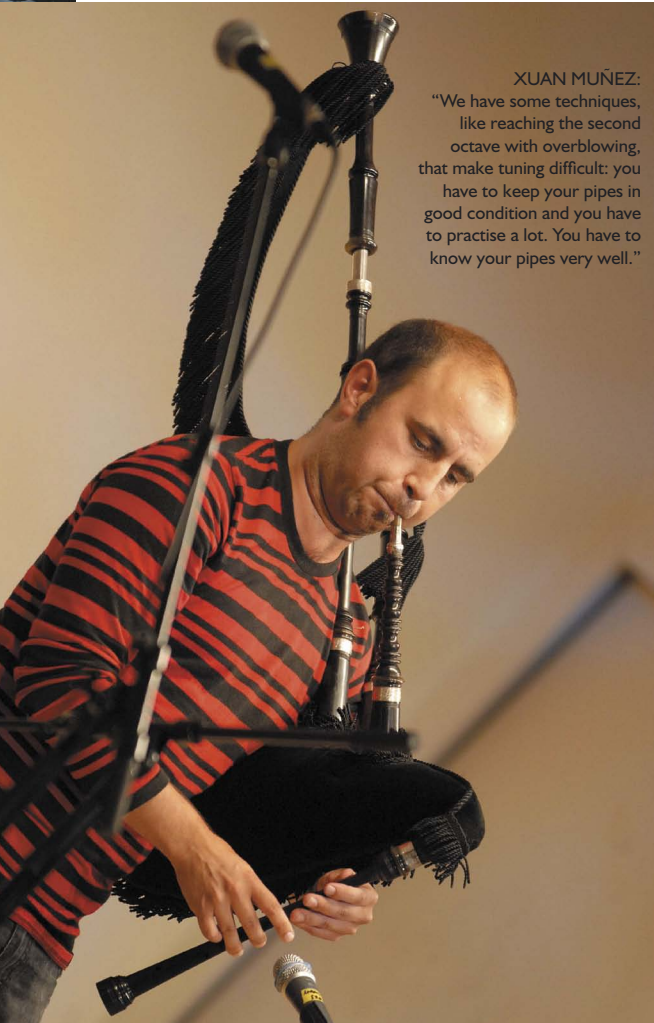
tween Galician and Asturian pipers, depending on the greater or lesser presence of traditional piping style in the personal mix.”

Since we talked, a growing number of leading Asturian pipers — most notably José Ángel Hevia Velasquez (“Hevia”) — and groups — like Llan de Cubel and Tejedor — have made their presence ever more vividly felt in international circles and the tradition at home has gone from strength to strength.

The Museo de la Gaita’s collection of pipes and piping materials, which began as the personal passion of a bookseller, Raphael Meré Pando, is now installed in the historic Casa de los González de la Vega, a 17th century house

set back from the golden beach of San Lorenzo in a park beside the city’s sports stadium and the Rio Piles. It has a permanent exhibition of pipes from Spain, the rest of Europe and North Africa. There is even a set of English ‘Leicester’ small pipes, an experimental re-creation by the Peebles-based pipemaker Julian Goodacre. Also displayed is an assortment of other Asturian traditional instruments, along with art and photography relating to piping traditions.

The low point for Asturias’ piping tradition and traditional culture came in the late 1970s, according to Fonsu Mielgo, a cultural promoter and co-founder of the 25-year-old Asturian traditional group Llan de Cubel.



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Photo: Derek Maxwell

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“There were perhaps 100 old pipers left at that time, all old people. Very few young people were playing pipes in an area where the pipes had always been the most important and most popular instrument.

“There were several sides to the revival,” he said. “In the 1980s, a lot of field work was done in dance, singing and music, mostly by enthusiasts working in a very academic way. Until the 1960s, there was no amplification at the festivals so music was provided by the loudest instrument there: the gaita. So the repertoire for the fiddle and flute was more in danger than that of the pipes and the work was harder there. Very good work was done with dance and we were lucky because this happened just in time to preserve almost all of the traditional dances and music.

“Our piping revival was under way by the end of the 1970s,” said Fonsu. From the 1980s, pipe bands were being formed in Asturias. “We followed the example of Scottish and Breton pipe bands. That was a very big thing for Asturian pipes and now there are some very good pipe bands and there is a lot of interest. Asturians come to Scotland, to the *Piping Live!* festival and the World Pipe Band Championships, to see the best piping in the world and to improve. I think we can say that piping is now in the best shape ever in the history of Asturias. The repertoire is widening, techniques are improving, pipe bands... there are lots of very young players, very good bands, excellent pipers: it’s an excellent situation.

“The pipe bands wear costumes based on dress used at the end of the 18th century and worn, more or less, until the end of the 19th century. It’s typical in the pipe bands but we’ve never worn costumes in the folk band.”

Fonsu and his friends met as engineering students with a shared passion for their musical heritage. They launched Llan de Cubel in 1984 as a five-piece traditional band. Fonsu and two of the band’s other founders — Marcos Llope (vocals and flutes) and Elías García (bouzouki and pedal bass) — are still with the group. Today, Llan de Cubel

is the most widely recognised Asturian folk group and its six albums define contemporary music from the area.

He added: “As a bunch of young people, we began to work with traditional music, trying to make it better known, not only in Asturias but also the rest of the world. We did field work too. We made recordings of old pipers, accordionists and fiddle players. I began playing gaita in the band and did it for a while ...but it is hard and you need to practise every day.

“Now I play percussion and a little accordion and we were joined by Xel Pereda (guitar and vocals) in 1995, Simon Bradley (fiddle) in 1996, and Xuan R. Muñez (gaita asturiana, low whistle and vocals) in 1998 so, for the past 12 years, we have had the same line-up.”

Llan de Cubel’s approach is not strictly purist, according to Fonsu. “In olden times, a *‘bandina’* included gaita, drum, bass drum, fiddle, clarinet and accordion, in different combinations — but never a guitar, bouzouki or pedal bass like we use.

“We think traditional music is alive: you have to allow development in traditional music or it will become a museum thing. At first, some people did not understand what we were doing and there was controversy, but time has been our justification. Now there are ethnic groups that play in the pure, traditional way with no modern influences but it is more an academic thing. Most young people are playing in new bands, improving things and writing new tunes. You need to write music to keep the tradition alive and young people are doing it. We are following the way that other Celtic countries have shown us.

“In Llan de Cubel, we have always been very conscious of what we wanted to do,” said Fonsu. “The only changes we’ve tried to make have been to improve our playing and arranging techniques... trying to do things better.

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Xuan Muñez and Fonsu Mielgo

‘modern’ to young people, they followed us too and we had every kind of audience.

“Simon Bradley is a Scottish fiddler. He always wrote tunes in the Irish or Scottish way,” explained Fonsu. “Now, with us, he is writing Asturian music in the Asturian style and we play some of his tunes. He has good technical skills and we incorporate that in our arrangements of Asturian music in an Asturian style... enriched with his technique. The band has improved with his playing and arrangements.”

“We have toured the United States. Audiences there are older; you don’t see many young people following folk music. But in Asturias, it’s a bit like Scotland, you find all kinds of people and all ages in an audience.”

Llan de Cubel’s gaita player Xuan Muñez began piping when he was 12. “I started with a classical band but, when they started a section of Asturian bagpipes, I began to learn. I preferred the pipes and I had a set of bagpipes from my grandfather at home,” he said.

“His pipes had been kept in his attic where they had lain unplayed for 70 years or more. The pipes were like new, in D, with one drone. The bag had been eaten by mice but the wood — boxwood — was perfect. It was a miracle.

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Today, he said, schools of traditional piping and Asturian and snare drumming are operated by a number of bands. He added: “There are about 50 schools in various towns and 3000 pipers.” However, band competitions have not proved popular. A championship launched seven years ago stalled in 2008 after none of the Asturian bands entered.

“Not everyone wants to go to a championship,” said Xuan. “But there are competitions for solo piping and for the traditional ‘tonala’ ensemble: a piper with a singer where the singer

is the important component and the pipes are accompaniment. Some pipers play and sing at the same time.

“The gaita asturiana is also played solo, particularly for Mass in church and, most popularly, with a drum for dancers. I used to play with my brother on the drum, I play for friends’ weddings and I play in the church and sometimes I play with a singer but not often because you don’t find a lot of singers everywhere. There are some younger singers but most of the older, experienced singers have pipers they perform with regularly.”

Over the past 15 years, the Asturian pipes have come to be better tuned, according to Xuan. “We have some techniques, like reaching the second octave with overblowing, that make tuning difficult: you have to keep your pipes in good condition and you have to practise a lot. You have to know your pipes very well,” he admitted.

Xuan said an old technique of pumping the bag for rhythmic effect had been lost. There was a piper who was famous because he did that — and there are some traditional tunes where you need to do it — but that piper died in the 1940s.

He added: “Our chanter reeds are different from the Galician chanter reeds and this gives the Asturian pipes their particular sound. There has been some development of the reeds.

“Earlier in the revival, we played the traditional reeds but they were unstable. So we made many efforts with makers to improve the traditional reeds. Now we play with modern Scottish cane reeds.”

Local instrument makers have also played an important role in the revival, said Fonsu. “In the 1980s, and for maybe 100 years before that, the most important pipe tunings were D and C. B-flat pipes were not made. The B-flat tuning was the most traditional but makers had become used to making higher-pitched pipes.

“We started to work with some young pipe-makers to get them making B-flat pipes again because we need that pitch for the pipe bands and for the folk bands. It is better for the strings and tuning. We participated actively in the revival of the B-flat pipes in Asturias and this wouldn’t have been possible without the hard work and interest of the makers.

“Now they are making the Asturias pipes, the Asturian drum and other traditional drums and doing very good work.” ●