

Piping cultures flourish in Germany

Dudelsack-Akademie

PRESERVING old traditions and ensuring that they flourish is a vital part of piping around the world. Encouraging and supporting relatively new traditions also makes for a vibrant music scene as piper Thomas Zöller has been showing with his piping school in Germany.

Besides the main focus of the Dudelsack-Akademie being Scottish piping traditions, the RSAMD BA (Scottish Music — Piping) graduate is developing new teaching methods for the Sackpfeife, “mediaeval” German pipes which were actually invented in the 1970s.

Thomas graduated in 2005 and it was around this time that he decided to pursue setting up his own school when he returned to Germany. He spoke about it with Allan MacDonald, who he regarded as a great mentor, teacher and influence on his own playing.

He explained: “I asked him to be involved with workshops and seminars and become the patron of the school because I wanted his style of playing, and his approach to music, to be part of it. It had such a big impact on what I had learned.

“When I returned to Germany, I started thinking about where and how to do this, we continued that process and kick-started the school. It was meant to not only include the Scottish piping tradition but also the mediaeval German tradition, Irish pipes and other European piping traditions, with the idea being pipers could learn from each other’s repertoire or the approach to their instrument.

“I set it up in my home town Hoffheim, which is situated in between Frankfurt and Wiesbaden in the Rhine-Main area. It’s a small town of about 30,000 inhabitants with a very picturesque old part of the city.”

At first, Thomas rented a small old building in the city centre, using some of the rooms for teaching and also living in the premises. As he admits, there wasn’t any major financing behind the project or government support, it was achieved purely through the will to make it happen.

He had a small core of students he continued



Thomas Zöller

Photo by John Slavin @ designlick

to teach while he was travelling back and forth to Glasgow during his studies.

Thomas added: “Once I got back home there was an interest from the piping community that just grew bit by bit really with a constant increase of students to the school.”

As the school’s popularity grew, Thomas could no longer cope with all the teaching duties himself so he persuaded other teachers to come on board.

The first was Katrin Krüger, who taught

Scottish smallpipes and the second was Brian Haase, who played mediaeval pipes.

Later, Thomas approached Masaki Kato, who he knew from his time at the RSAMD in Glasgow. He came over to work part-time in the school as a teacher and spent the rest of his time instrument making.

Then last year, they added another teacher, Jan Belak, who is also teaching Scottish pipes – Highland pipes and smallpipes.

Thomas added: “Meanwhile we moved

premises in January so now we are in a new premises, still in the city centre, but we have doubled the space.”

With regards to the Scottish tradition, the school teaches the Highland pipes, Border pipes and smallpipes.

He explained: “Some students are interested in the competition side of things. That also coincides with the exam syllabus which is offered by The National Piping Centre and other institutions, and we prepare the students for these exams. We usually get an examiner over from The National Piping Centre once a year and so far we have had Roddy MacLeod, Glenn Brown and John Mulhearn. Some students just like the idea of working towards an exam which gives them a strict working pattern.

“With regards to the mediaeval German piping scene we teach an instrument called the Sackpfeife. The mediaeval piping scene is something in its own right over here. It has its own tradition but is very modern at the same time.”

The Sackpfeife was invented sometime in the late 70s or 80s and is a mixture of the Highland pipe and other European bagpipes. It plays in the key of A and the sound is broader compared to the Highland pipes. It is played with an open fingering, a bit like the tin whistle, and has nine notes in the scale.

The number of drones varies, as Thomas explained: “You certainly have a bass drone. Then you might have a baritone drone or you might have a tenor drone, and the baritone on top of the tenor, or just the bass and the tenor but it’s not very common to have a bass and two tenors.

“Some cross fingering is possible. It is very important for the instrument to have the option of playing the F sharp, just as the Highland pipe would play, and a F natural because a lot of the repertoire uses F natural.

“The movement started in the former East Germany and it got a big push when the wall came down in the 1990s. There are mediaeval markets now all over Germany every weekend with various bands going around, usually with two or three pipers, and one or two drummers.

“Because the way the instrument came about there has never been a real system or a standard approach to learning the instrument. People would practise it on a Scottish practice chanter which has a different scale so it doesn’t really work, or they would use the recorder to practise,



Allan MacDonald, patron of the piping academy, performs at the Gälische Nacht during the Interkeltisches Folkfestival in 2008.

but then they can’t play the grace notes. The reeds are taken from Scottish pipes or French pipes — it’s a big mix-up.

“From the teaching side of things there has never been a real fingering system. People would use the same grace notes several times in a row — which can corrupt the musical flow of a piece and limits the player speedwise.

“I decided to write a tutor book which goes along with a practice chanter for the mediaeval pipes. Clemens Bieger, a maker of scottish smallpipes and other types of bagpipes and myself developed this new practice chanter. Lately, Brian Haase and myself have released a music collection and are working on a follow-up for that.

“We are at the forefront of producing the means to learn it properly providing a fingering system that works really well and sounds good

From left: Michael Klevenhaus who runs the German Centre for Gaelic Culture and Language, Masaki Kato (teacher at the Dudelsack-Akademie), Markus Engelter (student), Anreas Jakobi (student), Robert Kriese (student) holding a mediaeval Sackpfeife, Thomas Zöller, Boris Deckelmann (student), Felix Schumacher (student) and Barnaby Brown who has been a guest lecturer since the very beginning of the Dudelsack-Akademie. This picture was taken at the annual concert 2008.

on the chanter. I think it’s important people from Germany are trying to rediscover their own repertoire. I think it’s a good thing to go back to mediaeval times and look at collections of tunes to revive that.

“We also teach a kind of mediaeval smallpipe which is similar in sound to the Scottish smallpipe but has a different fingering system and scale which is suitable for the mediaeval music. It’s a rebuilt type of smallpipe, which looks like Scottish smallpipes.

“We also want to take on another bagpipe tradition in the course of this year, the Hümmelechen.

“It is a historic instrument which goes back many centuries, and is fingered like a recorder. It is very quiet, like the smallpipe, and is a mouthblown pipe played in many regions of Germany.”

The Akademie also prepare students to join the band at the school, which Thomas describes as more of a Highland ensemble, rather than a pipe band as they don’t have a drum corps.

He added: “We get people from other pipe bands who come here to increase their personal playing or people who want to prepare for a competition. You get people who play in folk bands but want to work on their skills to play together with other musicians and understand what they are doing from a theoretical point of view.”

The main focus of learning is individual tuition, particularly for beginners, although there is some group teaching for more advanced players.

Thomas explained: “We’ve got two Scottish smallpipe groups where we do ensemble playing

and pieces with several harmonies so people can start working on playing together. We also have a group with mediaeval smallpipes.”

A range of extra workshops are also offered covering topics such as music theory, how to maintain pipes and tuning. They also stage weekend workshops with guest tutors, for example, Barnaby Brown has taken a canntaireachd workshop and Allan MacDonald has done piobaireachd sessions.

On top of that the Dudelsack-Akademie runs a winter school called Stòras Òran — Gaelic for a treasure of songs.

“We bring together the Gaelic language, the song tradition, the piping in terms of light music, ceol mor, piobaireachd, the 19th century style of playing the pipes like Angus MacKay, Scottish dance, bodhran and also medieval piping,” said Thomas. “We try to get connections between the different classes so that people play and work together. It is about bringing together those isolated elements making people understand the culture and the music as a whole.

“Stòras Òran is staged in a cooperation with Michael Klevenhaus. He runs the German centre for Gaelic culture and language and also works for the BBC, Radio Nan Gaidheal and Sabhal Mor Ostaig. He is also a singer and the two of us play together in a band called Às a’ phìob.



Thomas Zöller and mediaeval piper Brian Haase perform together at the third Interkeltisches Folkfestival in 2009.

“We also run the Interkeltisches Folkfestival from 18 to 21 August. We try to spread out the concerts through the whole city, and we have a very nice open air venue which The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland has played at. We have used the church, and the city museum — it is spreading out all over the city. We also have a youth contest in the city centre in the pedestrian area. There are usually two concerts

every night, and we have a festival club after those concerts and a dancing event.”

The festival draws an audience of music enthusiasts — with people traveling up to 100 miles.

“We try to put on concerts that have a unique theme and over the years people have realised that, so they travel quite some distances to the event,” said Thomas.

“I had a couple that came from Bonn and they got to know the town through the festival and they liked it so much they got married here. You get stories like that.”

The school now has around 80 students and Thomas feels that by offering such a wide range of different styles it give students the best chance to understand and learn what they want to learn.

He added: “They have different interests and to me it is important that we address these. It is not focused on just one aspect but the full picture.

“We sometimes get people moving on to other pipes, a lot of the Highland pipers play smallpipes as a second instrument. You also get mediaeval pipers who switch to Scottish pipes or vice versa or even people who play both.

“I am really glad at how it has developed and progressed over the first five years. I am also grateful for the opportunity I had to learn through The National Piping Centre and the RSAMD because that has allowed me to increase my understanding and knowledge of the music and the instrument.” ●



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