

The wild side of

NEO-MEDIEVAL GERMAN PIPING

ANYONE who takes in one of Germany's popular medieval markets or festivals is very likely to encounter a brazenly noisy, leather-loined, bared-torso style of piping that is unique, if not for its technical finesse, then certainly for its antics and its origins.

Welcome to German neo-medieval folk: a vigorous pipes and drumbeats-led performance genre — part apparent parody, part fantasy-inspired self-indulgence — that, having simmered for some years under the weakening grip of the German Democratic Republic's communist regime, erupted into West Germany with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the country's ensuing reunification.

While early music was being politely expressed by classically-trained members of baroque consorts at sedate venues in the Federal Republic of Germany, across the border in the GDR Roman Streisand was giving the Highland pipes an in-your-face makeover. If the rumours, gossip and an admiring oral tradition are to be half believed, he was a charismatic



FABULA AETATIS whips up some medieval market ambience ... "It's a kind of distant mirror to yourself and it offers a lot of people space for fantasy and fantastical imagery, like *Lord of the Rings*, and a different way of looking at things — so it's a re-creation scene, but across a relatively big gap."

wild man who occupied a big farmhouse where he spit-roasted whole beasts, hosted feasts, irritated officialdom and was waited upon by

a retinue of pretty young acolytes.

He dropped the pitch of the Highland pipes to the old tonic of A, said Thomas Zöllner, a



German piping

professional piper and graduate of the BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degree course in Glasgow, Scotland, who now operates a piping school, the Piping-Academy, in the town of Hofheim, near Frankfurt.

“He changed the scale because medieval tunes were played with a minor third — some tunes are in Dorian mode, which means you need F sharp, some are in minor mode using F natural and you get both notes on the medieval German pipes by cross fingering on the upper hand. But you can’t get a major third; it’s always a minor third. It’s played with an open fingering style.

“And he changed the drones, widening the bore to take them down to A, and gave them a rougher sound.”

The chanter is conically bored and belled, and there are usually two parallel-bored drones: a big, showy bass drone with a widely-flared bell that is carried over the shoulder, and a smaller, less dramatically belled tenor drone, also carried over the shoulder. A third drone, pitched higher than the tenor, is sometimes added, lying across the player’s arm.

The tenor drone or drones are supplied with turned, wooden plugs so they can be shut off when they are played with other instruments. Their sound would be lost anyway, and the diminished demand for air makes it easier on the piper.

Said professional piper Brian Haase who stars with leading neo-medieval groups like Fabula Aetatis and Cultus Ferox: “There are a lot of stories about Roman Streisand. He was a part of the scene that kick-started the whole movement back in the 1980s in Eastern Germany.

“I was only 13 when the wall came down, so it was before my time but there are stories about the difficulties of the folk movement’s being connected with freedom. A piping colleague has told me about gatherings in Leipzig. They would be picked up by the GDR police and driven home to where they’d come from.

“Immediately after the wall came down, there was a big, six-week gathering in Berlin where people lived out a whole ‘medieval’ thing — the dress, music, wildness, eupho-

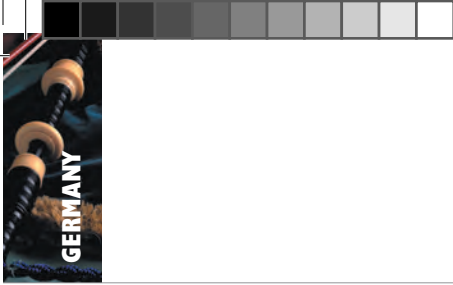
ria, squalor and freedom — and it was a very intense time.

“After that, it exploded: a mixture of freedom, fantasy and excitement. The wilder, louder medieval music of the east contrasted with interest in the West where you had groups like Ougenweide, a ‘Teutonic musical collective’ formed in the early 1970s that played ‘pastoral folk rock compositions with medieval influences’. It was a big band in Germany for a long time during the folk revival, and it was more concerned with authenticity, and quieter with recorders and seated audiences and so on.”

Said Thomas Zöller: “The markets have become very big.

“I tend to believe every culture needs a folk tradition. It’s something people can feel they originate from and identify with. In countries where unbroken traditions have been handed down, there’s no need to go back 1,000 years to re-define yourself and your musical origins, so you probably won’t find such a strong early music tradition.

“But in Germany where, due to the Nazi



era and that recent history, and people having identification problems, leapfrogging back to the medieval period provides a solution. It's a kind of distant mirror to yourself and it offers a lot of people space for fantasy and fantastical imagery, like *Lord of the Rings*, and a different way of looking at things — so it's a re-creation scene, but across a relatively big gap

“Because of this, the markets have become a big thing appreciated by a lot of people in Germany. Each year, almost all of the old towns hold a medieval market. There are costumed jugglers, story-tellers, art shows and presentations, traditional trades and crafts, even jousting and martial arts, and they usually have two or three stages for music and musicians walking around as well.

“There's typically a procession at the beginning and a big finale in the evening with the musicians all playing together, with bands playing individually on stage or in the street between. It's all there.

“There are two or three big organisers who are contracted to mount medieval markets in all the different towns, and they book the bands.

“There are maybe 10-20 big medieval bands in Germany and a lot of small bands.

“Some of the troupes you see at the markets are very concerned with authenticity when it comes to costumes, weapons and all these things, and do a lot of work to achieve it,” said Thomas Zöller. “But you also get people doing whatever appeals to them.

“You might get an ensemble that sets out to play early music in a way its members believe is more authentic, and they maybe incorporate a dudey or hümmelchen (traditional German bagpipes), but you would find them performing their concert in the local church — you won't see ensembles like this on the market stage.

“There, it's the people playing these chunky medieval pipes, an invented instrument, going for the fun and the dancing.”

IT was at such a market in Leipzig in 1995 that Brian Hasse, then training as a telecommunications engineer, was first attracted to the medieval piping scene.

“I don't recall there being many medieval markets around at that time, but I knew about a big one held in Leipzig, and went with a friend.

“We dressed to fit in. And it was there I heard the pipes and the music. It triggered something for me, a connection. I wanted to learn, not for professional reasons, just for the sake of



Photo: Mike Paterson

PIPER BRIAN HASSE ... “I'm not sure where it'll go. The big thing that is needed in German medieval piping is improvement in the technical area”.

the instrument.”

Said Thomas Zöller: “The main difference in Germany is that there's greater awareness of the connection between the piper and the instrument because there is a lot of show happening. A Scottish piper stands or marches and it is very precise and accurate. In medieval piping it's the other way around. Pipers tend to not have much technique and there are blowing weaknesses, and there's no general system that is taught.

“Most of these people are self-taught and there's no standard gracing system, and there's a lot of experimenting when they approach the instrument.

“On the other hand, they are very good at

capturing their audiences with a very wild and lively performance... they are leaping about and moving and very testosterone in their appearance.

“Some of the most successful professional bands have taken it to another level, combining it with electric guitar, double basses and drum kit and have created this genre called medieval rock: In Extremo, Tanzwut, Schandmaul...

“They do big gigs in Germany and internationally with pyrotechnics, fire, three or four pipers, a whole rock band line-up, a bit of bouzouki or harp maybe, but mostly pipes and a rock band. And they combine it with techno.”

CLEMENS Bieger has been making pipes for eight years. He has a studio in Hattersheim, Okriftel, having learned his skills in the workshop of Kurt Reichmann, a prominent hurdy gurdy maker in Frankfurt. “He first showed me lathe work and wood turning.

“At the same time, Thomas Zöller, a good friend of mine, began teaching and I came up with the idea of making simple practice instruments for learners, so I began teaching myself, largely by trial and error.”

Clemens Bieger travelled to Scotland, and asked pipe makers Nigel Richard and Julian Goodacre whether either could offer him an apprenticeship that would let him learn the craft.

“Nigel had just employed someone and Julian already had someone working with him. But they were both very nice to me, very open and helpful, and that was very encouraging,” he said.

“From Nigel Richard I learned how to use a metal-turning lathe to make pipes. You get great precision and some processes are really much easier to do, but you are a bit limited in the design because you often have to stick to quite rectangular designs. You have to find a design that presents nice optics. I admire Nigel's designs: he's worked on it very carefully.

“And I spent some time with Julian Goodacre who uses a wood-turning lathe. This is more difficult; you need more practice. But you are freer in the way the pipes may look: you can create more fluid surfaces more easily and, depending on your ability, the finished instrument can look more crafted. It's a question of taste.

“So I have metal and wood turning lathes, and a big metal lathe I use for drilling all the bores because it has a very big aperture and





I can put long pieces in there and drill them very easily. I use gun drills I first saw in Nigel Richard's workshop. They are quite expensive but very good. And, for the conical bore, I have a very expensive, specially-made reamer from a toolmaker in southern Germany who specialises in instrument-making tools. I also have an old triangular bayonet-style tapered reamer for small-bore chanters."

Clemens Bieger works in boxwood, plum, apple and pear woods. "Cherry is very nice but it's not very dense," he said. "Some people ask for it because of the low, mellow sound it produces.

"And I have tried other woods. Lilac is an incredible wood but very rare. It is closely related to olive and has similar characteristics. It has a very nice appearance and interesting colours. Because of my original profession as a gardener, specialising on tree pruning, management and removal, I have had good chances to very often get very nice indigenous woods: boxwood, yew, different fruit woods... I have the opportunity to choose the very nicest pieces.

"I use some antler horn for ornamentation, ferrules and chanter soles, mostly for smallpipes. I have some reindeer antler from the far north of Sweden. It's hard to get but it is very beautiful with a clean white base colour patterned with a very nice grey tone, a bit like Cararra marble."

His pipes vary according to the buyer's requirements. "The standard is two drones but some people want a single drone, usually to keep the price down," he said. "I make the medieval pipes with two drones, a bass and tenor; some with the fifth as well as the octave, and some with a third drone, an octave above."

The medieval pipes are all in A, with the same tuning, scale, the same chanter possibilities and all have about the same bag pressures and loudness. A few pipers have an additional holed drilled in the back of the chanter to enable them to produce a major third. "The chanter stock bore is not standardised as in the Highland pipes, though, so one chanter may not fit another set but it could be adapted fairly easily," he said.

Clemens Bieger makes and fits his pipes' chanters with double-bladed cane reeds using *Arundo donax*, mostly from Sardinia, but also from France. He uses single-bladed plastic reeds in the drones of the big medieval pipes and for the drones and chanter of the mouth-blown medieval smallpipes he has developed as a



Photo: Mike Paterson

PIPE MAKER CLEMENS BIEGER in his workshop with a set of his neo-medieval pipes... "People have been learning on recorders, which is a bit difficult because you can just learn the fingering. A practice chanter would be more suitable for the sound, the pressure, the fingering and grace notes."

quieter option.

These medieval smallpipes are finding a new market.

"I sometimes make bellow-blown, cane-reeded smallpipes, though," he said. "And I've tried a lot of different things like cane and brass composites, but plastic is the most reliable and easiest to make.

And he is developing a medieval practice chanter. "People have been learning on recorders, which is a bit difficult because you can just learn the fingering. A practice chanter would be more suitable for the sound, the pressure, the fingering and grace notes."

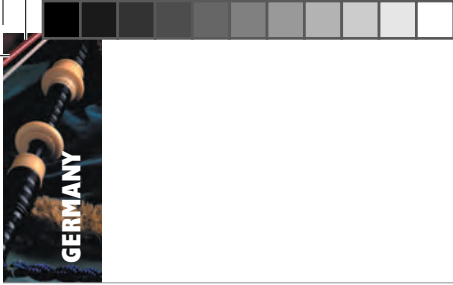
The medieval pipers like the wood of their

instruments to be dyed black. "People want the pipes to look ancient," said Clemens Bieger. "But you wouldn't want to use blackwood because it would be far too heavy and very expensive. It wouldn't make any sense. You might want a blackwood chanter for more brilliance and loudness but it's not something I would recommend to people."

Players also have demanded larger and more dramatic bass drones.

"In the beginning, the first big medieval pipes did not have the big bells," said Brian Hasse. "But they have been getting bigger and bigger and the new bands have bigger and bigger bells and the problem is the weight.





“The main thing has been the look of the instrument: they get pipes with metal accessories and so on but the technical side should also be important.”

THE neo-medieval repertoire includes a popular canon of about 30 tunes that, said Thomas Zöller, seem to be historically genuine, medieval and connected with Germany, “although it’s hard to tell where a particular tune originated.

“One source is the 12th century *Carmina Burana – Songs of the Peasants* — a collection of about 240 songs. While that’s only lyrics and poems, many of them are accompanied by inflective marks or ‘neumes’ that suggest melodies, and some have been matched up with melodies found in later manuscripts.

“And we also have the famous collection from Santiago de Compostela, in Spain, from the court of King Alfonso X, ‘El Sabio’ — one of the biggest medieval song collections — several hundred tunes, mostly religious songs dedicated to the Virgin Mary, pilgrimage songs sung on the way to Santiago. His court included Jewish, Muslims and Christians; it was a very interesting time musically and culturally. And there are a lot of Arabic influences. So the repertoire comes from a mingling of influences.”

And there are a lot of modern and contemporary compositions.

But neo-medieval folk/rock, once indulged in as an aggressive musical statement against a controlling state, and carrying with it the risk of police intervention, has become tamed as an income-generating adjunct to the flourishing summer markets.

Said Brian Hasse: “Since it started, the scene has expanded considerably. By the time I got into it, it had already begun to commercialise. There were more events.

“You can get into the scene quite easily because there is such a big demand. There are a lot of people who have got together, made up bands and copy what is already out there.

“They can do it because the technique is not demanding, and they can take over the repertoire and dress up wildly, under-cut other bands and play at the smaller markets. The gigs are there and a lot of people doing it.

“Technical things aren’t as important as the feeling for it, the show and the fun of it. A lot of it is about stage presence. What makes a good band is its level of musicality and the quality of playing, but there also needs to be ‘soul’ and



PIPING teacher Thomas Zöller ... “I think you could make much more happen than is happening now, using staccato effects, grace notes, interesting grace note combinations and rhythmic ideas. I think it has to happen. It could maybe become something known more widely as the ‘German pipes’. Maybe.”

feeling in what a musician does, and in what a band does together. This is what’s missing in a lot of the lesser bands that copy the music of others; there’s no individuality in it,” he said.

“And the medieval market movement is getting out of date. But, because it’s called ‘medieval’, you’re hindered in what you do. It’s always tied to the past and you can’t really go other places.

“I’m not sure where it’ll go. The big thing that is needed in German medieval piping is improvement in the technical area and, although I am not sure whether many of the people who are playing now actually want to learn more technique or change their style, there are some who are thinking about it.”

THOMAS Zöller, whose Piping-Academy caters primarily for the Highland piping interest in Germany, has adapted Highland piping technique to the German medieval bagpipe and has begun to teach it.

“In a way,” he said, “the neo-medieval music’s one-dimensional. It doesn’t have too many options.

“When you hear it the first time and you see those half naked guys jumping around on stage, it has something to it but, on the technical side, compared with Irish or Scottish



Photo: Mikle Paterson

ROBERT KRIESE, a learner piper, plays a set of neo-medieval German small pipes developed by instrument maker Clemens Bieger... “At the beginning I did not like grace notes. But I had to learn them and now I use them a lot and the music is much better. Now, I don’t like it without grace notes; I find it a bit boring.

pipes, much less is happening. You can’t take it many other places because of the limited technique, the limited scale with just the minor third and with most tunes being based on the tonic (because a mode starting on the second note of the scale that’s available to you just doesn’t work).

“So you have far fewer possibilities than on the Highland pipe with the myxolidian scale.

“The other problem is the players have no tuition in breathing technique so the drones are often wavering a bit and the tuning is not so good.

“There’s never been anyone who’s been a ‘lead figure’ or taught in this scene. It’s all about doing it yourself — you have to make room for yourself by whatever means, and a lot of things get left behind. And as far as I know, none of these players have come through proper classical training on any instrument.”

Thomas Zöller has three young medieval piping students — a 12 year-old, a 15 year-old and 17 year-old. His other students are all older and study Scottish piping.

“But I think more young people are being inspired to learn medieval pipes now,” he said. And he is teaching them breathing and





fingering technique.

“It is to help develop and make more of the medieval pipe that I have thought through all of this technically and that’s why I teach it. Even some of the very good players have approached me and asked for advice on technique.

“It would be great to see things develop. And, without interfering with the physics of the instruments, sound or melodies, there are a lot of things you can do.

“The open fingering style is different, a high G or low G grace note are just not possible, and, if you can get the note on some chanters, it doesn’t sound right.

“So I’ve adapted the rhythmic ideas of Scottish piping technique and transferred them onto this fingering. So I’m teaching these technical things to the students.

“I have one student who is very dedicated and has practised these gracing systems very well.”

He is referring to Robert Kriese who, at 15,

has been taking tuition on the medieval pipes with him for three years.

Robert Kriese saw his first medieval market when he was four and remembers liking the knights and duelling... “and I liked the music,” he said. “Then, when I was 11 years old, I saw Cultus Ferox playing at another market. I liked it so much I bought a CD and I bought more CDs of Cultus Ferox and other bands.

“The medieval pipes have a rough-sounding mystical drone sound and give you a choice of pitches; the Highland pipe drones are so clear, I don’t like them so much. The drone is very important.

“And I began to play on a borrowed set of pipes.

“Most medieval pipers teach themselves,” he said. “I would like to play with a big band in concerts. I have three more years of school yet but I have played as a stand-in guest with Fabula Aetatis a couple of times and sometimes I’ve played street music with friends.

“Thomas has been teaching me grace notes. At the beginning I did not like grace notes. But I had to learn them and now I use them a lot and the music is much better. Now, I don’t like it without grace notes; I find it a bit boring.

“Grace notes make the music more interesting, they mean you can choose to play a tune in different; you have a way to improvise because the player can choose how to place and use the grace notes.”

Said Thomas Zöller: “Now Robert’s really into the technique and he uses it to great effect.

“Technically, if you go down the road I’ve been putting to my students, I think you could make much more happen than is happening now, using staccato effects, grace notes, interesting grace note combinations and rhythmic ideas. I think it has to happen.

“It could maybe become something known more widely as the ‘German pipes’. Maybe.” ●



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