

# Interests converge at academy

A PIPING SCHOOL IN GERMANY

**P**IPING is taking some new directions in Germany thanks to the efforts of BA (Scottish Music — Piping) graduate Thomas Zöller.

Now, with a permanent piping academy firmly established in Hofheim, a programme of regular seminars and workshops, and a winter piping school coming up in nearby Neu-Anspach, 21-25 February, not to mention performance bookings and attending to business issues, he has become busy enough to begin considering taking on a partner to handle the teaching load he is generating in this part of his native Germany.

Hofheim, in the region of Hesse in western central Germany, is a picturesque long-settled centre, the site of an ancient Celtic burial mound and Roman-era fortification, that received its city status in 1352. Thomas Zöller's academy is based in older part of the city.

"It has a good feel to it," he said. "I am in the heart of the old town, on the first floor of a house built over remains of the early city wall. It's ideal."

The academy consists of a teaching and recording room and a seminar room. The seminar room stores a collection of resources: books, CDs, DVDs and minidisks. "One very valuable teaching resource is from my time at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the National Piping Centre. With Allan MacDonald, I recorded the whole of the MacArthur-Macgregor manuscript — 30 piobaireachds — so that the students here can hear the music, the stories and the songs connected with it," he said. "We have continued on into the Kilberry book and Allan is working on the other tunes there."

"I started the academy just over a year ago and it's going very well," he said. "I have about 35 students, most of them coming once a week for individual tuition."

"To supplement these lessons, I ask my students to choose seminar topics they would like — canntaireachd, composition, music theory and so on — and we do these as group



*THOMAS ZÖLLER... "The main thing is to give people as much of a chance as possible to discover what it is that they are looking for musically, and offer to them what you can."*

evening classes for two hours, which I repeat two or three times to ensure it's available for everyone who wants to take it.

"But I've reached a point where cannot take on more students; I'm having to hold people back.

"I have to see how we can get teaching for them. And I'm thinking about adding another room to it if I get another teacher. There is a lot of interest."

Piping interest in Germany stems from several sources.

Scottish and some American military pipe bands made their impression during the post-Second World War period of occupation. The interest of individual Germans turned to involvement and Scottish-style civilian pipe bands began appearing, particularly from the 1970s on.

The Bagpipe Association of Germany was formed in 1984 and registered in 1989. It started organizing competitions and summer

schools and Germany now has a vigorous pipe band movement consisting of 30 or more bands. As well, there is a strengthening contingent of solo competitors.

But there also is a keen interest in Germany in things medieval, including medieval bagpipes.

Germany has also become something of a centre for world music, a genre to which bagpipes, again, are not unknown.

"We are a country that a lot of musicians have come to, and I feel that, for 30 years or so, Germany has been a kind of musical melting pot," said Thomas Zöller. "A lot of world music projects have come out of Germany, and a lot of successful musical experimentation has been done."

"So I don't think that, by and large, learners in Germany feel as obligated to make competition their only focus. There are many different individual experiences and aspirations.

"Some of my students are playing with

German competing pipe bands, some start their own bands with other musicians, some have their own pipe bands,” he said,

“At the annual piping concert of my academy students, two students — actually they are a trio but one member the group had fallen ill — played Johan Pachelbel’s famous Canon in D on Scottish smallpipes: a completely different thing altogether again.

“There are all sorts of little things happening like that, and, because everybody is different, everybody is looking for something different from the pipes. The main thing is to give people as much of a chance as possible to discover what it is that they are looking for musically, and offer to them what you can.

“And that’s what I like to do. I don’t want to teach everyone the same tunes, all the same embellishments and push everybody in the same direction. Some students will start on a 19th century Angus Mackay manuscript, some will play competition marches, some do piobaireachd, and the next one will want to play a medieval scale on Scottish Border pipes: it’s all over the place. But it’s good that way because, musically, it gets very rich.”

Thomas Zöller’s personal piping explorations have, for the past several years, centred on the affinities he finds between Scottish Gaelic piping and South Asian percussion and drone-based musical ideas. As well, he has been influenced by early music interests.

He marked his return to Germany by presenting two Homebound concerts in the autumn of 2005 that brought together two of his teachers from the Glasgow — piper Allan MacDonald and tabla player Vijay Kangutkar — with cellist Joachim Schiefer, harper Ute Meck and percussionist Sascha Gotowtschikow from Germany and Portuguese guitarist Pedro Aibéo, playing music that was not quite like anything the 700 people hearing the performances could possibly have heard before.

These were recorded and an album has recently been released — “it took us a year to publish because the past year has been so very busy,” said Thomas Zöller. Foot Stompin’ Records is selling the CD in Scotland. It is also available through the National Piping Centre and the College of Piping.

“And we did another concert this past autumn which attracted 600 people at the City Hall here in Hofheim.

“We’re not really pushing it but we are

keeping the show alive and Pedro Aibéo, our Portuguese guitarist is looking for bookings for it in Portugal and that’s looking promising. And there are likely to be other bookings too. It would be great to do in Scotland; it is a bit different.”

The music fascinates its audiences and its Gaelic aspect is a strong part of the attraction in Germany, as is piobaireachd.

It is something in which German learners often take a very serious interest.

“I had Glasgow-based piping scholar Barnaby Brown over in November for a canntaireachd workshop that was attended by 12 people,” said Thomas Zöller. “He told me it was the first time he had led a canntaireachd workshop that was so long: he usually does sessions of 2-3 hours, here he taught for two days, six-seven hours a day.

“Canntaireachd is the way to get to the essence of piobaireachd, to the heart of the tune. And the idea of the Piping Academy is to offer all of these things and make them accessible to students and highlight how important it is. If you learn to connect canntaireachd with what you play on the pipes, you play differently, you gain confidence.

“Fred Morrison told me he always hears the canntaireachd when he plays the pipes and many pipers do that. If you follow a voice within you, you will be playing as musically as you can. And the best voice for that is from the canntaireachd system, whether it is a natural canntaireachd system or a classical canntaireachd system, like Campbell’s or Gesto’s.”

Barnaby Brown and Allan MacDonald are important contributors to the academy’s teaching resource.

Uilleann piper Tom Kannmacher, from Cologne, is another. He studied classical guitar and violin but has long been involved with folk and traditional music and had a strong influence on the German folk music scene in the 1970s.

“He has been playing uilleann pipes for more than 30 years now,” said Thomas Zöller. “He has introduced new regulators to the Irish pipes that allow him to produce new notes and he is playing very interesting harmonies... a nice



ALLAN MacDONALD teaches piobaireachd during a visit to Thomas Zöller’s Piping Academy in Hofheim, Bavaria.

style. He is part of the team here”

So too is a German Gaelic enthusiast, Michael Klevenhaus who is director of the Zentrum für Gälische Kultur und Sprache — the Centre for Gaelic Culture and language — in Bonn and a correspondent for BBC’s Radio nan Gaidheal. “We have started a small band and we are running the Winter School programme together,” said Thomas Zöller.

“Michael and I lead joint workshops where we have singers learning Gaelic songs and pipers learning the same music on the pipes, and they play together and see how the language immediately influences their gracing. The pipers experience the way the gracing comes to you once you hear the song. That’s something people are very interested in as well.”

The school in February is being held in a comfortable seminar center: “it’s a big house,” said Thomas Zöller: “a very nice place with accommodation, dining, performance and tuition facilities for up to 60 people, and the school will be streamed so people will be able to put their own programmes together. We’ll have concert performances by the teachers and students, and make it cozy and comfortable for the people there.

At the three and a half-day winter school, Michael Klevenhaus will teach Gaelic language,



A YOUNG learner plays for his fellow learners in the annual students' concert at Thomas Zöller's Piping Academy... "People here are fortunate in being exposed to a lot of different possibilities, traditions and sounds on the bagpipe."

ballads and dance; Allan MacDonald will be teaching piobaireachd and some 19th century Gaelic light music; Thomas Zöller will teach breathing technique, canntaireachd and music theory.

There will also be two dance instructors and a well-known German medieval piper and composer who will teach medieval pipes. "The school will focus on the Gaelic traditions of Scotland and Ireland," said Thomas Zöller, "but we wanted a 'guest culture' to introduce as a regular aspect of the school each year to enrich the picture a bit. So this year we decided to take on our own old traditions.

"A lot of the students play a second pipe... smallpipes, Border or session pipes: most of the younger students learn 'medieval pipes' which means they are most interested in their own older tradition. German culture is still a big issue in Germany and a touchy area. But, when you go back to the medieval times you can leave that aside, and its good young people are interested in that.

"They get really keen and work hard. And that is very encouraging and good, said Thomas Zöller. "But it is important to help develop greater technical awareness here.

"If you go to the medieval markets that are very popular here in the summer, you will find that the technique of most medieval pipers is not too good: things like the breathing technique, rhythmic control, melodic control, tuning... and the simple finger technique that doesn't always suit the music.

"So I am trying to borrow some of the rhythmic ideas from Scottish piping that suit

the medieval scale and chanter, and encourage a more sophisticated and flexible technique for the instrument.

"It's very difficult to know what the medieval tradition was, of course, because the tradition was broken. We have to guess a lot and we don't have many sources; there are some pictures and some written sources but that doesn't tell you much about the technique.

"I think you would fairly expect any musician of any period to dedicate their time to accomplishment on their instrument. But how they actually phrased their music, we are not sure.

"But I am confident that, as a completely new instrument has been invented and made up and presented as a traditional 'medieval' pipe, which it's really not much more can be done. Music for dancing was an important part of medieval piping and that clearly favours technique."

It is the diversity of piping's aspects that Thomas Zöller sees making the instrument as attractive as it has become in Germany.

"There is so much more around piping than the tunes to make it interesting," he said. There are so many valuable aspects to it, about music and transmitting music.

"My approach with the academy has been to offer a variety of many things: a lot of workshops, but using highly qualified people from Scotland or other countries who come here to give the students opportunities to gain knowledge and widen their horizons. There are many things that can enrich your personal interest in piping.

"People here are fortunate in being exposed



BARNABY BROWN leads a canntaireachd workshop at Thomas Zöller's Piping Academy in Bavaria... said Thomas Zöller: "He told me it was the first time he had led a canntaireachd workshop that was so long: he usually does sessions of 2-3 hours, here he taught for two days, six-seven hours a day."

to a lot of different possibilities, traditions and sounds on the bagpipe.

"We have a pipe band competitions scene that's vivid and the German B.A.G. but we also have the medieval scene, and, with the situation here with Allan coming over here, with Gaelic song with Michael being here, also with the sort of thing I do with concerts like Homebound, people here are being exposed to completely different styles and can draw from as lot of different influences.

"Barnaby Brown will be over again in April for another canntaireachd workshop and Vijay Kangutkar will be offering a tabla workshop in April," he said. "I have had a lot of positive experiences with the Indian musicians' very sophisticated and interesting system for rhythmic accompaniment."

"And I hope Fred Morrison will be able to come over for a workshop. Tom Kannmacher will do a workshop on Irish tunes for Scottish pipers, on transcribing and arranging Irish tunes for the nine-note Highland pipes scale.

"Then we have a three-day Celtic festival coming up in the summer with a Gaelic night, a Young Masters of Old Traditions concert featuring musicians from Scotland, Portugal and other parts of Europe, and a third concert of Medieval Voices, with a Gregorian choir singing, a medieval band and some medieval piping...

"This town is becoming a real center of piping in Germany, there's so much happening — it is really awesome." ●