

First International Bagpipe Conference

FULL REPORT

by Cassandre Balosso-Bardin

Date: 10th March 2012

Location : Chancellor's Hall, Senate House (Malet street, Central London)

Abstracts and call for papers available on the Bagpipe Society's website (International Bagpipe Day – Conference)

The first International Bagpipe Conference was held on 10th March 2012 at Senate House in Central London. Prestigious Chancellor's Hall was booked by the Institute of Musical Research who supported the event and organised the impeccable catering.

The event caught national interest and was widely broadcasted on local and national radio as well as national television:

- BBC1 on the Breakfast Show (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-17325078>)
- BBC World Service on Newshour (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/p00p98m8> at 47 minutes)
- Radio 4 on Today Programme
- Radio 5 live on Double Take
- BBC Three Counties Radio
- Radio Coventry and Warwickshire

The International Bagpipe Conference (IBC) was held on the first International Bagpipe Day, an idea fathered by Andy Letcher during the Bagpipe Society's 2011 Blowout Festival. The event was a great success with about 100 people attending the academic conference, 200 the concert and 100 the dance. Participants came from all over Europe: Austria, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, France, England, Scotland, Belgium. We were also happy to count bagpipe celebrity Carlos Nuñez amongst the audience.

Social networks also picked up on the event. A few tweets about the day:

matt1642: I'm quite disappointed that I couldn't go to this!! BBC News - UK hosts first ever International Bagpipe Conference

paxtondave: Ah good. After International Women's Day, we have International Bagpipe Day

shootingroots: First International Bagpipe conference in London yesterday - congrats to them. Watch here for BBC plus bagpipes! <http://t.co/jzkRcBKg>

joelstewart: Bagpipe day on the BBC. Olle Gällmo directing his super dry wit at the presenter... <http://t.co/XoxdIEbY>

speyfest: Today is the first "International Bagpipe Day"...hope you are having a good one!..

queens_hall: Did you know the first ever International Bagpipe Day Conference is taking place in London? Luckily the BBC did: <http://t.co/q4vYGTAJ>

iammariama: International Bagpipe Conference <http://t.co/DPOQ3FF0> - I love this and it is so interesting over 130 different types of bagpipes, who know!

At 9 :00 AM the entrance was already full with members of the public, before registration had even started. By 9 :30 AM most of the participants had arrived and the speakers were getting ready for their talks, setting up their powerpoint presentations with the help of Barnaby Brown and David Heath.

The opening speech thanked all the people and organisation who enabled to make this event happen. The Bagpipe Society, the British Forum for Ethnomusicology, the Institute of Musical Research, the English Folk, Dance and Song Society, the department of Music of the School of Oriental and African Studies and the SOAS French Folk Dance Society were all instrumental in the success of the event by supporting it either financially or practically (marketing, room bookings, information, material...). It welcomed all the participants to a day dedicated to bagpipes from all around the world.

The morning session, chaired by Andy Letcher, lecturer in religious studies at Oxford, was dedicated to double reed bagpipes.

The journey started in the Iberian Peninsula with bagpipe playing in contemporary Portugal by Susana Moreno and an exploration of the use of Galician bagpipes by Mano Ponferrreiteiro. Barnaby Brown and Julian Goodacre then recounted the research process that led to the creation of an 18th century Highland Bagpipe chanter with video interviews and a live performance. The session was closed by Peter Cooke who presented for the first time his 1986 research on the local bagpipes in Northern India, the *masaq*, with a lot of vivid photographic and recorded data. He also commented on the use of Highland bagpipes in the local community.

The morning session was followed by a long lunch break with sandwiches, fruit and tea and coffee organised by the Institute of Musical Research. Bagpipe makers Sean Jones, Jon Swayne and Julian Goodacre were able to showcase their instruments. The Bagpipe Society and the British Forum for Ethnomusicology were available for information and sold various publications. CDs and books were on sale on a different table. Participants were able to socialise and many new contacts were created.

The afternoon session was piped in by Mano Panforreiteiro on the *gaita* from Galicia. Professor Keith Howard, lecturer in ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, welcomed the participants to London and SOAS.

The session started with single reed bagpipes. Sophie Jacques de Dixmunde introduced us the the Languedocian *bodega*, an instrument that she has almost single-handedly revived. The enormous bagpipe was followed by a neighbouring instrument, the *baha* from Gascogne, introduced by Joan Miqueu Espinasse who explained the transformation of the instrument over the last 30 years. After two separate live performances, Sophie and Joan Miqueu played us a duo with song and bagpipes.

Olle Gällmo then talked about the history of the Swedish *säckpipa* from Darlana, an instrument revived by a handful of people but now well part of the Swedish tradition. Graham Wells gave us a vivid recollection of the story of the Northumbrian bagpipes, explaining how it never came to be as widely known as it may have been if not for a series of unfortunate events. He accompanied his talk with paintings and the sweet sound of his Northumbrian pipes.

The two last speakers of the first afternoon session both presented different projects from Scotland. James Beaton presented the oral history collection project led by the Piping Centre in Glasgow and Arnold Myers explained the project of creating a university collection of bagpipes and the difficulties encountered by the university of Edinburgh to encounter and buy valuable instruments.

After a short tea break, Chris Walshaw piped us into the second afternoon session.

This session, chaired by the conference organiser and PhD student Cassandre Balosso-Bardin, closed the day with two historical papers about piping in England from the 17th to the 19th centuries and a paper about the classification of bagpipes.

Pete Stewart and Paul Roberts (excused) presented a paper about the common bagpipe in mainland Britain from 1670 to 1820, explaining with iconographical evidence how the most commonly played bagpipe was not the Highland bagpipe as one may have expected but a bellows-blown pipe with three drones, now known as the « border » or « Lowland » bagpipe. Clive Matthews then gave us a vivid talk about the street bagpipers in the 19th century, explaining how many different types of characters and bagpipes could be seen and heard on a daily basis in England thus showing how people were exposed to all sorts of different bagpipes.

The conference was closed by Jean-Pierre Van Hees who introduced us to the classification of bagpipes he elaborated after many years of playing and working with bagpipes. He showed us how he created a new vocabulary in order to describe the instruments more accurately and scientifically, complementing the social studies of the bagpipes today.

The Conference was followed by an early evening concert. Three soloists showcased three very different bagpipes: Barnaby Brown opened the concert with the historical highland bagpipe chanter and then went on to a mind-blowing circular breathing performance on the Sardinian *launeddas*. Rémy Palézis, winner of the Saint Chartier festival contest, came all the way from France to play some intricate multiple droned tunes on the *boha* and finally Jean-Pierre Van Hees treated us to a prelude by Boismortier on the baroque musette. The second part of the concert featured the well-known bagpipe orchestra Zephyrus who played magnificently, causing the audience to stand up unanimously at the end of their performance.

Over too quickly, the concert was followed by an evening Spring Ball. Organised by the SOAS French Folk Dance Society that puts on regular events in London, it featured two British bands : Skeller, a duo with Helena Reynolds and Martin Keates and Angles, the famous trio from Kent with Cliff Stapleton, Chris Walshaw and Richard Jones. Olle Gällmo also played a set enabling all the scandi dance enthusiasts to practice their *polska* steps. The ball was a success, the decorating team having used their magic to turn the SOAS Brunei Gallery into a fine ballroom.

Following the success of the event, a second International Bagpipe conference will be held in March 2014. Watch out for it ! In the meantime, International Bagpipe Day has been launched and we are expecting many events to be organised around the world on that day.

Long Live the Bagpipes!