

MUSIC FOR THE LOVE OF IT

JUNE 2004



AN ECHO IN THE MOUNTAINS *by Deanne Savage-Blackhurst*

With spring finally reaching the foothills of the Utah Rockies, my husband and I could hardly wait to get out and take a drive up through the canyon. As we neared a viewpoint surrounded by pine-covered mountains, a curious sight drew our interest. A man dressed in traditional Swiss clothing stood blowing into a huge twelve-foot horn that rested on the ground in front of him.

Several of us walked over to investigate, intrigued by the beautiful melancholy strains of music that echoed through the mountains around us. That was the day I first met Dan Abernathy and his alphorn.

Abernathy had been a music professional for over forty years before he acquired his first alphorn. He'd played the French horn in symphonies from New York to Salt Lake City, Utah, and was currently teaching music at the Timpanogos Academy Elementary School near his home in Orem, Utah.

Although he'd heard the alphorn played during his visits to the Swiss and German Alps it wasn't until he attended an annual workshop of the International Horn Society that Abernathy got to try one himself.

"A vendor had several alphorns on display and many of us were interested. He invited us to give them a try but we were all a little intimidated to make the attempt in front of our music colleagues," said Abernathy. After a

continues on page 9

THE SEISIUN: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE IRISH SESSION *by Stan Engel*

If you've ever stumbled into a traditional Irish music session, or *seisiun*, you may wonder why that fiddler went to the bar halfway through a number, or how everyone knew what to play next, when all the piper said was "Hup." The answers are below.

A session is primarily for players. In times when everyone played, in the long cold winters before *Pop Idol* (the British TV talent search show), it was the hub of village culture. The pleasure it now gives listeners is a bonus.

For me, the least formal sessions are best. You meet somewhere, and when there are enough instruments, off you go. Some sessions have a leader who decides who plays what when, but it's more fun without. Good organization maintains standards, but precludes the occasional glorious accident.

Session format is simple. Tunes are played in sets of two or more. Set length is up to you, but a long set should include some popular favorites so everyone can join in. If you start a set, you own it, you choose the tunes. You don't have to tell anyone what's coming, though it's good to have some idea yourself. If your mouth's free, you can give them a "Hup" to indicate you are moving to the next tune. They have to guess what it is from the first few bars. Many tunes exist in several variants, so everyone confidently starts the wrong tune from time to time. You can always ask, but many tunes have several

continues on page 4



Musical Passages

Chamber Music Vacations in Wonderful Places

Jane M. Carhart

Tel (914) 677 5092

Fax (914) 677 3210

E-mail Carhartjm@aol.com

25 Alden Terrace • Millbrook, NY 12545 • USA

<http://www.musicalpassages.org>



Asolo (Veneto, near Venice), Italy

September 2-10,

2004

Cratoule (Provence), France,
Ripatransone (Marches), Italy,
Jimena de la Frontera, Spain,

late September 2004

early October 2004

December 27, 2004 -

January 4, 2005



forreests music

please request our Double Reed Catalog

1849 University Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94703

Telephone (510) 845 7178

SEISIUN

continued from page 1

names, and players often know none of them. (I once asked for a name and was told "I just think of it as the one that comes after that scaley thing in E".)

Tunes generally have two or more parts. Each part is played twice, and then the whole is played three times. There are no 'correct' versions, so you can exploit your skills (and conceal your weaknesses).

If you don't know a tune in someone else's set, you can 'noodle' along with it, or, like our fiddler above, go for a drink and come back for the next one.

The melody instruments — whistle, flute, pipes, fiddle, banjo — play in unison, rather than harmonizing; the flavor of the tune comes from the differing ornamentation available to each instrument. Ornamentation, vital to Irish music, is at the discretion of the musician.

If you feel like a relaxing listen, you can't beat the sweet chaos of a session. If you want to join in, learn a few tunes at home and take them with you. Start with a few jigs — "The Kesh," "The Blackthorn Stick," "Donnybrook Fair" — and a few reels — "St Anne's," "The Cup of Tea," "The Sally Gardens" — since you will find them played almost everywhere.

At any new session, it's a good idea to start by listening, and then by playing unobtrusively. Show respect and consideration, and you'll soon be invited to start a set yourself.

Enjoy!



Stan Engel is a freelance writer and musician working in England. He has played whistle and bodhran in sessions in Ireland and England for ten years or so.