A Musical Tour of Montréal

by Susan Jaster and Ishmael Stefanov-Wagner

[Last fall] we really had no business going on another vacation, but during idle conversation one night we allowed ourselves a look at the winter schedule for danse traditionelle québécoise in Montréal. We saw that the November dance would feature Pierre Chartrand calling, with the band Entourloupe, consisting of Stéphane Landry on accordion, André Marchand on guitar, and the violinist Éric Favreau, with whom we had studied at Pinewoods for CDSS 2010 American Dance Week.

Then we recalled how a friend from Québec had told us of a new Sacred Harp singing in Montréal that met weekly. These two items were all we needed as bookends for a five-day musical excursion containing two dances, two singings, and three music sessions.

We thought you might be interested in hearing what is available in Montréal to the *visiteur* interested in traditional music and dance.

A little World Wide Web research and some luck filled in the rest of the days. We found Robin Beech's Montréal session list, which gave us leads to three evenings of participatory music, and a helpful agent at Bonjour Québec, when we mentioned traditional music and dance, told us she participated in *contredanse Anglaise* (English country dancing), a dance type we weren't even thinking we'd encounter in the city.

Montréal has an excellent public transportation system, so we chose to leave our car home, take the bus to Montréal, and rely on public transit for daily travel. An OPUS card, like Boston's Charlie Card, can be loaded with a weeklong pass, enabling one to take any number of bus or train trips for the duration.

Our musical good fortune started on the way up, even before reaching the city. Our comfortable new computer-controlled bus stopped at the border, and then would not restart after passengers had cleared Canadian customs. Faced with a wait for "rebooting" the bus, Ishmael walked to a bench and pulled out his fiddle for practice and to pass the time. A well-dressed gentleman in tweed walked over to ask the name of the tune just played. I responded, "Flowers of Edinburgh; do you play?" He allowed as he played fiddle, so I offered him the instrument to play some tunes. What came out of the fiddle was a tune with the most exquisite Irish ornamentation—this was not some casual dabbler. It turns out that Caoimhin had just finished a show in Boston, consisting of one actor

and one onstage musician, and was on his way to Montréal for the day. A few more tunes, then I pulled out a whistle to play Tobin's Favorite together. By then, the driver had managed to get the bus running, so we all boarded to resume the trip.

We finally arrived in Montréal and checked into our B&B. The innkeepers asked if we were in town to attend the anthropological convention, and seemed somewhat perplexed when we told them that our interests were Québécois traditional music and dance. We are always surprised that all Québécois don't know more about their traditional music and dance or wouldn't understand why tourists might wish to visit in order to absorb them. We suppose that would be like expecting someone from the Cambridge Best Western Motel to know about contra dancing and local song swaps.

We dropped our bags, washed our faces, and headed out to see the city on our way to that night's Sacred Harp singing. Dara Weiss and her group of enthusiastic, mostly-Anglophone, mostlyyoung people have been meeting on Tuesday nights in varied spaces. The singing was in a studio in the BELGO building, a former warehouse, now converted to galleries, artist's studios, and performance spaces. Climbing three flights of steep steps, we could hear capoeira and Hari Krishnas, and soon we found Dara expertly leading the Montréal Sacred Harp singers as they sat perched on folding chairs and floor pillows. "Bring a chair," the email announcement had stated: we were lucky to snag some floor pillows. The singing sounded great, and speaks to how useful weekly meetings are to learning this particular style. We look forward to joining these singers at future all-day singings or conventions.

Ishmael had his fiddle; when Dara asked why, we said that we were heading to Café Vices et Versa for the Québécois session after the singing. She had also planned to attend and offered us a ride, which got us there more quickly and certainly than our plan to take train and bus. The place was packed, hardly even standing room, and the music was already going fast and furious, with stepdancers trading off providing foot percussion to accompany the fiddlers. We spoke with Andrea Beaton, who had taught this summer at Boston Harbor Scottish Fiddle School, and Emmanuelle LeBlanc of Vishten who had played at New Bedford Summerfest. Veronique Plasse, of Commando Trad, was hosting.

Wednesday's session at Fiddlers Green Pub

mixed Québécois, Irish, Cape Breton and other traditional and new-in-the-style tunes. Robin Beech, who publishes a website listing sessions for traditional music around Montréal and the region, was setting up and welcomed us, doing introductions around the table. Another fiddler came in, and when we introduced ourselves informed us that she had been born in our hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Within a short time, and continuing for hours, there were fiddles, concertinas, melodeons, whistles, flutes, mandolins, bodhrans and songs. Jigs and reels were played at close to dance tempo.

Friday found us on the subway to another neighborhood for *Initiation aux arts de la veillée*, an introductory Friday afternoon workshop offered to persons older than fifty at the SPDTQ (la Société pour la promotion de la danse traditionnelle québécoise) headquarters, Espace Trad. Subjects vary by week, including storytelling (conte), dance and song. This week featured Jacinthe Dubé teaching chansons à répondre, a call and response form where one voice sings a verse and the group repeats the last line(s) in chorus. The class started with a lesson in breathing, then lyrics to several songs were handed out and we all learned the melodies by rote. That done, each person in turn around the room would sing a verse, with all repeating the last couplet. Four traditional chansons in the style, and the afternoon had come to an end.

A quick dinner, then a long subway ride and short walk had us at Finnegan's Irish Pub for an Irish session sponsored by the Montréal chapter of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*, the worldwide organization dedicated to preservation and promotion of Irish music and culture. At this session, with scant exception, the tunes were traditional Irish ones, since a good fraction of the attendees take group music classes offered by *Comhaltas* and come here to play their tunes in *seisiún*. There were many fiddles, whistles, some flutes, mandolins, one banjo and a set of Uillean pipes; there were even songs, as taught in a recent class.

We recognized several of the musicians from the Wednesday session, but a new-to-us singer/guitarist told us about a singing event she had recently attended in Québec City: A twenty-four hour long *chansons* à *répondre* session. No song could be repeated, she said, but the songs did not have to be in French—she recalled some in Turkish and Albanian, among other languages—only the call and response form was required.

Saturday afternoon we went to the equivalent of a local community college for *Atelier Contredanse Anglaise*. Professors Michel Landry and Arduina Alonzo teach English country dance monthly to recorded music, mostly from Bare Necessities CDs.

Instruction and calls were in French, with mention of the English terms for the figures, and translation of the names of the dances into their descriptive French equivalent. Arduina was visiting family in Italy, so Michel taught alone. He described the figures verbally as well as physically, repeating the description to one run-through of the recorded music, then restarting the music while all danced as he called figures until all on the floor had the steps mastered. The recordings go about six times through, so for most dances we would stop for the music to be reset, then continue dancing from that place a second time through the music.

At the break we sipped tea and met Sean McCutcheon, a musician and organizer for the Montréal monthly contradance. We heard about even more dance opportunities, an English country dance with live band on Sunday (after we left) and a contra dance with Crowfoot and David Millstone the next week.

Another few rounds of dance, and it was over. We'd worked on Sion House, Round About Our Coal Fire, and Christina, among others. One of the dancers heard that we planned to attend the Québecois *danse trad* that evening, and strongly suggested we be there, coats checked, and in dancing shoes on the floor by 8 pm for beginners instructions.

Marie-Martine's insistence was not to be resisted. We went back online to Montréal's excellent public transit trip planner and calculated a trip that had us stepping off the bus at 7:30 pm in front of the community center where the dance was being held. Outside, we met Éric Favreau and Stéphane Landry, and as we chatted together, Pierre Chartrand rolled up on his bicycle.

The organization of these dances is different from what we're used to in the States. The room looked like a high school cafeteria with a low stage set up in the center front for the band. Around the perimeter of the rather dark room were cloth-covered tables with flickering candles. The kitchen window sold beer, wine, soda and bowls of chips. There's a coat and bag check, your ticket enters you in that night's CD raffle, and the pre-dance teaching is really organized. The teachers are determined in advance, and dress in traditional *Metis* sashes (men) or maroon skirts and neckerchiefs (women). Teachers are admitted to the dance free, and appeared to have an organized teaching plan.

We were in a teaching square with Marie-Martine and Jean-Claude, whom we had met at the afternoon's ECD. In the course of the dance, we also saw another dancer from the ECD workshop, two older ladies from the *chanson* workshop at Espace Trad, and a fiddler from the Finnegan's Irish session, so we'd been travelling in the right circles!

We may have been the only Americans at the teaching session, but many Québécois children with their parents, as well as young people and adults, were there learning the figures. As regular contra dancers, we had an idea of most of the figures, but not the calls; the locals at the teaching session needed to learn the entire dance, but understood the French. After a half-hour of instruction, the band started up, and the remainder of the evening was solidly in French. Pierre did singing calls, which can be hard to parse in any language, but the nature of the dances is that couples stay together, and each couple does the same figure in turn. A break usually occurs at the end of the completed figures, so if you place yourself in the third or fourth couple position, you should be able to figure things out. Some differences in figures from what we were accustomed were in the promenade, the couple position in the swing, and in the hand placement in the star figure, and that you always acknowledge your partner as you encounter each other in the grand chain, and look at your partner as you circle, so that you could be circling backward.

The first dance was the circle mixer La Bastringue, after which we danced regular quadrilles, a waltz quadrille, a six-couple and five-couple set, and a four-couple longways set. At the first break, people moved chairs onto the dance floor, and a storyteller took the stage, followed by an excellent harmonica player who played tunes, including a waltz for the dancers. In keeping with the *veillée* concept, we expect that some call and response singing took place in one of the later dancing breaks: the evening was scheduled to go on to 1 am, but we had a Boston bus to catch the next morning, so we regretfully left

the dance at 11:15 pm.

Except for the Sacred Harp singing, which was in English as might be expected, the other events described would go better with some understanding of French. While many Montréalais are bilingual and willing to explain details in English, the Québecois sessions that most interested us were conducted in French.

Our bus trip home to Boston and many evenings since have been spent in recapping our Montréal music and dance adventure. We would recommend an exploration of what this beautiful and friendly city has to offer the musical seeker.

Helpful Montreal Webpages

- Espace Trad—http://espacetrad.org
- Qu'est-ce que la contradanse anglaise? (Where are the English dances?)—http://www.cvm.qc.ca/mlandry/danse/ANGLAISES/danse-anglaise.htm
- Montréal Sessions—http://music.gordfisch. net/montrealsession/sessions.html (Editor's note: Had some trouble reaching this website consistently, even when I googled it.)
- Whistlers du Québec—http://www. whistlersduquébec.info
- Contra Montréal—http://www.contramontreal.org/
- Commando Trad videos—http://www.youtube.com/user/COMMANDOTRAD (particularly this video—http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ni3x-uwAumo

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