

Montreal's Music Community

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Increasingly the pages of Treoir inform us of the diverse geographical spread of branches of Comhaltas around the world. For many of us it is a brief glance at the varying roles of Comhaltas and the strength of Irish culture internationally. It is also a reminder that, almost everywhere we go, we can carry our instrument and become part of Comhaltas in a whole new way.

In June 2011 I travelled to Canada to participate in an academic conference at McGill University. My talk concerned the Sliabh Luachra musical region and the legacy of musicians such as Pádraig O'Keeffe and Johnny O'Leary on the identity and culture of the region. Before I left I did a quick Google search for sessions and, of course, logged on to the Comhaltas website to find out about the branch in Montreal. Armed with a mandolin and vocal chords, I set out to enjoy my trip and meet with friends I didn't yet know.

I landed in Montreal on a drizzly Monday evening. I dropped my bag at the hotel and set out for tunes in Hurley's pub. I was told at the door that some musicians were here before me – early by my watch – and I found them seated around some tables in the middle of the bar. Straight away Fred Graham came over to greet me and shake my hand. A teacher at the Siamsa School of Irish Music, he plays bodhrán in the band 'The Irish Rovers' with Cork banjo player Seán Ó Driscoll. Connections made, he quickly introduced me to others around the table and more as they entered. There were few in the bar that did not have an instrument and, though it grew to be quite large, the session was quite an intimate experience with acknowledgement of all those who were involved. Everybody was encouraged to participate.

The session gradually filled up. There was everybody from beginners to teachers at the local Siamsa School of Irish Music. Marc-Antoine Bérubé, a fiddle player and French speaker from outside Montreal asked me if I knew about Pádraig O'Keeffe and Denis Murphy and if we should play some slides next. Before the end of the session, Donna-Marie (chairperson of the local branch), informed me that the monthly Comhaltas session would take place on the following Friday in Finnegan's and I had to come along.

When I checked my emails the following morning, I found more musical invitations. Concertina and accordion player Robin Beech, a Professor at McGill and originally from England who had been my initial contact for the Irish session the night before, suggested I would like to hear some Quebecois music. That evening I took my mandolin along to the Parc la Fontaine for an open air session. There was a great buzz and the recognisability of some of the tunes highlighted the links between Ireland, Scotland and Canada through migration over the past few centuries.

On Friday night I made my way to Finnegan's where I met Yolanta Kruk, a fluent Irish speaker who enjoyed singing sean nós. She was trying to persuade everybody to attend and participate in the Canadian Oireachtas which was coming up. Many of the group had been at the session the previous Monday and were preparing for a trip over the weekend to an event celebrating the music of Turlough O'Carolan. I enjoyed playing through many of his compositions that do not often feature in sessions.

Another email from Robin on Friday night put me in touch with Jaques Joubert, a guitar player whose interest in Irish traditional music was whetted during a trip to Ireland two years previously. Jacques enjoyed playing various genres of music but, on Saturday, he was happy to drive me to a concert and session being organised by Laurence Beaudry, a local music teacher. As we sat on the banks of the St. Laurence River, Irish and Quebecois tunes intermingled, as did people of all ages.

During my week in Montreal, friends from Ireland had been suggesting on Facebook that I meet up with Belfast Andy and his name also cropped up in conversation at some of the sessions I was at so, on Sunday, I went to meet him. Yolanta gave me directions to McKibbon's Bar and was there with Rae from the local Comhaltas branch. As we played and sang, we watched Rory McIlroy break all sorts of records to win the US Open Gold title. Andy was an entertainer with connections in Tralee and, like in the other session conversations, we discussed mutual friends and favourite musicians.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Robin Beech, Laurence, Yolanta and all the musicians and singers in Montreal who welcomed me and made my visit to Montreal so memorable. Comhaltas does great work promoting Irish traditional music, song, dance and language and, as members, we should never feel alone wherever we go in the world. We just have to strike up a tune or share a song with the friends we have yet to meet.