

Le Son Continu, France. When the St Chartier festival went bankrupt, Le Son Continu (the song continues) was formed to keep it going. This is a festival of musical instrument makers, with dozens of instrument stalls standing in the forest of a grand country chateau (Chateau d'Ars doesn't sound nice, but it is). The forest has an ethereal ambience as musicians test the various instruments, like an orchestra tuning up.

Dances and concerts are an addition to the stalls, but they are the part I go for, and there are three dance floors so you never have to stop.

The evening concerts were excellent. The highlight for me was a Flemish women's group Laïs, beautiful harmonies reminiscent of Bulgarian polyphony, but distinctly western European.

I was also fortunate to hear a jam session in the beer tent with the extraordinary Luc Arbogast, check him on YouTube!

Le Grand Bal de L'Europe, Gennetines, France. Overwhelming. How else can you describe a week of dance with thousands of dancers, 10 marquis with dance floors, about 200 dance workshops, and dancing until the wee small hours at night. You can learn dances from Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Estonia, Scandinavia etc etc, and from the many regions of France.

It was also nice to share it with a Western Australian contingent - Pam, Martin, Laurel and Pat.

It'd be hard to pick my favourite dances, but a Lithuanian "follow-the-leader" couples dance called "Polka with Horns" was crazy fun, especially when the women drove the men like wheelbarrows down the room. It took over a half hour to dance, and I don't think I'll be teaching it.

Tortosa Renaissance Festival, Tortosa, Spain. I was an audience at this festival, not a participant. There was an extensive program of events, but not an English translation, and some things were ticketed, so if there was an opportunity to dance, I missed it. Other than this, it is a spectacular event in a town full of character. The town is decked out with banners, there are outdoor mass eating areas and displays, things for kids, lots and lots of street theatre, exciting bands playing day and night, a parade of the nobility in their finery, and all set in a beautiful town overlooked by medieval fortifications.

The highlight for me was at a concert in a plaza outside the cathedral, a band with a brilliantly talented acrobat / juggler / dancer called Ibrahim Assan. His whirling dervish dance took about 20 minutes, incorporating all sorts of skills as a magician and dancer, and it was riveting for the whole time.

Gucha Trumpeter's Festival, Serbia. You get some sense of what this festival will be like when you walk into town and see a sign "Vegetarian Restaurant" over a hotplate of sizzling chicken cutlets and sausages. Sponsored by Jelen beer, people were playing drinking games in the main street, climbing drunkenly up the trumpeter statue, and generally walking around with yellow cans of beer in hand. Two young guys were sitting in the middle of the road with a hat and sign saying "Need money for beer", and they were getting it.

The other obvious signature of this festival is the noise. A typical brass band has about 8 brass instruments, and it's really loud. At Gucha, a small restaurant can have 2 or 3 bands playing for different tables. And some restaurants just have a sound system playing brass band music at a volume that drowns out any live music.

Part of the festival is performances by local and foreign folk dance groups. They were

very good, but they weren't the focus of the festival by any means. The focus was the stadium / sports field where the evening concerts and band competitions took place. The concert acts were popular Serbian singers and the best of the brass bands. The crowd stood around singing along, drinking, talking, dancing, falling over and lighting flares. The only dance on the field was a fast basic 4/4 dance, but some people had extraordinary and tricky variations. On the rare occasions that a 7/8 was played, there was no dancing.

I was at the back of the stadium seats, where a group of dancers took over a flat area and danced a variety of fairly simple dances, so I was happy.

This is also called the Gypsy festival, because many of the brass bands are gypsies, and a gypsy band was voted the best brass band, but there were few gypsies in the streets, and gypsy dancers were barred from many restaurants. Apart from that, it was a glorious melee of celebration, but not one for the faint-hearted.

Photos

015 - Le Son Continu - Alia listens to Luc Arbogast and friends jamming in the beer tent.

016 - Le Son Continu - John dances outside the Chateau d'Ars

028 - Gennetines - dancing "Polka with Horns" from Lithuania

029 - Gennetines - lunch under the trees with Laurel and Pat

030 - Gennetines - African dance "Cola san Juan" featuring pelvic thrusts

102 - Tortosa -dervish dancer Ibrahim Assan

109 - Gucha - dancing at the back of the stadium, in front of the Jelen beer sign

110 - Gucha - air trumpeters contest