



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

LA GRANDE RENCONTRE

MONTREAL, CANADA

Ed Stocker enjoys rip-roaring trad folk from Québécois artists and others from further afield at La Grande Rencontre

PHOTOS ED STOCKER & SPDTQ

Pascal Gemme is in the zone. Seated on a stage in front of a hometown crowd, the violinist is using the wooden deck at his feet to furiously tap along to the tune he's playing with his fellow Genticorum band members. Gemme is grinning away furiously – and infectiously – looking around for support from his flute and guitar player as he hammers out the 'Reel Circulaire' rhythm with his shoes. One audience member is enthusiastically jiggling her legs, moving back and forth to the music, desperate to be onstage with Montréal's finest.

Genticorum are headlining at La Grande Rencontre, an annual festival held in Québec's most populous city and a celebration of traditional music from Canada and beyond. Genticorum – young, energetic, internationally renowned – represent everything that's exciting about folk music in Montréal with their spot-on vocal harmonies and mish-mash of trad tunes. And then there's

their take on *podorythmie* (foot-tapping).

In other circles, perhaps, the inclusion of Genticorum in a festival line-up run by a band member's father would seem like nepotism – but not so at La Grande Rencontre. Because nurturing future generations and creating a family atmosphere is really what this festival is all about, a tradition dating back to the earliest Québécois musical encounters when friends and relatives would gather in kitchens to sing and tap out percussion on everything from cups to cutlery. And there's no doubt the group are an exceptional talent.

Gilles Garand, festival director, smiles when asked about the band, explaining that his son Alexandre (flautist and violinist with Genticorum) grew up wandering around backstage at past Grande Rencontre editions. And history is clearly repeating itself as Alexandre's small son wanders in as I interview Grandpa Garand and sits on his knee.

"I'm a full-time volunteer," says Garand,

65, a retired musicians' trade union leader and president of the Society for the Promotion of Traditional Québécois Dance (SPDTQ). "This is not a business; it's my life. This is about love and passion. This is a community festival – and I've found out that I've got an incredibly big family!"

The festival is held at several indoor venues in the grounds of the University of Québec in Montréal (UQAM), a stone's throw from downtown. UQAM is a solidly Francophone institution and a rival to the English-language McGill faculty located to the west. Garand admits that there is a certain division between the two different language communities and still a rough east to west linguistic split in the city. But he's keen to point out that the festival welcomes everyone.

Montréal certainly guards its French identity carefully with its historic old town of cobbled streets and chic bistros flying the *fleur-de-lis* flag. But Garand argues that more and more English people are phoning up to ask about the festival. And La Grande Rencontre purposely moved away from its original Hochelaga-Maisonneuve setting (in the Francophone east of town) via stints in Villeray and Parc Lafontaine, towards a more central space in order to appeal to the most diverse spread of Montréalais possible.

La Grande Rencontre's music programming is without doubt varied, featuring bands from other parts of Québec (Cap de Gaspé), alongside musicians from the furthest reaches of the country (Cape Breton). The latter Nova Scotian island was represented by the Beaton family, playing traditional jigs and reels brought over by their Scottish ancestors. The four-strong family group chatted in-between songs with accents that sounded like they belonged to another age and another country, a reminder of the many influences that have trodden these shores.

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Left to right: downtown Montréal; La Grande Rencontre – it's a family affair; the rainbow coloured Palais des Congrès is just one of the many attractions for visitors to Montréal

Indeed, the inclusion of traditional musicians from Ireland, a festival theme for this, the 19th edition, was a perfect complement to the assembly of local artists. And it was clear that the musical differences separating bands such as Genticorum, Raz de Marée and Rapetipetam and Irish artists such as the Mick O'Brien Trio or Liz Doherty and Louise Hunter were non-existent. This truly was music without borders.

"When the British arrived they would bring Irishmen and Scotsmen in the army," explains Garand. "They'd bring dances and all these traditions with them. When I listen to 'The Money Musk,' a tune that comes from south of Inverness, I know it. All the fiddlers in Québec know how to play that tune, as well as a lot of Irish washerwoman songs."

For all the focus on tradition, the festival was by no means uniquely fiddles, flutes and *uilleann* pipes (although Paddy Keenan – dressed like a sort of Irish Crocodile Dundee – was a piping revelation). The music also reflected the changing landscape of Québécois music, not just open to other cultures but able to assimilate and absorb them into the local repertoire and create something both traditional and modern.

One fine example of this trend was Juan

Sebastián Larobina, born in Argentina, raised in Mexico and now residing in northern Québec. He lent a bit of Latino swagger to the event but also showed an innovative side to his high-tempo songs. Playing late on the Saturday night, he reworked a classic track from Madame Bolduc (probably Québec's most famous songstress) as the Spanish-language 'Consumir', accompanied by accordion.

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Equally absorbing were Maroc'n Reel, a stripped down duo of *oud* and voice from two Montréal-residing Moroccan musicians, referred to by singer Sabah Lachgar as a multicultural "couscous."

Music though, was just one part of the festival. There were also dance workshops, debates and a screening of the fascinating *Le Son des Français d'Amérique* series, a

seminal film charting the multitudinous influences on Québécois music. The filmmaker André Gladu was also there to receive the 2011 Aldor prize, a gong handed out by the festival each year to a Québécois who has made an exceptional contribution disseminating local heritage.

But the most raucous event was the Saturday night mix of *ceilidh* and *veillée* dancing with musician Marie-Soleil Pilette onstage calling out the moves. It was great to see so many young people in attendance, keen to spend their weekends listening and dancing to traditional music. After a few attempts to dance, I confess to stepping back and letting the professionals whirl and twirl their way around the main hall.

"We're returning traditional music to the university arena," glows Garand. And with ever increasing government funding and a swathe of young bands ready to carry the Québécois torch, things are clearly on the up. "It's like we're passing on the baton to another generation who's going to pass it on to the next one." ■

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DATES The next edition of *La Grande Rencontre* runs May 8-13 2012
ONLINE espacetrad.org

Below, left to right: multicultural 'couscous' Maroc'n Reel; Pascal Gemme of Genticorum; one of the various stages of the festival

