



Eric Legret

NoBorder Festival

Jo Frost travels to the most north-westerly corner of Brittany for an annual gathering of music lovers and professionals in Brest, France

The enduring popularity of Breton culture and specifically its music has been widely documented. The region boasts a wealth of festivals and a relative newcomer on the Breton winter cultural calendar is NoBorder festival in Brest, in the *département* of Finistère. 'Un festival sans frontière. Plus que jamais.' (A festival without borders. More than ever) is its own succinct description of the event.

Brest is the location of France's second largest military port and was heavily bombed during World War II, so unless you're a fan of French naval history, it doesn't have too much to recommend architecturally. It is however home to Le Quartz – a *scène nationale* (National Performing Arts Centre). There are around 70 *scènes nationales* in the country and Le Quartz is the biggest, in terms of spectator numbers.

The formation of the festival coincided with the appointment of its current director, Matthieu Banvillet: "It was my wish to create a world music festival when I was made director back in 2011 [the first edition was in

November 2011]," he says. "It quickly became clear that the desire also corresponded with a wish of Erik Marchand (from DROM) to make a first meeting of modal music. And so we met with this collective called Bretagne World Sounds and all three decided on NoBorder."

The three-way partnership is between Le Quartz, Bretagne World Sounds – an association of promoters, venues and agents based in Brittany – and DROM, the organisation founded by Marchand in 2001 in order to promote modal music. Although born in Paris, Marchand is a highly influential and respected figure within the Breton music scene. "DROM was originally created in order to meet with musicians who have aesthetics close to ours but who come from different regions of the world," Marchand explains. Initially it was about creating new music, but it has now become principally focused on the transmission and education of modal music via the Kreiz Breizh Akademi, who organise master classes with leading international musicians. Another key figure is Bertrand

Dupont, who along with the musician Jacky Molard, set up the Innacor label that records the works of DROM.

Dupont jokes that the trio is the best formation, but running a festival by committee is clearly not plain sailing and there are inevitably disagreements, largely about objectives and finances. "It's not perfect, but it's very interesting," Marchand remarks, although he does conclude "it works, more or less." Banvillet's take is more considered: "It works very well, although it can be a bit epic... we have very long conversations, but now we know how each other works, we respect each other."

Ultimately, it's a success because they can pool resources – Le Quartz has the space and resources; BWS and DROM provide the local professional knowledge.

The impetus for the event occurred when Banvillet attended a concert of shamanic singers from Siberia and was struck by the commitment of the audience who sat through the three-hour performance: "One thousand people stayed and experienced this adventure;



Left: Anthony Joseph and his band went down a storm with the local crowd in Le Vauban This page: The inaugural *fest deiz*, held at les Capucins was opened by Breton piper Erwan Keravec (right)

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it was like a trance. At that moment I thought we should do something. There had never been a festival before, but there's always been world music and I noticed that the public were very, very interested."

Brittany does feel very different to the rest of France: "it has its own, very strong identity," Banvillet agrees. "We've always welcomed people... sailors travelled all over the world from here so there's a big taste for cultures from elsewhere. I think it's because Brittany is quite isolated, it's like an island. But also because of trade, the arrival of jazz with the Americans during the war."

Unsurprisingly, there's a strong Breton element to the programme and a collaborative spirit that underlines the willingness of Breton musicians to collaborate. Le Quartz chooses an artist in residence every three years and the current one is Erwan Keravec, an experimental piper and composer who opened the sixth edition with his Revolutionary Birds trio (with Lebanese percussionist Wassim Halal and Tunisian Sufi singer Mounir Troudi). "It's very important for us that we have Breton artists or at least artists who are established in Brittany because we're working with professionals who help with the dissemination and circulation of artists," says Banvillet.

The larger concerts take place in Le Quartz's main theatre with a capacity of 1,500 and the Petit Theatre, which seats around 320. Both have superb acoustics and lighting, particularly notable during Patrick Molard's visual and



unapologetic sign on the reception desk: 'Concert Bruyant Ce Soir,' forewarning

sonic spectacle, Ceòl Mòr (Light & Shade), the Breton bagpiper's homage to *pibroch*.

The region's most distinctive custom is the *fest noz* (night festival) – the Breton equivalent of a Scottish *ceilidh*, added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2012. NoBorder has its own take on this very Breton tradition – a *fest deiz* that takes place on the Saturday afternoon across the river in Les Capucins. It's a huge, redeveloped site that was formerly an old ship-building warehouse and is now a cultural space; it's accessible via a *téléphérique*, the first urban cable car in France. Last year's *fest deiz* was inaugurated by Keravec, who appeared like the pied piper and within minutes, had locals of all ages holding hands and dancing.

All self-respecting festivals have a late-night venue and NoBorder's is Le Vauban – most definitely the beating heart of the city. "It has mythical status in Brest," says Banvillet. A much-loved musical institution, Le Vauban opened after the war and is now run by local character, Charles Muzy, along with his daughters. Conveniently it's also a hotel and located directly opposite Le Quartz. There's an

guests of any noise likely to emanate from its basement venue. The 2016 programming ranged from the hushed, minimalist singing of Brazil's Tiganá Santana to the full-on, intense Caribbean funk of Anthony Joseph and his band. In between were various French groups, including Super Parquet from Auvergne who impressed with their electro-folk (showcasing at this year's WOMEX) and San Salvador, a polyphonic group from the Massif Central.

Besides the jam-packed music programme, there's also the professional events, with an annual meeting of BWS members and a symposium. Last year it was on intangible cultural heritage and this year DROM are presenting various sessions under the heading of 'Pentatonic Musics, from Reality to Myth,' a theme that will run throughout the event. 'Pobl' ba'r Machine[e],' will be the culmination of Kreiz Breizh Akademi's students' work, with invited guest Algerian *oud* player Mehdi Haddab – it's sure to be a highlight of this year's ever-eclectic musical programme. ♦

+ DATES This year's edition is December 7-10
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