

# Et v'là l'bout !

Chants et musiques  
traditionnels  
en Haute-Bretagne



© Association Vielle à Roue en Bretagne / Fonds privés • Graphisme Marie Guinél

## The exhibition's mini handbook



dastum

VITRÉ  
Gwitreg - Vitre

la bouëze





Upper Brittany or Haute-Bretagne refers to the eastern part of historic Brittany (shown in blue on the map / or center on the map ). Lower Brittany or Basse-Bretagne, the western part (shown in grey on the map / or left ).

Upper Brittany is sometimes referred to as Pays Gallo (Gallo Country), as a Romance language, Gallo, is traditionally spoken here. This language is not related to Breton or Brezhoneg, which is a Celtic language traditionally spoken in Lower Brittany.

The word Gallo comes from the Breton gall, meaning «foreigner». The term was originally used by Britton speakers to designate «those who spoke the Romance language». Gallic speakers more often used the term «patois», although this was often considered pejorative.

# THE INSTRUMENTS OF UPPER BRITTANY

## The clarinet :

Around 1900, the clarinet playing area was quite vast. It includes Le Pays de Loudéac and Le Mené, for the gallèse part of Les Côtes d'Armor, eastern Ille-et-Vilaine in Le Pays de Fougères-Vitré-La Guerche and, to a lesser extent, Le Pays de Rennes. It is also found in the south of Loire-Atlantique, but is less well established than in Ille-et-Vilaine. Morbihan is the only département without a clarinet-playing tradition, with the possible exception of its border area with Côtes-d'Armor.

The popular clarinet spread to the countryside of Ille-et-Vilaine from the second half of the 19th century.

The development of its use seems to be linked to the appearance of brass bands. Some players were both brass band musicians and wedding band musicians.

According to surveys carried out in Ille-et-Vilaine, the clarinet was widely played until around 1910, in an area encompassing La Guerche, Vitré, Fougères and part of the Rennes basin. From the 1910s onwards, the practice continued for varying lengths of time, depending on the area.

These "sonnoux de tronc d'chou" or players of the clarinet as they were called abound between Fougères and La Guerche-de-Bretagne. They are frequently found in violin-clarinet and clarinet-clarinet duets (Drouges, Domalain, Moutiers... ), but also, around 1910, accompanying the diatonic accordion.

+++

Since the 1970s, there has been a revival of interest in so-called traditional music. Thanks to information gathered from old-timers, some of today's musicians are rediscovering the repertoires and instruments of their ancestors. As a result, the popular clarinet in Upper Brittany is regaining its place as a «traditional» instrument in many of today's musical ensembles. It can now be heard ringing in festoû-noz groups, at wakes, or during hikes accompanied by music...

# The diatonic accordion :

First fashionable in bourgeois salons, the accordion made its way into the rural world by the end of the 19th century. In Brittany, the first evidence of the instrument's presence dates back to 1850. However, it wasn't until another thirty years or so later that it was heard at rural weddings.

It would seem that the accordion was first adopted by the maritime world, in contact with the great German production centers, as long-distance sailors seem to have appreciated the instrument very early on.

From the beginning of the 20th century, the accordion was played in the smallest communes, opening up a new repertoire. As early as 1900, folklorists wrote that it represented a danger to older instruments (veuze, violin, clarinet...) and their repertoires.

The bousine, pouche or bouèze, the king instrument of the first half of the 20th century :

Mass-produced and sold by catalog, the accordion was relatively affordable for many budding accordionists, and within a generation, between 1890 and 1940, it became an essential part of rural and maritime festivities. Depending on the region, it is given a «local name», often in reference to an ancient instrument.

Accordion players most often play alone, but it's not uncommon to see duos being formed, or even real little orchestras with violin and clarinet, for example. In fact, some players of older instruments that are becoming less fashionable (e.g. the violin), are sometimes accompanied by a young player.

+++

The 1970s saw the revival of «traditional» music by a number of musicians in the «folk» movement. Many young musicians regained interest in the oral tradition of their region. They quickly developed an interest in bagpipes, the violin, the hurdy-gurdy and, of course, the diatonic accordion or the «diato», the fashionable instrument of the 3rd millennium.

Young accordionists meet up with old-time traditional pipers to learn their repertoire, discover their playing styles, and even invite them back to play at the new bals and festoù-noz. A number of associations were formed, and the first courses in traditional music were given. Since then, the diatonic accordion has become the most widely taught and practiced instrument in Upper Brittany.

## The veuze :

During the 19th century, the use in Upper Brittany of bagpipes likely to resemble the veuzes found in the 20th century became increasingly rare. The written archives and literature of the 18th and 19th centuries mention bagpipes with different names: musette, bousine, vèze, poche-hautbois, bouèze, vaise, biniou... And this is true not only in Upper Brittany, but also more widely in western France. It's hard to tell which type of bagpipe it is. Investigations into the veuze were undertaken too late and over too restricted an area to determine its maximum playing range. Research was carried out mainly over a large part of the Loire-Atlantique département and the north of the Vendée. Between 1880 and 1930, forty-five musicians were recorded in the area studied. Most came from the area between the Loire estuary and Redon, in the Marais Breton-Vendéen, with a few isolated "veuzous" (veuze players) around Nantes and in the Mauges.

No research has been carried out in Ille-et-Vilaine. Only written attestations mention the use of bagpipes in this département. It would seem that a bagpipe similar to the veuze, and perhaps even the veuze itself, once existed. It disappeared in the first half of the 19th century.

Some veuzous travel many miles to practice their art. Such is the case of veuzou François-Marie Moranton, known as the "Rouge de Bréca" from Saint-Lyphard, who would occasionally play as far away as Marzan in Morbihan. Several veuzous from the Marais Breton-Vendéen meet every year in Nantes for Mi-Carême. The playing area known today and the number of players listed probably do not correspond to historical reality. The surveys were carried out too late and over too small a geographical area.

+++

To our knowledge, no recordings have been made of the style of the old veuzous, and today's pipers have adopted a variety of solutions, drawing inspiration from the different playing techniques used on other bagpipes. Some players have also drawn on sung repertoires to reappropriate subtleties such as ornamentation and vibratos, often overlooked when the same tunes are played on the accordion, for example.

Today's veuzou players refine and enrich their playing freely, within the framework defined by research. Sounds and styles remain highly personalized. Learning is by ear, based on a broad repertoire derived from oral tradition. No knowledge of written music is necessary, and the veuzou apprentice is soon performing in front of an audience. To be a veuzou, like any other player born of the oral tradition, is to be a musician as well as an entertainer, a sort of direct descendant of the minstrels of yesteryear.

## The violin :

In most of the departments of Ille-et-Vilaine and Loire-Atlantique, the violin is the only ancient instrument still being played at the beginning of the 20th century.

Except on the Guérande peninsula, where it sometimes rubs shoulders with the veuze, already in decline.

The violin and veuze are sometimes played as a duo. Some veuze players, such as François-Marie Moranton, known as "le Rouge de Bréca", play both instruments to meet the demands of youthful and new repertoires.

In eastern Ille-et-Vilaine, the violin sometimes plays alongside the clarinet. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Pays de Vitré and Fougères organized competitions for violin ringers and violin-clarinette duos.

In Côtes-d'Armor, the violin rubs shoulders with the hurdy-gurdy, another ancient instrument widely played in this region.

In the Pays de Redon, the violin sometimes accompanies the traditional round dances that are still played today.

In the "vignoble nantais" region, it sometimes is played alongside the cornet à piston ...

+++

The practice of playing by routine musicians did not disappear completely during the 20th century.

By the end of the 1970s-1980s, only a handful of musicians were still able to play and testify to their art, but fortunately this knowledge had been collected and passed on to new generations of musicians.

It can be found in dance music groups (traditional bal and fest-noz), at wakes; it is also taught in numerous associations and schools of traditional music...

More and more beginners and experienced musicians are relearning to play the Gallo tunes, in the "old style", to the delight of dancers and music lovers alike.

## La vielle à roue or The Hurdy-Gurdy:

We have little information on the presence of the hurdy-gurdy in Brittany before the French Revolution. It wasn't until the early 19th century that there was any evidence of its presence in the region. In 1808, for example, a wedding in the Saint-Brieuc region was enlivened by the sound of «the oboe and a hurdy-gurdy». During the Restoration Period in France's history (between 1814 and 1830), the hurdy-gurdy is reported to be played in the north of Upper and Lower Brittany. Erwan Berthou, a native of Trégor, recalls his youth, around 1870: «I remember that there wasn't (...) a wedding without a hurdy-gurdy player», «The one in Pleubian was called Job Even...».

At the turn of the 20th century, the vielle à roue became increasingly rare in Trégor. In the Goëlo region, the instrument continued to be played until the 1920s.

In the Gallo part of Côtes-d'Armor, the instrument remained very much alive. Around 1900, its playing area was limited to the east by a line running from Bécherel (35) to Dinan (22), up the Rance, and to the south by a line running from Bécherel (35) to Uzel (22). This region is a veritable breeding ground for hurdy-gurdy players, and to date, 130 players active between 1800 and 1920 have been recorded.

In Ille-et-Vilaine, the hurdy-gurdy also seems to have been played. A few testimonials are about the Pays de Saint-Malo, Dol-de-Bretagne, Rennes and the Pays de Vitré and La Guerche-de-Bretagne. Folklorist Marie Drouard quotes: «The hurdy-gurdy made a brief appearance around Vitré before 1890.

Further south, in the Morbihan and Loire-Atlantique departments, we have no evidence of the use of the hurdy-gurdy, except perhaps for the appearance here and there of beggar hurdy-gurdy players such as «Père Zim-Zim», whose real name was Joseph-Antoine Tallemant (1835-1908), a big figure in Nantes at the turn of the 20th century.

+++

The instrument disappeared from everyday life in the 1950s. After an initial attempt to integrate the hurdy-gurdy by the «Groupe Gallo-Breton» in Rennes around 1935, the instrument was integrated into a dozen groups in Ille-et-Vilaine and Côtes-d'Armor, sometimes with the contribution of routine hurdy-gurdy players such as Victor Gautier, Adrien Cardin, Bernard Gauçon and José Reux. Several of them were recorded for the occasion, and a short-lived «Confrérie des vielleux» was even created.



In the 1970s, a number of hurdy-gurdy players brought out their instruments to liven up the festoù-noz or kermesses of the day. Such was the case of André Tardivel, known as «Hardivielle», from Ploeuc-sur-Lié. Around the same time, two folk groups adopted the instrument, Katell Goant and La Mirlitantouille.

In 1983, the double LP “Sonneurs de vielle traditionnels en Bretagne” was released. This was the first document to showcase the traditional practice of the instrument in the region. It was accompanied by a well-documented eighteen-page booklet, the fruit of research carried out by the “Collectif Vielle en Bretagne”.

From then on, the first lessons were given to people wishing to learn to play the instrument, and “cafés-dansants” and other gatherings of hurdy-gurdy players were organized in the Saint-Brieuc region. In 1984, a 13-minute video was produced entitled “La manie vielle en Bretagne”. Today, several associations in the Côtes-d’Armor and Ille-et-Vilaine regions offer instruction in this instrument.

+



Young children and their instruments with La Bouèze association - Vitré 2014  
(Fond La Bouèze)

# “Traditional” singing in Upper Brittany

“Traditional» singing in Upper Brittany or La Haute Bretagne is rich and unique in terms of its repertoire and in terms of the variety of its styles. Styles that are associated with its many performers. It’s an important heritage that owes much to oral transmission.

Traditional singing is a living practice that has found a place in our contemporary world. Family transmission still exists, even if it is less common than in the past. Today, however, singing has its place in music schools and conservatories, associations and festive events such as traditional balls, festoù-noz, shows, concerts, festivals and competitions. For example: La Bogue d’Or in Redon (35), La Fête du Chant in Bovel (35), Les Bordées de Cancale (35), La Truite du Ridor in Plémet (22), etc.



Eugénie Duval singing around 1955 - (fond Dastum)

---

**Song examples are indicated by (Annexe n°) and can be found using the QR code or at :**

**<https://www.dastum.bzh/objet-multimedia/exposition-et-vla-lbout-table-des-annexes-sonores/>**



## Origin of the repertoire :

Most of the songs come from the French-speaking world. Many versions can be found in other parts of France, Belgium, Quebec and Louisiana. Most have been catalogued by two researchers: Patrice Coirault (French) and Conrad Laforte (Québécois).

The transmission of these songs can span several centuries. For example, the song « Les amants d'à présent » (annexe 20) sung by Mme Jeanne Goré and Mme Marie Lejanvre, of Sougeal (35) and collected by Pierrick Cordonnier and Robert Bouthillier in the 1990, dates back to the 16th century (Leroy-Ballard, 1572).

There are also other origins to the repertoires, for example, conscript songs, short forms, certain songs linked to calendar cycles, and «criminal» laments on loose sheets.

Although the majority of the repertoire is of French origin, Gallo, the Romance language of Upper Brittany, is not excluded. It's not uncommon to find Gallo lexicon mixed with French. There are also songs sung exclusively in Gallo. The authors are often unknown. This repertoire therefore belongs to everyone and is in the public domain.

\* Catalogage chanson type : [COI] 2608, le galant qui a trop parlé / [LAF] II.C.17 L'indiscret à la porte de la belle.

## Collection and transmission :

From the second half of the 19th century onwards, what were then known as «folklorists» began collecting songs, music, tales, languages and other practices linked to oral traditions. Among them were Adolphe Orain (1834-1918), Paul Sébillot (1843-1918), Armand Guéraud (1824-1861) and Lucien Decombe (1834-1905).

On September 13, 1852, Hyppolyte Fortoul (1811-1856), Minister of Public Instruction, ordered the creation of a «Recueil des poésies populaires de la France» and entrusted its publication to the Comité de la langue, de l'histoire et des arts de la France. 492 songs were collected from all over Brittany.

From the early 20th century onwards, other generations followed in the footsteps of these «folklorists». These included Jean-Choleau (1879-1965), Marie Droüart (1887-1966) and Fernand Guériff (1914-1994).

The 1950s-1960s saw the start of systematic sound recording surveys. A revolution!

Up until then, surveys had only been written down, with song tunes recorded more or less faithfully on sheet music. As a result, there was no information on interpretation: voice timbre, ornamentation, modes used, phrasing.

A new generation of investigators set out to meet informants in the countryside of Upper Brittany, using a tape recorder and a notebook. They collected songs and, for the first time, recorded the voices of those who seemed to be the last holders of this knowledge. Thanks to tape recorders, collectors can now reproduce all the subtleties of the singing.

In 1959, Albert Poulain (1932-2015) was the forerunner. Several generations of collectors have followed. Today, surveys are still carried out throughout Upper Brittany by associations, students or simple enthusiasts working alone.

In the past, repertoire was passed on almost exclusively through one's immediate social environment (family, neighbors, friends, peddlers, military service...). Today, other means of transmission include associations, conservatories and music schools, courses, records and other media, collections and databases such as DASTUMEDIA, managed by the Dastum association.

## Notions of style :

Traditional Upper-Brittany singing can be classified in the world of so-called modal music\*.

Ornamentation, breathing, phrasing, punctuation, rhythm, the use of «mobile degrees», half- or quarter-tones, voice placement, the presence of pataquès \*\*: all these components may differ from one performer to another, but they form part of a common background that allows us to recognize, from the very first listen, that we are dealing with a singular type of singing, rooted in an ancient tradition.

\* Modal music: a sequence of tones and semitones that do not exist in Western classical music, which is described as «tonal».

\*\* Pataquès: sounds added at the end of words that should not exist according to French grammatical rules. For example: «Elle sauta dans la mer-eu». They should not be erased, as this would distort the style.

## **Group singing :**

A distinction is made between alternating or «responsive» singing and unison singing.

### **“responsive» singing :**

(Annexe 11)

This involves letting the lead singer sing the first phrase, then letting one or two other singers, or even the whole group, repeat it.

This technique is used to support a dance, to accompany a procession of marchers, or for “table” or work songs.

### **Unison singing :**

(Annexe 10)

All singers sing the whole song or part of it, such as the chorus, in the same key and at the same time.

This implies that the assembly has a common repertoire.

## **Short-form songs for counting down or counting up :**

(Annexe 09)

These are short, repeating verses that always begin with a numerical value, decreasing from ten or increasing to twelve.

For example, «C’est dans dix ans, petit lapin blanc, c’est dans neuf ans...»; «Y a ‘core dix filles dans l’bourg de R’don, y a ‘core neuf filles dans l’bourg de R’don...»; «J’ai ‘core deux œufs dans mon penieu, j’ai ‘core trouéz œufs...».

## Melodies and laments :

(Annexe 08) (Annexe 07)

Sung by a single performer or in a group, laments tell stories. The subject can be marvelous, about love, profane, about war or death, historical or phantasmagorical.

They are often performed to slow moving, timeless melodies that sublimate the subject matter.

## Nottage and gavottage :

(Annexe 04) (Annexe 03)

This form of singing is used solely to support the dance. Particularly “contre-danses”, “avant-deux” and couple dances.

These are short verses sung one after the other, generally accompanied by onomatopoeia imitating the absent musical instrument.

The gavotteur or notteur may be accompanied by makeshift percussion instruments such as fire tongs, bottles or cutlery. The term notter is more commonly used in the north of Ille-et-Vilaine, and gavotter in the south and Loire-Atlantique.

It seems that a good “gavotteur” was preferred to a bad “sonneur” (instrumentalist) for dancing.

## Songs linked to the calendar cycle :

(Annexe 06)

These songs are exclusively linked to calendar festivals or seasonal cycles, and are only sung on a specific date, once a year. For example, « les chants de quête » or «songs of quest» such as «le Mai», sung at night, at the doors of houses, on the eve of the first day of May. It is customary to offer eggs to the singers at the end of their performance.

This song is sometimes called «Mazimazette» in Pays de Rennes, or «Mouézi-mouézelle» in Clos Poulet.

The same goes for the Easter song known as «La Passion», a secular song referring to the Passion of Christ.

Even if the song referred to religious events, the Church rarely endorsed this type of practice - at best, it was tolerated.

In the north of Ille-et-Vilaine, two or three weeks before Christmas, people would gather from village to village to sing secular carols « à pleine tête », as the local expression goes.

At nightfall, groups of singers would gather on higher ground (mounds, straw heaps) to sing these popular carols.

In some areas, «La gui l'an neuf» or «La guilanneu» is sung on the first day of the year, and «La yaneu» on New Year's Eve, in groups and from door to door.

In June, close to the summer solstice, others sing «Voici la Saint-Jean venue, le temps des veillées...» («Here comes Midsummer's Day, the time for wakes...»), as they pull the joncs (basin bells) or make a big «fouée», that famous bonfire around which people make the rounds.

## Songs of work :

(Annexe 05)

There's a vast repertoire of work-related songs. The list is not exhaustive, but we can mention the wide world of maritime songs, songs by farm workers or ploughmen sometimes called «Bahoterie» to the west of Rennes, «Cueillisserie de lin» songs, end-of-threshing songs, workers' and craftsmen's songs, and itinerant merchants' songs.

Singing played an important role in workers' daily lives. It could become inseparable from the task in hand, like an additional tool.

Singing was a way of giving oneself strength and rhythm, easing difficulties, rejoicing at a job done well, asserting one's function, informing others of one's presence, entertaining oneself, recognizing oneself...

## The «children's» repertoire :

(Annexe 02)

There's a singular repertoire sung almost exclusively by children such as in rounds, fingerplays, nursery rhymes and other mimed ditties.

Some of these repertoires are still performed in schoolyards today by oral transmission: «Le facteur n'est pas passé...»; «Plouf, plouf...» or «Trou, trou, ça sera toi qui sera le loup...» (or the cat); «Puisque le facteur n'est pas passé...»; «Plouf, plouf...» or «Trou, trou, ça sera toi qui sera le loup...». (or the cat); «Puisque la Reine et le Roi...»; «Mon papa ne veut pas, que je danse, que je danse la polka...»; «Scions du bois...»; «Trois petits cochons pendus au plafond...».

## The «crime» lament on loose paper :

(Annexe 01)

Very popular from the 19th century until the Second World War, this type of song was not originally part of the oral tradition. They are printed songs intended for sale at fairs, for example.

The principle was as follows: a rapidly written text, recounting a news item, often as horrific as possible, sung to a popular tune known at the time and illustrated by a very explicit print.

In a nutshell, this could be the forerunner of sensationalist TV programs that tell the story of crimes and other terrible events, sending shivers down people's spines!

Some of these songs were so successful that they became part of the sung repertoire of certain families.



**Thank you**