

Les Halles are alive to the sound of music

An Irishman's Diary about midsummer's night in Paris

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There are two ways of approaching the *Fête de la Musique* in Paris. One is to have an event plan, and a map. The other is to wander aimlessly through the streets – always enjoyable in Paris anyway – and just let the whole extraordinary phenomenon wash over you.

I chose the latter strategy last weekend, albeit by accident. Arriving the day beforehand, I was only vaguely aware that the French marked midsummer's night with musical events, and imagined this to be a sedate affair. Which it was, at the star

In the 18th-century courtyard of the old Irish College, now the Centre Culturel Irlandais (CCI), for example, several hundred guests soaked up the early evening sunshine, listening to the music while sipping beer and having picnics. So far so civilised. Then I went off to watch a World Cup match in a nearby pub. And by the time I returned, the courtyard was transformed.

The crowd was huge now, for one thing (the clickers on the door counted an astonishing 7,500 in during the course of the five-hour concert). And most were on their feet by that point, many dancing like dervishes to the main act, a jazz-folk-world-music ensemble called Yurodny. By the time the frenzy ended, a cloud of dust was rising from the college cloisters.

It was about 10pm then. Out on the streets of the Latin Quarter, however, things were only getting started. Around the CCI's stately neighbour, the Pantheon, several garage bands had set up on various pieces of pavement, and were doing their best to wake the famous dead.

Farther on, at a corner of Rue Soufflot, a four-piece ensemble was performing *Twist and Shout*, with 200 backing vocalists.

And so it continued, all the way down Boulevard St Michel – micro-concerts everywhere you looked. At the Shakespeare & Co bookshop – normally open until 11pm – a sign announced it had closed early, because “tonight we will be among the musicians”. Perhaps the booksellers were just around the corner, where a female afro-beat combo was shaking its collective booty for an especially large and appreciative audience.

You could have bottled the energy in and around the 5th arrondissement, where the party continued into the early hours and the crowds grew ever larger and more boisterous. In France they kiss on Main Street, as you'll have heard. But on midsummer night, they dance on it too, to the great annoyance of car drivers.

Such scenes were replicated all across Paris (and France), I gather. Specialities differ from one area to the next. The 5th was largely the preserve of cover bands and classic rock. If you preferred tango, however, or techno, or death metal, or Yiddish folk music, there were events to suit – all night and all free.

Fête de la Musique started back in 1982, at the behest of culture minister Jack Lang. Since when, like those other inspire ideas *Nuit Blanche* (aka Culture Night) and the bike scheme, it has spread around the world. There is even a mild version in Ireland, or there was until last year. The Music Network promises its return in 2015.

But is it conceivable that Dublin could have an all-night fête, Paris-style? There'd be enough musicians, certainly. The problem, as another music-themed event in September has illustrated, would be the drink, and how to avoid it becoming a “Fête de la Puking and le Public Urination”.

Mind you, there was no shortage of drinking in Paris last weekend. On the contrary, the combination of midsummer's

night falling on a Saturday, and during a heatwave, provoked some industrial-scale beer consumption.

Yet visual inebriation levels were moderate, at least by the time I retired. And by the time I rose on Sunday, inevitably, Parisian street cleaners had swept through the 5th like a liberating army, removing all traces of the Bacchanalian occupation.

The Centre Culturel Irlandais did its bit for temperance. Yes, there was draught beer on sale throughout the concert, but only via a single tap, from which the caterers (Polish, as it happens) dispensed lager at a speed that suggested they were brewing it on the spot too.

The queues were never less than lengthy. Yet I suspect this was a deliberate and cunning strategy by the CCI to challenge cultural stereotypes. The mostly French guests must have gone away impressed by the warmth of the welcome, and the excellence of the music, while concluding that if only Irish knew anything about serving alcohol, they'd be perfect hosts.

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