Pride Of Portugal

Accordeon player Celina da Piedade takes Andrew Cronshaw on a guided tour of Portuguese traditional music activity. No, it's not all fado...

I reviewed Portuguese accordeonist-singer Celina da Piedade's double CD *Em Casa* in fR353/354, so it was a pleasant surprise to happen upon her at Womex, not showcasing but in the trade fair, singing a very attractive impromptu solo set of warm musicality and unaffected charm.

The person standing watching next to me turned out to be Carmo Cruz of Uguru, Celina's agents, and the result, a month later, was a very interesting four days in Lisbon's bright November sunshine, exploring the traditional music and dance scene in which Celina moves. Drawing on rural traditions, this is a whole other world for those who assume that Portuguese roots music begins and ends with fado, and has a lot to show the rest of Europe.

The evening I arrived Celina was playing a major concert at Lisbon's Coliseum theatre, an elegant rotunda like a smaller Albert Hall, with Rodrigo Leão's band, of which she's been a member since 2000. A founder member of Madredeus and rock band Sétima Legião, Leão left both in the mid-'90s for a very successful solo career of folk and classical influenced melodic instrumentals and songs. On keyboards he leads a band of strings, bass, drums, Celina on chromatic button accordeon and glockenspiel, and singer Ana Vieira. For this show there were special guest singers including Beth Gibbons of Portishead and Neil Hannon of The Divine Comedy, both of whom turned in rather fine performances. Celina gets to sing too, and judging by the acclaim she received she's clearly very popular with the Leão audience.

The next morning Celina and husband Alex Gaspar (who plays saw, adufe and glockenspiel in her band) picked me up. They proved perfect and most amiable, generous guides. After lunch in a park café in Bairro Alto, one of the two high wings of the city between which central Lisbon runs down to the sea, we drove westward to the beautiful folk-arts Café Saudade in the nearby town of Sintra, where Celina was to be interviewed and sing for a video crew. As we arrived so, to my surprise, did largely Sweden-resident fiddler Sérgio Crisóstomo of Stockholm Lisboa Project, whose work I've reviewed and featured in *fRoots*. Celina often guested with Sérgio's former Portuguese folk band At-Tambur, and SLP was together in Portugal, doing a radio show the following day.

Video done and home-made cakes scoffed, we headed back into Lisbon to Casa do Alentejo, the Alentejo cultural centre and restaurant in a richly ornate tile-lined former Moorish palace. There I joined the class that Celina leads each week in the traditional singing of Alentejo, the wide hot region of plains and rolling hills south and east of Lisbon that has a strong polyphonic vocal tradition. The songs and vocal styles of south Alentejo, her mother's home region, are at the heart of Celina's music. She's from slightly further north, Setúbal, just south of Lisbon, and still lives there, but fell in love with south Alentejo music while at university in the picturesque small Alentejo city of Évora.

Photo: Andrew Cronshaw

Time for some Celina history. When she was tiny a teenage friend played the accordeon. She was desperate to do that too, so when she was five her friend began to teach her. Later she went to the Conservatory in Setúbal. "So I played a classical repertoire, some popular music, French musette, traditional songs. As you get into your last years you start to play more complicated things by contemporary Russian and Italian composers and so on. It was OK but not what I wanted to do as a musician."

At university she studied history rather than music but continued to play, and word of her skill began to get out. Via musician friends in Évora, particularly American brass player Gregg Moore, she widened her musical horizons, and also came to the notice of the active cultural wing of the local authority which invited her to perform, at first two concerts then more.

She also ran into flute player Paulo Pereira. He taught and played for European folk dancing – circle dances and group dances – and, with no idea of what a European folk dance might be, she went along, loved it, was drawn into playing for the dancing, and into the work of PédeXumbo, of which she's now honorary president. Set up in Évora in 1996 as an association for world dances, in 1999 PédeXumbo started the Andanças festival. With Paulo Pereira she became a founder-member of the band Uxu Kalhus, playing for dancing and concerts, and with them she began to sing a little for the first time in public.

"Andanças was inspired by those French festivals like Gennetines and Saint-Chartier. It grew bigger every year and there were people bringing bands from Germany, Italy, France, and some Portuguese musicians got together to do this kind of music. At the beginning it was a lot of French, Irish, English, Italian music, even for the Portuguese bands – not Portuguese music. But then we invited folklore groups to teach the dances, and after some years people started to play Portuguese music for dancing."

After Celina's singing class, followed by dinner in Casa do Alentejo's restaurant, we moved on to Fabrica do Braço de Prata, a former arms factory that's now a relaxed privately-owned cultural centre, for one of these folk dance sessions. The mostly young crowd was dancing in a circle to recorded music, but after some time musicians including Celina and Alex gathered in the middle of the room and took over from the CDs and the session went on into the early hours, and this on a weeknight.

"I think most of the people I see who are really interested in this traditional dancing and folk music, playing and so on, are urban people, and suburban, who grew up in places where they had no references to the time before, like me. My parents moved to the city to work, and their generation was running away from the rural images because they remind them of the poor conditions of life. So for them doing traditional music was like taking a step back and they didn't want to do that."

"For me and my generation I think it's the opposite; growing up and trying to find references, in our fathers' stories, in our family, and in this image that we have from the past. If we're dancing traditional French dances, that's not *our* past but we want an image that we can connect to, something that has more roots."

"My parents, when they were young, weren't thinking their traditions were going to die because in the place they were everybody danced, everybody sang, everybody played. They never thought that the times would run so fast that in the '80s and '90s things would be forgotten. In the '70s there was huge emigration by young people from Portugal as is happening again now. All my father's brothers went to France. Only he stayed."

"The reality I know is from the south of Portugal because I've been working a lot with that. Radios came to the countryside in the '70s and '80s, very late because there was no electricity. But they could sing every night. And some special days there would be a musician who'd come to their monte – that's a farm on top of a hill – to play for them."

"On special occasions people got together for bailes – balls – to dance, and sing while they danced. The balls changed very slowly. Before there was mandolin, guitar, flutes, and from the beginning of the 20th Century diatonic accordeons, and the musicians would sing. Chromatic accordeons started to appear in the '30s and '40s. In the '70s they got the first PAs so people would bring the electric guitar, but most of it was with the accordeon. Then came electric keyboards which took its place. But the repertoire was changing very slowly. And now for instance there are still a lot of concerts using the accordeon. They also use the electric accordeon with a beat."

"People say they'll never give up on doing the balls. They do them on the same days that they used to do, special celebrations for Easter, Christmas, but now they use the rhythm from Angola, and an 'um-ch um-ch' disco beat, and Cape Verdean dances. People love to dance – I'm talking about in the most far-away villages in the south of Portugal. It's a tradition that's been able to change, to adapt to the new times. So that's why they didn't need any revival. The revival we are doing now is because we grew up in an urban ambience without having that. That's why we're dancing."

The following afternoon we went to Lisbon's little Teatro da Luz to see Stockholm Lisboa Project's remarkably felicitous mix of Portuguese fado and folk songs with Swedish trad, with their newish and very fine singer Micaela Vaz (sister of well-known musician and producer the late Rui Vaz of Gaiteiros de Lisboa, of whom more later), in a live broadcast for the national radio Antena 1 show *Viva a Música*. Then on to another nice eatery to continue with Celina's history.

"I was also getting to know the associations that worked with traditional music, such as the Portuguese association for bagpipes in Lisbon. Its president was one of Rodrigo's best friends. Rodrigo needed an accordeon player and he thought of me, and I already knew what he wanted from me because I'd spent my teenage years playing along with his CDs. I was a big fan, because when I was 12, at the beginning of the '90s, Portuguese pop music – Sétima Legião, Madredeus – was beginning to use the accordeon, and it was a new thing. Madredeus really opened the way for the accordeon. For me it was a mind-opener: 'OK, I can do this! The accordeon isn't limited to folklore'. I didn't want to play in a folklore group. The folk music movement was changing traditional music, and for me it all made a lot of sense, that you could improvise over traditional music, change harmonies. That was a new thing for me. Nowadays almost all the folk groups use an accordeon; that's why I'm often invited to play on CDs – people are looking for the sound."

Her acceptability might have been enhanced by the fact that she now plays a five-row Saltarelle chromatic, brown-wooden and more melodeon-looking than the car-radiator chrome bling of most chromatic accordeons, and blending well visually and in sound with strings. It's lighter, too; lugging a big beast around nearly made her give up before she happened across someone playing a Saltarelle.

By 'folklore group' she means one of the costumed theatrical groups that began early in the 20th Century. This dressing-up in a group uniform spread even to the much more real polyphonic folk choirs of Alentejo. "It's not a group that plays like a band and people are dancing, it's a theatrical thing on a stage. They do things like 'a night in the countryside', with people sewing, talking, little children playing. In the first half of the 20th Century in Portugal we had a dictatorship and one of the main works of the dictatorship was to build a cultural image of Portugal for inside and for abroad. So they got really into folklore. They created a sort of department for folklore and they decided to reward the groups that belonged to that. So all the groups wanted to belong because there was money involved, and going out, and concerts, and they all changed the costumes, to look more 'ethnic'. Not in a historical way; it was to look beautiful and 'authentic'."

Violas – Portuguese guitars – at the Museum Of Portuguese Music.

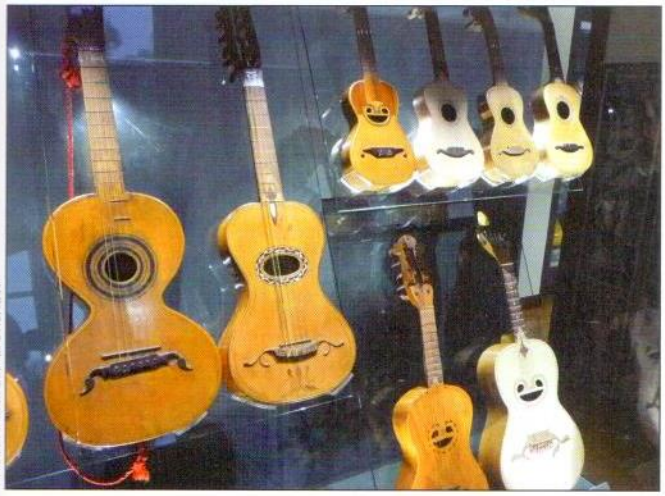

Photo: Andrew Cronshaw

PédeXumbo makes connections with the older musicians, including those from folklore groups. "We created a special festival, a players' meeting for people to learn music from old people. We would invite old players who played the traditional violin, or bagpipe, or the viola campaniça" (this, with ten strings, is Alentejo's version of Portugal's range of rural violas, narrow-waisted steel-strung guitars). "And we would have a moderator who'd be a young musician with experience, like Artur Fernandes from Danças Ocultas" (the innovative Portuguese diatonic accordeon quartet). "He had an old man who played the concertina – the diatonic accordeon – and for young people who wanted to be with this man, to speak with him, Artur was a teacher who understood. We did this players' meeting festival for five years, and it was really a success, but we had to finish it because of the money. It was all free, and we had a lot of different musicians. We had the chance to record the old musicians, and for them to play with the young ones."

"Most of them had thought that their music was worthless because before us there was nobody going there. This was more than ten years ago. There was a big gap in the '80s and '90s in taking care of the folklore, the traditional culture. And these young kids who were going, everyone who met these players, was absolutely fascinated. The players were asking 'How come you want me to play for you? Why do you want to listen? No-one wants to listen to me any more.' It was something that made them feel more up and happy about what they do. And I've seen some of them who after that started to play again, and to go to play in their village for the public, and they weren't doing that for years. It's really a nice thing. And we also brought a lot of traditional instrument makers, and people started to buy the instruments and learn."

Portugal has a lot of traditional instruments, including the various violas, the little cavaquinho (steel-stringed parent to the ukulele), bandolim (mandolin), bagpipes, rabeca (rural fiddle), accordeons, flutes, percussion, and drums from the square adufe to the big bombo.

"I think it was really a changing moment. After that, a lot of things happened, like Tiago Pereira started to go to these places to film them."

Tiago has for the last few years been videoing old and young exponents of Portuguese roots music and dance for his online series *A Música Portuguesa A Gostar Dela Própria*, with so far well over 500 videos on Vimeo. With Vasco Ribeiro Casais of Dazkarieh he also has the OMIRI project, in which they cut up and add to these recordings to make new, danceable audio and video tracks and so bring slices of the old ways to a wider audience. "He's creating a database that we never had. It's popular because it's sound with image, and also because he does it very well. And he stays a long time with people and keeps going back, and every year records the same people. It's really a beautiful thing, and I think it would be lovely if in 200 years people could see this testimony of this time."

Tiago is the son of well-known and longtime Portuguese folk music activist, mandolin-player and multi-instrumentalist Júlio Pereira. Júlio, flying in the face of record-shop recession, has recently opened

Ouvir Devagar, a big and splendid audio and book store devoted to Portuguese music, writing and art, with bar and gigs, in the LX Factory, a former industrial area that has become a hotbed of creative activity and nightlife.

Tiago's main predecessor in field-recording was the Corsican Michel Giacometti, who in the 1960s and '70s was the first to substantially film and record Portuguese traditional music. The Museum of Portuguese Music, in a pretty castellated mansion in Cascais, was opened in 2006 largely to house Giacometti's Portuguese folk instrument collection and library. It's a half-hour drive from Lisbon, and when Celina and Alex took me there we found ourselves virtually the only visitors, but it's well worth a trip.

It was at PédeXumbo's players' meeting festival in Castro Verde that Celina became more deeply involved in south Alentejo music. "There I met a young man who played viola campaniça. Pedro Mestre. He's almost 30 now but was just 17 then. He was explaining to me that he'd been playing the guitar and singing since he was about 12 or 13, and he was really sad because there were no more players, people weren't singing; the Alentejo folk choirs were still doing their thing, but for this repertoire for viola campaniça and dancing, there was nobody else singing it. He's a great singer, and I started to learn to sing with him. He felt so passionate about these things, and he transferred that passion to me. And they were needing a woman to do the higher voice, the alto; all the good altos had already died so I got to learn it from him and from the CDs in this." She shows me a book, *A Viola Campaniça O Outro Alentejo* by José Alberto Sardinha. "This became a very available working tool for me, because it has two CDs and all the lyrics."

She also gives me the book she co-wrote herself, *Caderno De Danças Do Alentejo Vol 01*, published by PédeXumbo in 2010, an elegant and useful production that describes Alentejo dances, with tunes, photos and links to videos.

While Celina and Alex head off to sound-check for their gig, Uguru's Joana Vieira takes me to a rehearsal by Gaiteiros de Lisboa. They have a gig the following night but I'll be gone by then so they run through the set partly to pull it together after a gig-gap, and partly for my benefit. I've long been enthusiastic about the sextet's innovative, gutsy Alentejo-polyphony-based music on CD, and saw them once before at the Purcell Room, but in the cramped, unluxurious space of the rehearsal room their powerful masculine singing while thunderously drumming on big skin-headed drums and tuned slapped drainpipes, with strident bagpipe and shawm, French horn, hurdy-gurdy and stringed and blown devices of their own invention is overwhelming.

Then it's off to Celina's album-promoting gig at a Fnac store in a big shopping mall on Lisbon's outskirts. The band's line-up, still developing as they juggle musicians' availabilities, comprises Celina, Alex, cello, frets and percussion. They nicely subvert the mall's commercial glitz not only with the music and Celina's bright-eyed, engaging charm but with the enthusiastic bunch of dancers who always show up for her gigs. As they link hands to chain-dance around the room singing *A Pêra Verde* (included on last month's *fRoots 43* compilation), Celina puts down the accordeon, leaves the stage and joins them. A small flashmob of community in song and uncomplicated dance humanises corporate consumer culture.

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