

## **Cillian Ó Briain interviewed in his workshop by Bill Haneman - 5<sup>th</sup> June 2009**



**BH:** We're with Cillian O'Briain in his workshop on a sunny morning, and Cillian, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your pipemaking.

Cillian, how long ago did you start making pipes?

**COB:** 20 years ago, just over 20 years ago.

**BH:** And how did you get started?

I had been working for a pipe organ builder, Kenneth Jones in Kildare, and had been there nine years.

I'd been making reeds for a long time before that, and coming across chanters and trying to get them working, I had the feeling that 'it shouldn't be this difficult'; I kept meeting up with serious problems with tuning, and so on, and thought 'it should be possible to make a chanter that was reed-friendly' and was easier to get working satisfactorily. So I had this thought in the back of my mind that I'd like to have a go at that, and gave it a shot.

**BH:** Would you say that pipemaking has changed much since you started; and how has it changed?

**COB:** Yes I think there was a period there, after Leo Rowsome died, when people were a little bit at sea, and making stuff and kind of hoping for the best. The standard of pipes being made now is certainly higher than it was, when I started playing in the 70's.

**BH:** So, who would you say were your big influences, or inspirations, when it comes to pipemaking?

**COB:** Without a doubt Leo Rowsome. because the sound I'd heard, what attracted me to playing the pipes in the first place was people playing Rowsome sets and Rowsome chanters, so that was the kind of sound that I wanted to play, first of all, and then later on was the sound that I wanted to produce, you know.

**BH:** So of the pipemakers of the past, it is Leo's work that you most admire?

**COB:** Tonally, without a doubt yes, but I also have a great admiration for the Taylors' work, it's just so innovative, and a lot of thought gone into it, and very robust. The crooked bass was a big step forward, it makes the whole thing less cumbersome. Rowsome and Taylor, I suppose would be the work I'm most interested in. Crowley's work too, visually, has a great, how would you say, almost tartiness about it... it had that sort of visual 'umph' that appealed to me as well.

**BH:** What would you say are the key skills for a pipemaker today?

**COB:** I suppose the essential one is reedmaking, that's prerequisite. That I suppose goes hand-in-hand with being able to play, the higher your're standard of playing, the more particular you are about your reed, and the better the reed you have, the better you can play. I once read, an oboe player actually, he made the comment that you're better off making reeds than practicing, because if you have a good reed you don't need to practice, and if you don't have a good reed there's no point. That's probably extreme, but I suppose there is an element of truth to it.

**BH:** Getting back to your own work now, what part of pipemaking do you most enjoy?

**COB:** It's all interesting, I suppose...Some of it might be more tedious than other bits. The one part of it that I do dread is having to replace reeds for people. Initially with a set of pipes, especially if it's someone just starting out on the instrument, you kind of know that it's a good reed, and that person will probably get used to that reed...

But I think when pipers get to the point where they're looking for something very specific from a reed, you're trying to pretend you are them, would they like it stronger or weaker or whatever, and you can't really tell; I just get a bit exasperated and kind of think, when you get to that stage, it's really time to start making your own reeds, because I don't play the same way as you, I know what I want, but it's impossible to know what someone else wants.

**BH:** Are there any other aspects that you think are particularly challenging in pipemaking?

**COB:** Definitely, I still find the reedmaking the most challenging, because you're dealing with a very inconsistent material. So you can't kind of, you can never, you know, say that if I do it exactly this way I'm going to end up with a good reed. It's very tactile, you're very much guided by the crow of the reed and so on, it's a very, it's the most skilled part, the most demanding part. It's not that I don't enjoy doing it, I'm quite happy to make reeds for myself, but it's such a personal thing.

The other aspects of it really, they're interesting and I enjoy them; I kind of like working with brass, it's nice material to work with, soldering and that kind of thing. The wood is a bit, you know, messy, but in the end it all goes together and looks nice.

**BH:** So, hopefully we'll have a lot of new pipemakers coming on line in the coming years to keep the craft alive. For a prospective pipemaker, is there any particular advice... what sort of advice would you give to someone who's thinking about becoming a pipemaker?

**COB:** Well definitely stick with the reedmaking, and stick with the playing and as I say the two of those are complementary, as you progress with one you tend to progress with the other. They're the prerequisites. Anybody attempting to make a set of pipes that doesn't already have those skills, the chances of success are, you know, there's an outside chance...!

**BH:** When a maker is thinking about making for other people... are there any pieces of advice you'd give to someone who's about to make someone else a set of pipes.

**COB:** Well, I suppose if I was starting out again, one thing I wouldn't do is actually to take an order! That might sound like 'well what's the point of making something if you don't know if anybody's prepared to buy it', but I would much prefer to be in the situation where I make something, and somebody can come and say they like it and they're prepared to buy it, or they can walk away,

I think it's terrible, the current situation where people have to choose who they're going to commission if you like to make a set of pipes for them, and there's all this expectation, maybe when the day comes it's not what they expected or wanted or it's not to their liking. As I say, it's such an individual thing, what one person wants in a set of pipes is very different to what somebody else wants. All I can do is make something that I'm happy with.

I would much prefer to be in that situation. I mean, first of all I should have stayed with just making chanters for longer. because I started in making half sets and full sets before I was happy with the chanter design, and so that was distracting.

I would say that the first thing to get right, and you should stick with it until you're absolutely happy with it, is the chanter design. The rest of it, really, you can get it working satisfactorily, it's not as challenging design-wise, whereas if the chanter doesn't sound good, it doesn't matter how good the rest of the set is, it's not going to sound good anyway.

**BH:** So in a typical year, how would your workload be divided and what kind of production would you have?

**COB:** I would expect to get about four full sets done, there would be other little jobs to be done as well, sometimes a bag needs to be replaced, that kind of thing.

What I'm finding now, I suppose, after 20 years, is that the amount of repairs that I have to do is growing all the time, and that I probably nearly spend half the time now

doing repair work. Sets I made 15 years ago are coming back, there's always, you know, things to be done, things wear out, and so on.

I hadn't kind of thought of that at the time, but again there's not that many people that pipers can go to, to get those sorts of maintenance jobs done, and I suppose it makes sense that I would know how things are put together, and have the tools to make any alterations that are required.

**BH:** Over the last couple of days it's become clear that research and record-keeping is a big part of your work, and that in that sense, research and development is ongoing. But if you look back over the 20 years of pipemaking, what fraction of that would you say... how would you characterize the time spent in research and development?

**COB:** Well as I say, constantly I would be considering 'would this make it better, would that make it better?', but definitely early on, for the first couple of years, it was very much trying to come up with a good design, and I got quite exasperated trying to figure out bores, trying to come up with a good chanter bore. I read some books, and Arthur Benade's book definitely helped clarify things for me. You can do a lot in a kind of empirical way, trying out different things, but I think it's good if you have a kind of basic acoustic understanding, a kind of physics understanding of what's going on... you can hear what happens, but to be able to confirm that it makes sense in an acoustic physics way. I mean, it's not peculiar to uilleann pipe chanters, all woodwinds are challenging to get, because you're looking for a lot of different sounds, different notes, from a single resonator. When you think of what any woodwind has to be able to do, it's quite remarkable that you can get all that variety, range of musical tones from a single resonator.

But getting it to produce all those notes satisfactorily is definitely a challenge.... I think Benade himself said that it was akin to trying to do a Rubik's Cube blindfolded. You have one problem to solve and you get that sorted out, and you realize you've created another one, and it goes on and on.

There is the risk, I suppose, of getting too, how would you say, obsessed with it, because there is a point with woodwind... there's no such thing really, I have come to the conclusion, as a perfect woodwind. But you can... What you're trying to achieve is something that can be played perfectly; the last piece of it is up to the musician.

Again I remember reading an interview with a man called Paul Louben (?) I think, he's a third generation oboe maker in America, he said something that kind of struck a chord with me, he said making a good woodwind, in his case an oboe, is about knowing when you've achieved the best compromise.

That's kind of my philosophy at the moment, I suppose. If you come up with a chanter that can be played in tune, that's good enough. And you're happy with the overall sound of it - and again, you can get obsessed with tuning - the timbre you're looking for, the tone of the instrument, in a way it's important as well.

In other words what I'm saying is, you can't sacrifice everything for tuning. This is where the compromise comes in. Sometimes you know, you might... if you're 100% happy with the sound, and there are slight discrepancies in tuning, it mightn't be worth compromising, so long as the notes are sort of

within reach, they can be achieved, usually a good musician will get that out of the instrument.

**BH:** Well Cillian, thank you for being with us, and for sharing your workshop with us for two days. It's been a pleasure.

**COB:** Thanks, I enjoyed it myself.