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June 2020 • Issue 261

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Cover image:
Footbridge in the
Écrins National Park.
Credit: Alamy



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Explore



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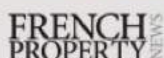
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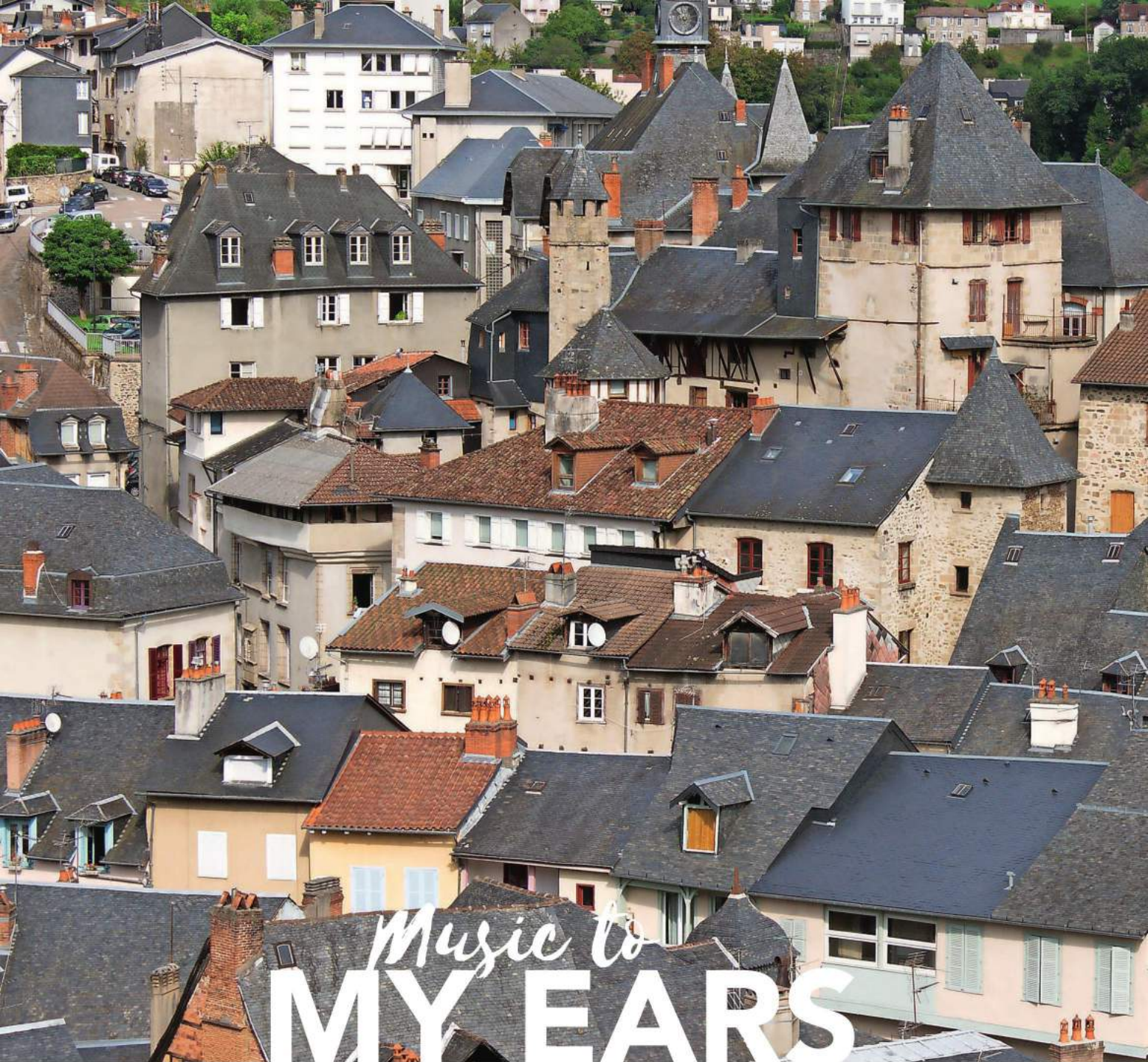
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Keith Mundy visits the merry accordion town of Tulle in Nouvelle-Aquitaine during its annual music festival

Tulle? That's a kind of cloth, isn't it, a sort of netting? Correct, a frou-frou material beloved of brides for bulking up their wedding gowns and of ballerinas for making their tutus stick out.

Tulle, an old town in the Corrèze département nestled in the western slopes of the Massif Central, is where the material

was invented, and where it is still made today – just about.

In a little shop facing the 14th-century cathedral, its spire rising 75m high, three ladies of a certain age are sewing *point de Tulle* – Tulle needlepoint – under a teacher's guidance. Using square frames, they sew designs into a canvas grid, referring to a pattern on paper. This is the real tulle, handmade with finesse

and dedication, only sewn as a hobby now in its place of origin – well known for its lace and silk production during the 17th and 18th centuries.

In the 19th century, industrial tulle was invented in England and churned out in Victorian textile mills, and that mass production of an inferior material had a knock-on effect on the original craft industry in this town.



'Accordion Central', the place in the world where this cheery and flexible instrument, dear to French culture, gets the most honour and the most love.

At Tulle, they have the only accordion-making factory in France; they have a foundation dedicated to the accordion with a huge collection of historical instruments; they have courses for accordion-playing at the local college and most fun of all, each year they hold Europe's biggest accordion festival with acts from all over the world.

With Tulle, the compact capital of the Corrèze *département*, squeezed into a narrow valley, it seems natural that the town should honour the squeezebox in all its forms.

Awarded France's Living Heritage Enterprise label, the Maugein company produces a wide range of accordions. On a factory tour, you see that the instrument's frame and many of its parts are made of alder wood and the bellows, which expand and contract, are made of cardboard. The highlight, though, is the dazzling showroom with its multicoloured array of shiny instruments.

Down the road you find France's National Accordion

Centre, boasting Europe's largest public collection, 440 in all. In a grand edifice which used to be the head office of an arms-making business, you find shelves upon shelves of all types of squeezeboxes – accordions, concertinas, bandoneons, melodeons and harmoniflutes, dating from 1832 to 1999.

There are even the extravagant dresses designed by Jean Paul Gaultier for the veteran accordionist, Yvette Horner, a French national icon.

Pearly nights

Today's accordions are finely tuned, but the basic principle remains the same: you pull and push the bellows, play the keys, and out comes a sound that can either be immensely jolly or beautifully melancholy, according to the tune.

To enjoy all the varieties of musical styles and instrument types, there is no better place and time in the world than the Nuits de Nacre (Pearly Nights) festival held each June in Tulle. Classic accordions are coated with mother of pearl, which is how the Nuits de Nacre got its name.

A veritable feast of music-making, attended by enthusiastic crowds, the festival welcomes

However, it is not the only thing it is famous for.

Accordion central

In open spaces on both sides of the cathedral in Tulle, in squares, cafés and bars, and alongside the narrow River Corrèze that flows through the town, each year a music festival explodes into life, celebrating that richly iconic instrument of French popular music – the accordion.

For what makes Tulle's name ring out today, in France at least, and among many musicians around the world, is that this is

Above:
France's
accordion
capital, Tulle

Right:
Florian
Demonsant
of Bey Ler Bey
performing
at the Nuits
de Nacre





performers from every musical niche possible, as long as one of the band's instruments is a squeezebox.

As well as a gamut of ethnic styles ranging from France's own musette to Jewish klezmer, from Brazil's forró to Louisiana's zydeco, there too are jazz, punk, pop and rock bands. As varied as the music is the range of settings in which it's performed, all close together in the town centre, only five or six minutes' walk between the furthest apart. Even better, most of them are free.

In a big marquee between the cathedral and the river, one recent festival swung into action with the superb French accent of the Super Swing Musette de Paris featuring Jean-Claude Laudat. In the spotlights, as Laudat expanded and closed his accordion's multiple folds and his fingers danced on the button

keys, the pearly motifs 'Maugein' and 'Tulle' glistened and sparkled.

On the riverside at a crowded café, a Canadian duo was playing Cajun music, the extended concertina looking like a blood-red snake, so long were the pleated bellows. Across the rushing river on another café terrace, reached via a footbridge, a French duo of female accordionist and male guitarist was wowing a full house with clever word play and exuberant music-making in the typical chanson tradition.

Out of town

Tulle lies pretty much at the centre of thinly populated Corrèze, where wooded hills and lush pastures are dotted with some truly lovely villages and noble towns.

Dazzlingly built in the local red granite, on a sunny day

Above:
Uzerche
on the
River Vézère

Right:
Accordions
on display in Tulle

the village of Collonges-la-Rouge (Collonges-the-Red) stands glowing against the wild chestnut and walnut groves of the Corrèze hills.

In the 15th to 18th centuries, locals became rich from the walnut oil and wine trades, and built patrician houses with pointed turrets. Revived in recent times with outlets selling crafts and local foods, its narrow streets of close-packed houses often draped in ivy, Collonges-la-Rouge is a veritable ruby among villages.

Set beside the lazily flowing River Dordogne, Argentat is another gem, its half-timbered waterside houses hosting charming little restaurants, while badlings of ducks quack about on its cobbled quays.

The fine historic town of Uzerche is perched on a rocky outcrop in an oxbow of the River Vézère, with many turreted

mansions built by the old Uzerchoise nobility.

The *département's* grandest monument is the Château de Pompadour (*pompadour-tourisme.fr*) which dominates the town of Arnac-Pompadour; a palace with extensive gardens guarded by castle walls, it was given by Louis XV to his favourite mistress, the indomitable Madame de Pompadour.

Corrèze is associated with another influential French woman: the taboo-busting novelist Colette lived with her third husband at his country home, the Château de Castel Novel, a huge rambling house that is now a luxury hotel (*castelnovel.com*). ♡



Francophile

Visit France's accordion capital

GETTING THERE

Ryanair flies twice weekly from April to October from London Stansted to Brive-Souillac Airport, which is 45km from Tulle. Buses and trains run from Brive to Tulle.

WHERE TO STAY

Manoir XV Domaine de Peyrafort
Tel: 0033 (0)5 55 27 34 66
chambresdhotels.org/english/Detailed/8661.html
Lovely guest house in medieval manor. Doubles from €88.

WHERE TO EAT

Les Sept
Tel: 0033 (0)5 44 40 94 89
restaurant-les7.fr

Excellent French cuisine at affordable prices. Three-course dinner menu, €31 and five-course tasting menu, €42.

WHERE TO VISIT

Les Nuits de Nacre
facebook.com/NuitsdeNacre/
June 2021
France's biggest event dedicated to the accordion. Performances in all kinds of places, including bars, cafés, squares, tents, halls – mostly free of charge.

National Accordion Centre

Tel: 0033 (0)5 55 20 28 28
Visits by appointment, Monday to Friday.



TOURIST INFORMATION: *Tourisme Corrèze*

Tel: 0033 (0)5 5529 9878; *tourismecorreze.com/en*

Département: Corrèze (19)

Maugein accordion factory

Tel: 0033 (0)5 55 20 08 89
accordeons-maugein.com
Factory tours available by appointment, Monday to Friday, email *maugein.accueil@orange.fr*

Musée du Cloître André Mazeyrie

Tel: 0033 (0)5 55 26 91 05
culture.ville-tulle.fr/culture/musees-et-archives/musee-du-cloitre
Exhibits on local life and interesting discoveries in the region. Free admission.

Du Bleu en Hiver

dubleuenhiver.fr
January/February 2021
Jazz festival across Tulle and Brive, plus Périgueux and Boulazac over the border in Dordogne.

