

The Marais Project

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Jordi Savall: A musical life well-lived

The recent Musica Viva sponsored Australian visit of HESPERION XXI, led by master viola da gambist Jordi Savall, offers performers and the general public the opportunity to reflect on the life and art of a wonderful musician. Given that he plays an instrument that is still less than mainstream in the classical music world – let alone in the broader community – Savall has been extraordinarily influential. He has taught literally hundreds of students including several Australians, made over 150 recordings, curated numerous music festivals and provided the soundtrack to that most unlikely of hit films, *Tous le matins de Monde*, celebrating the life of Marin Marais. In addition, his ensemble HESPERION XX/XXI has been a training ground for elite early musicians from harpist Andrew Lawrence King of Harp Consort fame, to Australian fretted instrumentalist, Robert Clancy.

My own limited but much-valued contact with Jordi goes back more than 20 years. During the mid-1980's I studied viola da gamba with Jaap ter Linden in The Netherlands and had several opportunities to hear Savall perform and teach. I was also privileged to be a participant at a two day Dutch Masterclass he gave jointly with the other gamba giant of the times, Wieland Kuiken. One of Jordi's early Australian students, Sharon Rueben, who was then living in Switzerland, played with me for my final exam in Rotterdam in 1988 which gave me further opportunity to understand Savall's style and technique as absorbed and practiced by Sharon, who is a very fine gambist. Finally, I also played for him in a Masterclass in Sydney during his previous tour almost a decade ago.

In his interactions with students and colleagues Jordi goes to the heart of who you are as a person: why you want to play and what you are trying to communicate. If you have something to say musically, technique will follow by necessity. When I re-introduced myself to him on this 2008 trip to Australia his response was, "Yes, I remember you", (a statement I am not convinced is true!), but almost immediately he asked, "Are you still playing?" I was happy to be able to assure him that I was. From the look on his face I knew that he expected any musician to be true to his or her art: to continue to perform because it's one's calling, not for duty or any other reason.

The passion to communicate and uplift is the constant in Savall's career over the past 35 years. Whether leading a full orchestra, teaching students, or performing Marin Marais, English viol consort music, medieval fragments or Israeli folk-songs, this rare and refined passion thrusts to the fore. While governments and religions world-over seem hell-bent on finding ways to disagree with each other, Savall recently set out to bring to public view a particular tune that has migrated all around the Mediterranean in defiance of borders, race, belief systems and time to become "everyman's music". To the Turks, Savall told his Sydney audience, it is a Turkish tune, to the Greeks, Greek, to the Spanish, it belongs to Spain. In reality, this tune symbolises our oneness as humans. As an encore Savall allocated the national variants of this tune to different members of his ensemble to sing and play, then HESPERION XXI played all the variants simultaneously. To the ear it was not chaos, but harmony – and that was the point. Great artists find ways in text, music and image to help us transcend our lesser selves. In his own quiet way, I suspect that Jordi wants us to rise above popular rhetoric and engage humanely with those who appear to be different to ourselves. And he used words sparingly, and music symbolically, to encourage us in that direction.

I heard Savall three times during his stay in Sydney: twice with HESPERION and once in a solo concert for a private audience. I also listened to him take a long public masterclass at the Sydney Conservatorium. There, two brave, talented souls, Chris Berensen (harpsichord) and Annika Stagg (gamba), played Marin Marais to the artist who convinced the world that Marais was worth performing some 300 years after the composer's death. At the end of the class he took questions from the floor, told the

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story of his life and how he came to play the viola da gamba, revealed the source of his inspiration (play two Sarabands to start each day!) and made us laugh with the comment that the actor who played Marin Marais in *Tous les matins*, Gérard Depardieu, was not a good student.

Humour aside, at 67 years of age Jordi Savall's playing continues to grow and evolve. He appears able to allow the artistic voices of his collaborators, including children Feran and Arianne, to shine through. For example, I suspect that it was courtesy of Feran's interests in contemporary vocal improvisation that jazz chords appeared in the harmonic lexicon in several of the arrangements during this tour. And the Arabic oud seemed just as at home in HESPERION XXI as the harp did last century in HESPERION XX.

I did want to give Jordi something specially Australian as perhaps he will not visit again before, or if, he retires. It was after listening to Feran's solo CD that the thought came to give Savall a copy of blind indigenous musician Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu's award-winning CD "Gurrumul". I thought it might provide some antipodean stimulus to the broad musical interests of an artist I will never cease to admire. His face lit up when I handed him a copy; I hope he plays it. Like Jordi, Gurrumul draws his inspiration from his people's deep musical wells. Across the geographic and cultural divide they are fellow musical travelers.

Jennifer Eriksson

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*Jennifer Eriksson is one of Australia's few professional viol da gamba soloists. Originally trained as a music teacher at Sydney Conservatorium, she subsequently studied viola da gamba in Sydney and The Netherlands. In 2000 she founded **The Marais Project** as a vehicle to perform the complete works of French master gambist, teacher and composer, Marin Marais. The Marais Project has performed live and completed several studio recordings for ABCFM and released their first CD, "Viol Dreaming" in 2007. She has appeared twice on "The Music Show" with Andrew Ford discussing her work and performing live. She is also Director of the ensemble Sounds Baroque which gives up to 150 concerts per year in primary and infants schools across metropolitan and regional New South Wales as part of the Musica Viva in Schools Program. Jennifer is one of Australia's leading viola da gamba teachers and gives tuition individually and to student consorts. In 2007 she was the Director of the Australian Viola da Gamba Association national Easter School.*