

Meeting the gamba - and it's Maker

Some three years or so ago I ordered a new viola da gamba from German luthier Reinhard Ossenbrüner on the recommendation of my former teacher, cellist and gambist Jaap ter Linden. I've had new instruments made before, but this was by far the most expensive gamba I'd ordered, and entailed the longest wait!

In February I headed over to Europe to pick it up. Over my time away I kept a diary of my thoughts, feelings and reactions. What follows is an edited version of when I met my gamba - and its Maker.

Feb 5, 2003

I leave Sydney airport at 5.00pm travelling with my bow in hand and with the expectation of a very long trip ahead. As I walk through security I set off the metal detector. It takes a little while to convince the authorities that the screw in my bow can not be used as a weapon and that I am certainly not a terrorist.

Feb 6, 2003

6.00am. I arrive at Frankfurt Airport. There is not a soul in sight and no one to ask me if my bow is indeed a weapon so I walk straight into the country unchallenged.

7.00am. From the airport at Frankfurt I catch the new fast "ICE" train to Cologne which takes only an hour. Public transport that actually works: that's Europe for you.

I manage to find the wonderfully named "Good Sleep" Hotel which I have booked on the Internet from Australia. Although it isn't the Hilton it is very central, being 2 minutes from the station, and 5 minutes from the main concert hall. I can see the famous Cologne Cathedral from my window. It is, the locals say, permanently under repair and surrounded by scaffolding. I am amazed at the size and presence of this enormous, ancient building. My only complaint about the Hotel is the cigarette smoke. I rename it the "Lung Cancer" Hotel and think how lucky we are with anti-smoking laws in Australia.

9.30am. It's time to ring Reinhard. I am very nervous and tiredness does not help. I have waited 3 years for this moment. I call. His wife answers the phone, says something in German and passes the phone on. I can tell Reinhard has been waiting for my call. He arranges to collect me from the hotel straight away.

10.00am. I meet my Maker. He is a very gentle, sensitive man and very, very nervous at this point. I find out later that although he is quiet he is also outgoing. He smiles all the time and enjoys wine. (Fortunately I have bought a good red from Australia to give to him). Above all, he has a great love for his art.

Reinhard shows me to his rather old car and has trouble finding his keys. He fishes them out from somewhere and we are on the way. His workshop itself is a work of art. There are instruments everywhere – but there is also a great sense of order – Germans do this really well.

I walk past the workshop into the show room where I see my gamba leaning on a stool, alone, just waiting. Reinhard writes to me later that this is an absolutely breathtaking moment for him, when a musician touches his or her instrument for the first time. He tells me he normally leaves the room immediately after delivery, as the tension is too much to bear.

Reinhard leaves me in the room. The gamba is very new as it was only finished at 2.00am that morning. It is a beautiful looking. The wood on the back is very unusual to look at and the bridge very elegant.

I sit down and draw my bow across the strings. From the first note I am taken. The sound is big, but especially resonant; I can hear many, many overtones. As I turn the pegs they move with complete ease. I play on the top D string and no longer hit my knee or the side of the gamba with my bow – a fault with my old instrument. Not only does this gamba sound beautiful, it works like a perfect piece of machinery.

I play and play and gradually the sound begins to build and grow. I lose all sense of time and place; I am totally engaged with the instrument. It is far better than I had dared hope for. Time escapes me and it is hours before I open the door to greet Reinhard with a smile of approval. We have lunch together and then it is time to work on the bridge.

The A string is a little difficult to play so the D string is lowered. It is much better. Then I play a little more and the C string is lowered. I am too tired to think any more. I have not slept for 48 hours.

Reinhard will keep the gamba for two days to work on it a little more and to varnish the bridge. I leave exhausted but very, very happy and find my own way back to the hotel.

Feb 8, 2003

I meet Reinhard at his workshop. We have coffee together and I learn more about what he does. He restores and makes violins, cellos and gambas. He has been making instruments for 30 years and has a real passion for his work. As he says, "I love what I do."

Speaking of love, today I love my instrument even more.

That evening I have dinner with Reinhard and his wife, Mechthid, who works restoring instruments in his workshop. It is very much a celebration with champagne followed by a beautiful meal and more wine. I am the first Australian they had ever met.

When I think about it, you can liken the whole thing to an arranged marriage. I had made a commitment to buy a gamba having never met the maker and knowing very little about him. The maker had made a commitment to deliver a concert standard instrument knowing even less about me. Fortunately the marriage has had a good beginning and I can only see it maturing over the years.

Feb 25, 2003

The gamba arrives home safely. The case and the instrument survive having being banished to the cargo hold for the trip. I had problems with my ears descending in to Singapore and stayed an extra night to recover on doctor's orders, but apart from that, I too am in good shape.

Since then, people have been asking me what it cost. Well, its about the price of a new car - but to me it is priceless.

Purchasing a new instrument at this stage of my career has caused me to reflect again on the relationship between the instrument – a musician's tool of trade – and the performer. We are so reliant on our tools to express ourselves, and to express the thoughts and feelings of composers whose works we bring to life. It's a mysterious relationship to develop with what is, after all, just a piece or two of wood, a smattering of glue and a few lengths of gut. This delicately shaped thing ultimately becomes an extension of who we are and how we relate to the world around us. It's a thought worth pondering on.

The gamba will be christened at the 7th Marais Project Concert, 3.00pm June 1. Ryde Anglican Church, St Annes Church site, cnr of Victoria Rd and Church St, Top Ryde.

I hope that we stay together for many years.

Jennifer Eriksson