

The Marais Project - Publications

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Hit the road Jack: with a gamba on my back

Early music - for the masses?

One of Australia's most important fine music organisations never schedules a concert in a recognised venue. Its performers include some of Australia's best known classical, jazz, world music and folk artists. Together they criss-cross the nation giving 2,300 performances per year to a combined audience of over 400,000 people. Even if you love music, you have probably never attended one of their concerts. Confused? I refer, of course, to the Musica Viva in Schools Program which turns 25 this year. For eighteen years now I have been a member of the Musica Viva in-Schools group, *Sounds Baroque*. Since its inception this ensemble, consisting of harpsichord, viola da gamba/pardessus viol and two singers, has given some 1,500 performances of "cut-down" versions of baroque operas, the latest being a 17th century Opera or Masque by Matthew Locke, based on Shakespeare's "The Tempest". We've adapted Locke's original work to cater for our mostly primary school age audience (5 – 12 year olds). There are storms, shipwrecks, sword fights, romances and dolphin appearances – the latter even seems to survive the current drought. Not bad considering that all our props including the harpsichord and dolphin travel in the back of a station wagon and a sedan! As a result of this wonderful program, thousands of children have heard early instruments and other fine music for the first time.

The thing that sets Musica Viva Concerts in Schools apart from other school performances is the amount of interaction between the musicians and students during, and prior to, each concert. Before we arrive at a school, teachers have attended a workshop with us and a Musica Viva educator. Here teachers are given material on our show (a booklet and CD) and ideas to take into

the classroom to prepare the students for our arrival. During our show students dance, sing, improvise and compose. School band, percussion ensembles and recorder groups often perform for us - or with us. As you will note from several examples I relate below, on occasion skilled junior pianists hop up from the audience and have their first experience of performing baroque keyboard pieces on the harpsichord, the instrument they were originally written for.



For the first time since I commenced this work, I thought it might be worth while sharing something of what goes on when *Sounds Baroque* takes early opera to the country. What follows are my notes from our recent two week tour of the Riverina.

Day 1

Sunday 10am. Two teams collect our two vehicles from Avis. Harpsichord, harpsichord legs & desk, set, costumes, viola da gamba, Pardessus viol and suit cases are all packed. We are traveling light as we will be changing motels each night for the next two weeks, except for a weekend break in Albury. If we forget the harpsichord kit - which has the tuner and spare strings in it - we are finished! First stop **Temora** 470k's south west of Sydney. It is Sunday night in a country town; although eating out has improved over my 18 years of touring, I know that it will probably be Chinese tonight.

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Unfortunately I am World Cup Soccer hooked and there is the Brazil Vs Australia game tonight. I set my alarm for 1.30 am - not something I usually do on tour.

Day 2

Two concerts at Temora Public School with other small schools attending (150 at each concert). The school is so pleased to see us which makes our opening concerts very rewarding. Set off to Griffith, 150 kms west. Griffith is a beautiful town with many fine Italian restaurants, good coffee and lots of surrounding wineries. We start with coffee as this might be our first and last good coffee for two weeks. The coffee shop is owned by an ex-principal of Opera Australia and the coffee is VERY GOOD. Note: Beware of the fruit fly. All of us had taken fresh fruit for the tour and had to dispose of it between Temora and Griffith.

Day 3

Two concerts at Griffith North Primary School - one of the highlights of the tour. At the second concert a group of high school students with intellectual disabilities joined the primary school audience and they sit, unfortunately, up the back. As is my custom, at the end of the concert I ask if anyone would like to play the harpsichord. To my surprise, a 17 year old with an intellectual disability got up and dashed off a medley of popular tunes which brought the house down. It was some of the best playing we have ever had from any student.

Finish at 1.00pm and head straight to the wineries. Following the advice of the locals we went to Berton Vineyards which had only opened its cellar door a week ago. It felt like the Boxing Day sales at Myers. The wine was so good and cheap at \$30 a case! Unfortunately with 200kms to drive to Jerilderie - a small town of 1,000 or so - we did more bouquet smelling than drinking...

Day 4

We are booked in a motel right near the school where we are to perform in the morning. But can we find the school? It took us 20 minutes going up and down the main street and around in circles until we finally arrived. You can lose your sense of direction easily on tour - all schools start to look alike. This concert combined

children from the local Catholic and Public Primary schools. There were about 100 students and we were treated to a xylophone orchestra performance. We have a great conversation with the staff after the concert and enjoy a tasty morning tea with them. It was good to see the two schools working so well together.

Next stop **Berrigan**. Although this town is only 60 kms away we know from experience it is best to get to your next destination before stopping for lunch. We give our concert at the local school with about 60 students attending.

Now its time to pack up once more and drive to **Corowa**, another small town near the Victorian border, about an hour's drive away. We call today, Wednesday, the "Hump" day when on tour. That is, 3 days down and 2 days to go to the weekend! Tonight we are all happy to retire to our own rooms for a quiet dinner alone.

Day 5

Corowa South Public school concert takes part in the Presbyterian Hall which has great acoustics for our style of music. One of the delights of country touring is stumbling across some beautiful performance spaces: some we wish we could take home with us. On tour we often perform to schools which are very small. In this case, four different schools from the area are attending, with one school enrolling a total of 8 students only. Multiple school concerts are always a challenge as it is important that we involve each school in activities. One of the schools is extremely well prepared: they know everything: from what a viola da gamba is, to the round we sing. We use their skills to encourage the other schools.

Now it's off on a two and a half hour drive to **Wagga Wagga** for our last concert of the day. We pass through Wagga many times on this tour. It is at Wagga where we see the Socceroos win a game, but then finally loose to the Italians. En route we try a short cut...big mistake. We spend over an hour on dirt roads not knowing if we are heading in the right direction. Fortunately we arrive on time at Turvey Park Public School but we are a bit rattled by the detour. This concert is in the assembly hall with over 250 students attending. Similar to most of the schools we visit

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on this tour, they are just so well prepared. After nearly two decades it still amazes me when students from an isolated area can tell me what my instrument is having never seen or heard a viola da gamba before. One of the other great joys is having students spontaneously start singing along when they recognise one of the songs from the Opera – maybe U2 aren't the only exponents of "Stadium Rock!"

We also have a few students from the local High School attending. One is in Year 12 and performs a Beethoven Sonata for us on the harpsichord. It is her first experience of a harpsichord – I hope she remembers it.

The day is over. We are staying in one of our favorite motels in Wagga and have a Thai meal in town.

Day 6

First concert for the day is at Shepherds Park Education and Training Unit. This is a prison for boys aged 13 – 18. During my time with Musica Viva I have had the opportunity to see into many different and varied institutions – including



playing for the School of the Air - places that most people never get a chance to experience. I have always seen this as a privilege. But we have never played in a gaol – and lets face it, baroque opera is not hip!

We had put a lot of thought into what we would do

at this unique school and with the help of the principal, who is an outstanding individual, the concert went well. The 20 or so boys sat quietly around the room with about 10 staff. We had decided to take the approach of telling the boys what our job was like as musicians "on the road". We spent more time explaining and playing the instruments than is usually the case, which included me playing a Metallica riff on the gamba,

without an amp! A boy asked to play the gamba - which he did - and a teacher volunteered to play the harpsichord. This all went down well... We then performed our little Opera in full costume and the audience kindly laughed at the jokes.

Afterwards we felt like we had already done a full day's work but there are two more concerts yet in Wagga. As is common on tour, we arrive at the wrong school. We started unpacking and realized there was no statue of the Virgin Mary in the school hall. (We were, in fact, scheduled to be at a Catholic Primary school.) As it turns out, the Catholic school is next door to the Public School...so off we go tails between our legs.

Fortunately the teachers at Holy Trinity Primary School Ashmount – the school we are supposed to be at - have a good sense of humor. So when we eventually arrive and start nearly on time they are cool. The week finishes with another xylophone orchestra performance from the adjoining joining public school.

The day is still not over however. Chris and I drop Narelle and Corin at the Airport. We then we have a 2 hour drive to Albury where we will thankfully stay for three nights in the same motel over the weekend.

Week Two

Item 1 on the agenda: pick up Narelle and Corin up from the airport before driving to our first concert outside Albury. Over 300 students aged 5 – 17 have turned up. Then it is a 60km drive to **Holbrook** where we give a concert at the local primary school. Then back to **Wagga** to watch the Italians beat the Socceroos (groan!). Over the next days we visit schools at **Yerong Creek, Junee, Gundagai, Tumut, Tumberumba, Tarcutta, Thurgoona** and finally **Hay**. We cover many miles miles, and see some spectacular country side. The tour ends with an 8 hour drive home interrupted by a motel stop over at **Yass**. This is Australia, it is still a wide, brown land.

On reflection

We have traveled over 3,000 kms in two weeks. During this time 3,000 students have heard a viola da gamba, harpsichord and a baroque opera

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live for the first time. They have also been actively involved in performing 17th century music.

In order to maintain a high standard of performance Musica Viva asks each school to fill out an evaluation of every concert we give. For me, the following comment from the Shepherds Park Education and Training Unit (the juvenile prison) affirms me strongly. The Principal writes:

"We welcome the 'courage' your organisation shows in delivering inside the razor wire – the performers were wonderful!"

When all has not gone according to plan during the day it is good to remember comments like these and the fact that taking music to people makes a difference to their lives.

©Jennifer Eriksson, July 2006

(Sounds Baroque consists of Jenny Eriksson, viola da gamba and pardessus viol, Chris Berensen, harpsichord, Narelle Evans, soprano and Corine Bone, baritone. Sounds Baroque continues its concert giving for Musica Viva in Schools in Terms 3 and 4, 2006.)