

# The Marais Project

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## In the footsteps of the Master: Marin Marais 'down under'

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By definition all journeys commence somewhere. To end up at one point you have to start at another. My journey with Marais commenced in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics. Unlike some artists, I have never been anti-sport. In fact at school I played a great deal of sport and I often find the achievements of sportsmen and women genuinely inspiring – cricket being the one exception! The massive preparation and energy that went in to the Sydney Olympic Games stimulated me to look at my own career as a professional viola da gamba player. At the time I had no real over-arching goals for my development as a performer. I lived from “gig to gig” except in regard to my participation in the Musica Viva Schools Program of which I’ve been an enthusiastic and continuous performer since 1989. There was not and is not a viola da gamba concert circuit in Australia such as exists for other non-orchestral instruments such as the classical guitar or the many piano series dotted across the country. I had to come to grips with the fact that I was drifting professionally. If I wanted to move to the next level as an artist I needed a goal that would inspire and motivate me and perhaps others as well. At some point I came up with the idea of performing the complete works of Marin Marais. Around about this time Gerard Willems was recording all of the Beethoven sonatas on an Australian-made piano. My thinking went along the lines of, “if we can get excited about Beethoven “down under”, why not Marais?” So it came to pass that in 2000 I stuck my neck over the parapet and organised two concerts largely consisting of music by Marais. In 2004 we completed the fifth continuous year of what has come to be known as “The Marais Project”.

The purpose of this short article is to reflect on what I have learned along the way, how my approach has evolved, and where I think we are headed. I would like to add that the perspective I take is that of a performer, not a scholar. Like many early musicians I read and research quite a deal on the music I play but in essence I do not approach my work from an academic orientation.

### **Marais in context: composer or performer?**

Marais was a creature of the French Baroque period and part of the long tradition of virtuoso performer-composers that includes string artists such as Tartini, Corelli, Bocherinni, Paganini and Ysaÿe and keyboardists like Bach, Litz, Chopin, Busoni and, more latterly, Rachmaninoff. I had of course played Marais before 2000 but his formidable reputation as the greatest of the viola da gamba performer-composers made it hard for me to evaluate the quality of the works independent of the aura that surrounded them. Having practiced and performed Marais almost constantly for five years I now find myself in a position where I am able to articulate something of my view on this matter.

Firstly, Marais’ music is not of the overall quality of that of Bach, Handel, Monteverdi etc. Yet unlike the many hundreds of workman-like baroque composers whose reputations never filtered beyond the local town or region where their labours took place, Marais’ star has ascended over time. This must say something about the relative quality of his oeuvre. His operas are forgotten, but there is growing respect around the world for the musical, technical and pedagogical achievements bound for all time in his five books of music for one, two and three gambas.

The initial suites in the early books are largely formulaic consisting of a loose collection of dances. The exception being the suites for 2 gambas at the end of book 1, which I think are some of the best and most loved Marais pieces. The suites in books 2, 3, and 4 are far more integrated and challenging both musically

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and technically. Marais' character pieces are unique, describing everything from windmills to guitars, a maze and even a gall stone operation. These character works are part of a long French tradition of musical depiction that continued up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in composers such as Olivier Messiaen. By the time Marais reaches book 5 there seems to be a reversion back to simplicity. The suites in book 5 are much more straightforward in structure and technically easier than books 2-4. It feel to me like Marais was testing how far he could take his instrument and his art – especially in book 4 - before finding a resting place in the final book.

So is Marais the composer still worth performing? Do audiences respond to the music? My answer to both questions in “yes” - although I have some reservations which I will come to later in this article. For example, a measure of the quality of Marais as a composer was apparent when we programmed a concert titled “La Folia” during which Marais folia variations for viola da gamba were heard alongside those for violin by Corelli. The almost universal audience feedback was that the Marais' version was more interesting than Corelli's. Not surprisingly, I agree.

Amongst the lesser known suites I have performed my favourites include the C major from book 3 with the beautiful Sarabande en Rondeau, the g minor from book 3 and the G major from book 5. Of the more well known, my favorite suites include the G major suite book 2, the a minor suite book 3, and the duo suites in book 1. In addition, La Folia will remain a classic and for good reason.

## **Marais and the dance**

From the first moments of the Project I wanted to integrate other art forms into our concerts. Over the years we have included readings of French Baroque poetry, staged an event with Barbara Campbell-Allen - one of Australia's ceramic artists, and commissioned several new pieces from Australian composers (more details below). Our most consistent relationship, however, has been with Fiona Garlick and John Bernard of “The Early Dance Consort”. Fiona even choreographed and danced what must be the only live Australian performance of Marais' “la folia” variations, a concert we have repeated twice in Canberra and Sydney. Dance was a key aspect of Louis XIV's Court where Marais was employed as a musician and composer. There are several extant dance books which notate and describe the dances of the time, and there exist numerous paintings and etchings of courtly dance in action. My view now is that to get to the heart of Marais, one has to get to the heart of the dances he knew, observed and perhaps even danced himself. Doing so has changed my musical approach. For example, I have now performed several of Marais' ubiquitous chaconnes with “The Early Dance Consort”. Watching the dancers perform has heightened our ensemble's sense of rhythm and accent with the added benefit of taking gamba music directly to dance lovers.

## **Programming and marketing**

One of my reservations about Marais as a composer relates as much to the capacity of contemporary audiences to relate to suite after suite of “niche” music written hundreds of years ago as to the attractiveness (or not) of Marais' compositions in themselves. There is a loyal, intelligent “hard core” audience for gamba music but it is relatively small in Australia. In my view the gamba audience is not large enough to justify a focus only on gamba solo music. In order to manage this issue I have gradually come to program more works for voice and gambas and broadened the range of composers we perform. (For those interested, all “Marais Project” concert programs can be downloaded as PDF files from our WWW site at [www.maraisproject.com.au](http://www.maraisproject.com.au) )

I have particularly come to love the ensemble of soprano, two viola da gambas and lute as it allows us to enjoy both Marais' solo works and contrapuntal vocal music. In addition, I've grounded us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by approaching local composers to develop new gamba repertoire. “The Marais Project” has now commissioned three new works by Australian composers, including a duo for two viola da gambas and a short ballet by Stephen Yates, and a setting by Matthew Perry of James McAuley's poem ‘Nocturnal’. In 2005 we continue this tradition with a commission to jazz pianist/composer/arranger Kevin Hunt to write a new work for 3 gambas for our October concert. Audience numbers have grown from 50-60 at our first concert to as many as 200. We now seem to average audiences of 160-180 people.

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I can report some success in obtaining mainstream media support including a live interview on ABC Radio 702 in Sydney, and several press articles in Canberra, but I am sad to say that on the whole the viola da gamba is still a marginal instrument both to mainstream music organisations and to the broader “arts establishment”. I say this not as a criticism but simply to note the reality as I have experienced it. Traditional concerts such as ours now compete not only with other classical music events but with a huge range of opportunities our society presents for its citizens to spend their “entertainment and artistic dollar”. In one sense, we are as much in competition with “The Lion King” as with other more established classical concerts except we are dwarfed by the resources of the former and under the radar of the latter!

## **Technical and other challenges**

Although I wrote this article for those who know and love the viola da gamba, I deliberately left the technical challenges of playing the Marais “songbook” to last. For those interested, yes, the music is still difficult technically. In particular, two pieces, “la folia” and “le labyrinth”, took months of grief to get “under my fingers”. Some people have called Brahms a “sexist” piano composer due to the enormous stretches he demands, and the same tongue-in-cheek jibe can be poked at Marais. “Le labyrinth” contains some immense left hand challenges for a person like me who is of small stature. I had to carefully work on my stretches for months in order to give a decent performance. However, one of the downsides of the limited opportunities available for solo gambists is that I often only get one opportunity to perform a difficult work which is not ideal for me or the audience.

Mentally I sometimes find the breadth of the challenge overwhelming. It can feel like there is a bottomless pit of Preludes, Allemandes and Giges to learn. Such moments make me wish that Marais had written some sonatas! On a serious note, the whole mental challenge is real. I recently completed a half marathon and a friend asked me how I found the energy. The answer was simple, a half-marathon is nothing compared to facing up to 5 books of Marais! My ongoing motivation comes from several places. Firstly, the sheer love for Marais’ music and my desire that more people will hear and enjoy it. Secondly, I still find it exciting to discover a lovely movement from one of Marais suites, or that of another composer. Finally, there is the privilege of working with musicians and artist who help create an atmosphere where the music comes alive to audiences.

## **Where to next?**

We are now about 25% of the way through Marais solo works. In 2005 we start to tackle the repertoire for two and three gambas which present new challenges. I guess we will finish the task sometime around 2010 or 2012 depending on the degree to which we get distracted along the way.

I would like to thank the many gamba lovers who have supported us over the years, along with the performers and “volunteers” who do everything from lifting harpsichords, to acting as ushers at concerts and helping with the many other jobs that need to get done. In my view, it’s worth the effort.

Jennifer Eriksson, Founder and Director, “The Marais Project”