

The Marais Project Newsletter

Vol. 2(i) April 2003

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Music in the time of war

By the time this newsletter is distributed the New Year will be well under way. Already we have faced a State election, war in Iraq, and economic unsteadiness. What part does art and music play in our lives in such difficult times? The Australian actor Nicole Kidman commented on just this issue when receiving an Oscar for her portrayal of Virginia Woolf in the film *The Hours*. Her view, criticised in some quarters, being that art is especially important in times of societal change and distress.

We sometimes forget that with some notable exceptions, it has virtually never been an ideal time to be an artist. Mozart died in poverty; Michelangelo struggled constantly for patronage, while Bach worked tirelessly (and simultaneously!) as schoolmaster, composer, teacher, performer and conductor in order to support his large family. In the 20th century, the great Russian composer Shostakovich lived in fear of his life under Stalin during a period when many artists, writers, actors and musicians were executed, exiled or just “disappeared”.

In our own small way, *The Marais Project* simply seeks to enhance the lives of listeners and performers with beautiful, challenging music in combination with other art forms. This effort is based on the belief that in a profound way, art makes us more human, more sensitive to our surroundings, and better able to deal with the complexities and contradictions of life. Art, then, needs no excuse and the choice to focus on artistic production is justified – even in times of war.

2003 Concert Series

As in past years, the focus of *The Marais Project* will be built around two major concerts. The first will be on June 1 at a wonderful new venue, *The Ryde Anglican Centre*. Set in the grounds of the historic St Annes Church – one of the oldest in Australia - the new Centre has responsive acoustics and is ideal for chamber music. In addition, underground parking is available on site for 50 vehicles. City venues are currently very expensive due to insurance and related difficulties which have forced us to seek out alternatives. However, we hope to return to the City in the second half of the year.

Our first concert will feature Jennifer Eriksson and Catherine Tabrett on bass viols, soprano Belinda Montgomery, Monika Kornel on harpsichord, with lutenist and baroque guitarist, Tommie Andersson. Music by: Rameau, Marais, Moulinié and Métru, with baroque guitar music by de Visée.

The second concert on November will feature the return of the ever popular *Early Dance Consort* led by Fiona Garlick and John Barnard. Anyone who has seen Fiona and John dance will agree that it is an unforgettable experience. Fiona will choreograph and dance Marais’ great set of gamba variations on the famous “*La Folia*” melody (*see record review below*). Stephen Yates is also composing a new work for the occasion. Definitely a date to put in the diary.

The Marais Project WWW Site

So called “early music” has a boring, crusty reputation in some circles, but a search of the Internet reveals many sites dedicated to early music and even the viola da gamba. Early musicians may explore the music of the past, but they are well up to date on the technology of the present!

Try, for example, the highly informative site of the *Viola da Gamba Society of America* at: www.vdgsa.org, or *The Great Bass Viol* site at: www.greatbassviol.com/home.html. The *Australian Viola da Gamba Society* has a site at: www.avdgs.org.au. There is even a site dedicated to the “*La Folia*” at: www.folia.tk.

Now you can also find *The Marais Project* at: www.maraisproject.com.au. Our site is still under development, but we hope it will become a place for discussion and information sharing on Marais and his time, the viola da gamba and *The Marais Project* itself. Please visit and forward us your comments and suggestions.

New instrument



Jennifer recently spent three weeks in Europe picking up her new viola da gamba. The instrument was made by Cologne-based luthier Reinhard Ossenbrunner. His design is modeled on an instrument made by Michele Colichon ca. 1695. The meeting between maker and

performer is always somewhat stressful, especially as Jennifer had traveled half way around the world, but it was a happy

time for all concerned. The gamba is a great success and exceeded Jennifer's expectations in all respects.

Gambello 2003

Gambello is an initiative of Jennifer Eriksson and baroque cellist/bass violinist, Tim Blomfield. *Gambello* aims to provide a forum for viola da gamba and (baroque) cello players to:

- Have an enjoyable time playing and sharing experiences in a comfortable environment with people who share a common love of their instrument
- Learn more about the technique, repertoire, function & maintenance of their instrument
- Have opportunities to play in consorts and baroque bass instrument ensembles

Now in its third year, *Gambello* is a unique, fun opportunity for gambists and baroque cellists of all standards to get together and learn. Tim and Jennifer are both trained teachers and have completed post-graduate training in baroque music in The Netherlands.

Gambello 2003 will be held from 25 to 27 July at *Womens College*, University of Sydney. Enquires: (02) 9809 5185 or (02) 95557442

CD review

La Folia 1490-1701

Music by: Corelli, Marais, Martín y Coll, Ortiz & Anónimos
Performed by Jordi Savall and others. (Aliavox label)

As noted above, the popular tune and dance "La Folia" has been one of the most influential pieces in the history of Western European Music.

The simplicity and nobility of *La Folia* has inspired literally dozens of composers from the 1500s to the present day. *Folias* had its origins in the late Middle Ages and was first mentioned in Portuguese documents at the end of the 15th century. As the *Folia* melody and chord structure became more standardised, it emerged over time as one of the favourite "ground basses" upon which composers built

intricate sets of variations.

This recording brings together the great Spanish viol virtuoso Jordi Savall and a number of members of his core ensemble, *Hysperion XX*. Given the immense historical significance of the melody the fact is, this is a recording that you can just sit back and enjoy. Jordi Savall plays both the treble and the bass viol in such an engaging way that one soon comes to understand why *La Folia* has had such a hypnotic effect over the centuries.



Savall is also a great improviser and those with keen ears will note that Jimmy Hendrix and Eric Clapton were not the first instrumentalists to solo effortlessly above a simple, captivating chord progression. Also featured is a superb

rendering of Marais' mammoth *La Folia* variations which *The Marais Project* will perform later in 2003 with *The Early Dance Consort*. Buy, play...enjoy.

Introducing Belinda Montgomery

Soprano Belinda Montgomery will perform at the June 1 Marais Project concert. In the interview below Belinda offers some insight into her life and music.

❖ *Lindy, how did you first get involved in music?*

I always sang around the house with my many siblings, but didn't have lessons until my early twenties. But I did learn piano (and guitar) from the age of seven and majored as a pianist in my first music degree.

❖ *You are known for the beauty and purity of your voice.*

When did you start singing seriously?

At the Con(servatorium) we had to do group voice lessons as part of our education course. The teacher there, Maree Ryan, suggested I have my voice trained. In those lessons, and in the Con choir, I discovered the joy of singing 'classical music'. I started taking singing lessons and, after finishing my Bachelor of Music Education, I soon decided to go back to University (Sydney Uni Music Dept this time) and do another undergrad course, majoring in singing. Through the University, I became involved in the *Sydney Chamber Choir* and the *Renaissance Players*. I would love to say I have decided on singing as my 'career'. The reality is, I have a full-time job as a school teacher!! But more and more, I'm taking on new work and would love to at least cut back to part-time teaching at some point in the future.



❖ *What is it you enjoy most about "early music"? Who are your favourite composers?*

By concentrating on early music, my voice is still able to be quite flexible - I've been able to maintain a fairly pure sound which means, if I want, I can sit at the piano and play contemporary music, or sing a jazz tune without sounding too 'trained'. I can sing in a wide range of situations - solo, in small ensembles, as part of a choir, or as a soloist in bigger works, like oratorios. As to composers, Bach is a particular favourite. I've also really enjoyed getting into the French repertoire as it has such a different character - very few people in Sydney seem to tackle it.

❖ *You've had some interesting performances recently.*

Apart from The Marais Project, what other engagements are on the horizon?

I'll be the soprano soloist in the upcoming Easter concerts with *Sydney Chamber Choir* - we're doing the Fauré Requiem and the Mozart Solemn Vespers, both of which have gorgeous solo parts for the soprano. Also, am very busy with *Cantillation*, the professional choir conducted by Antony Walker. I also have a couple of big concerts with SSO later in the year. I hope to be involved, again, with *Pinchgut Opera* in December - they're doing the Fairy Queen by Purcell which should be great fun!