

The Marais Project Newsletter

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What's happened and happening in 2005

The first half of 2005 featured Jenny Eriksson and *The Marais Project* in a range of exciting events. The launch of our concert series at the *Independent Theatre* in May saw almost 200 guests enjoy French music from the 1500s to the time of Schubert. The ensemble also gave a concert at the *Boucher, Watteau and the origin of Rococo* exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW in April and another for the Historic Houses Trust in August. Stay tuned for future concerts over the coming months.

The biggest event in the second half of the year is without a doubt *And then there were three!*, our fabulous concert for three viola da gambas that will also feature the world première of a new work for multiple gambas by Kevin Hunt. More of that in the interview below.

New music for old instruments: The viola da gamba and all that jazz

It is not often that audiences have the opportunity to hold a dialogue with a living composer. This is especially the case for early music fans as the great majority of our beloved composers have permanently exited the stage! With this in mind I took the opportunity of catching up with composer Kevin Hunt recently to see how he is progressing with a new piece *Have Mercy, Air and Joy* that he is writing for three viola da gambas on a commission from *The Marais Project*. Kevin's composition is to be premiered at our next series concert on October 16.

Kevin Hunt is a unique artist: even his elite jazz colleagues refer to him as a "musical heavyweight". A graduate of the renowned jazz program at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music Kevin is equally at home as a composer, arranger and pianist. He has worked extensively with local jazz legends such as Don Burrows and James Morrison and shared the stage with international artists including Herb Ellis, Billy Cobham, Sheila Jordan and Larry Adler. Kevin studied 20th century composition at the Sydney Conservatorium and holds a Master of Performance degree from the same institution.

Philip Pogson: Kevin, I suppose that classical music fans might know you best for your wonderful award-winning CD of JS Bach arrangements for jazz trio ("Kevin Hunt Plays JS

Bach"; ABC Music). *How did you get interested in Bach?*

Kevin Hunt: I always enjoyed playing Bach when I was younger doing AMEB grades but it wasn't till I heard a recording of Alfred Brendel playing the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor and Prelude (Fantasy) in A Minor, that I became really interested in Bach. Brendel's legato style, and his treatment of space, drew me in at a deeper level. In addition, the improvising techniques used by Keith Jarrett in the 1970s contained beautiful chorale-like textures that certainly excited my tastes for improvising in this way.



The Three Gambists - Jenny, Daniel Yeadon & Cathy Tabrett will feature great music for two and three gambas on October 16

PP: You are not the first jazz musician to grapple with Bach. What is it about great Cantor that jazz players find interesting?

KH: Bach's music is a backbone behind so many styles of music, jazz being but one of them. So to improvise on Bach is a familiar experience because his music has affected all the



music I play. For example, the Chorales provide a mammoth resource of voice leading and melody, the Well Tempered Clavier a huge library of rhythm and line; all the tools of Western music making. There must be a spiritual aspect as well, which I'm not able to put clearly into words apart from saying that the times I have performed Bach in churches and cathedrals have consistently been very powerful experiences, for both the musicians and the audience.

PP: *Have you any particular favourites from amongst Bach's huge output?*

KH: The Mass in B Minor especially the Kyrie, which I am improvising on (re composing) for *Have Mercy, Air and Joy*, the working title of the new score I am writing for The Marais Project.

PP: *I know that you also love the music of the late 20th century composer Olivier Messiaen. Where does Messiaen's music fit alongside the jazz greats you perform everyday?*

KH: It is really just one sound that drew me into Messiaen's music, his harmonisation of the diminished scale - his 2nd mode of limited transposition. Jazz improvisation and composition in the 1960s became fascinated by the same sound. Messiaen's organ works always intrigue me as does his fascination with birds; he believed of course that birds are the best musicians. He was, and is, a confrontational thinker and his goal of depicting eternal love through sound has a 'hold' on me.

PP: *You are currently working on a new piece for three viola da gambas...a strange combination for someone I imagine would be more at home with drums and bass! How did you find out about the gamba and its repertoire?*

KH: Well yes, I do feel more at home with drums and bass! Up until recently I hadn't known a lot about the gamba, apart from loving the sound that Jenny Eriksson produces on it. So I have been listening to recordings of gamba music, such as the La Folia dances of Corelli, the Bach gamba sonatas and the Marais' "Le Labyrinthe". I am particularly looking forward to working with the instruments in rehearsal.

"The gamba has a beautiful singing sonority that I'm hoping to combine for the three gambas, as if for the Three Tenors."

PP: *Is there anything unique or unusual to you about the viola da gamba? Are you just going to write "charts" for the continuo section (lute and harpsichord) and let them make most of it up?*

KH: As far as the continuo section goes, I'm writing a combination of figured bass symbols with particular improvised-style lines. I'm looking forward to hearing how much improvising will result from the prompts on the score: after all, improvisation did used to be in the toolkit of all baroque musos! The gamba has a beautiful singing sonority that I'm hoping to combine for the three gambas, as if for the Three Tenors.

PP: *Perhaps one of parallels between jazz and classical music is in the tension between jazz purists who believe that*

the best jazz music was written before the mid 1950s, and the jazz avant-garde who are still out there pushing the boundaries. Similarly, there are those in the classical scene that don't want to listen to much music written after 1910 and hate "modern", meaning atonal music. What are your views on the traditional versus modern debate?

KH: Just this year I've just started lecturing in Jazz History at the Conservatorium in Sydney. We've had one semester listening to Blues, Ragtime, Dixieland, Stride and early Big Band music, which all centred around artists such as Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington. So it is obvious to me right now that this is all one music, constantly evolving. So to my mind there is no problem in playing a Duke Ellington piece, a Scott Joplin piece and a Joe Zawinul or Miles Davis piece on the same program.

Presenting Jazz style from across all the stylistic genres has been happening for many years, probably before the first jazz concert in Carnegie Hall in 1938. However, playing

"Writing for The Marais Project offers me the opportunity to compose my style of Bach with the instruments of his period."

Classical form in a jazz style as I do is certainly a controversial matter. I am an improviser and have re-designed musical forms of Bach, Ravel, Debussy and Messiaen in an investigative way thereby opening up their music to improvisation. This has been my performance style for over 25 years of my jazz career. I learn a lot about these classical composers in this way and audiences do enjoy my approach. I have had some difficult moments with musicians who don't agree with my pursuits, though, which is fair enough. In fact I eventually appreciate their feed back.

PP: *Finally Kevin, are you able to give us a preview of what audiences can expect if they come to the next Marais Project concert?*

KH: "Have Mercy, Air and Joy" is in three movements, drawing on and re-configuring three basic forms of JS Bach's music:

1. Kyrie fugue from the Mass in B Minor
2. Air (Suite No 3 in D major)
3. Jesu Joy Of Man's Desiring

Cross referencing occurs so that is not always clear which of the original forms is in use. The piece combines the inspiration of Bach's Baroque with my previous approach to working with my jazz trio (piano, drums and bass). Writing for *The Marais Project* offers me the opportunity to compose my style of Bach with the instruments of his period. So we may hear what JS Bach's music may have sounded like if Louis Armstrong had been playing "church gigs" in Germany in the 1700s!!

PP: *Kevin, thanks for your time, we look forward to a wonderful concert.*

Interview by Philip Pogson

ABCFM will make a studio recording of And then there were three! for broadcast.

