

The Marais Project Newsletter

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The 350th birthday bash on ABCFM

The Marais Project's namesake, Marin Marais, celebrated his three hundred and fiftieth birthday on 31 May, 2006. To note this important date we organised two exciting events. The first was the national ABCFM broadcast on 30 May of a studio recording the ABC made of our last concert for 2005, "And then there were three!" A feature article on *The Marais Project* and this concert also appeared in the ABC's "Limelight" magazine. Secondly, on May 14 we launched our 2006 concert series with the aptly named "The 350th Birthday Bash". We were thrilled to welcome back Master Harpist Marshall McGuire who wowed the audience of two hundred or so with his transcriptions of 17th and 18th century French harpsichord and baroque guitar music. As for the gambists, they played Marais (of course) and a work by his teacher, Sainte Colombe.

After the musical celebration was over many of the audience joined us for a glass of wine while Dr Richard Millner, President of the Australian Viola da Gamba Association, proposed a toast to Marais and cut a 350th birthday cake. Many thanks to Richard, the ABC, narrator John Barnard, Dr Fiona Garlick from the Early Dance Consort, the staff of the Independent Theatre and the many other supporters who enabled us to bring our dream to reality on this occasion.

The Devil and James McAuley

One of the uninformed criticisms sometimes made of the so-called "early music revival" is that early music specialists are wedded to the past and not interested in the music of their own time. In reality, a number of early music ensembles, including *The Marais Project*, regularly commission works from contemporary composers.

Our latest endeavour, the fifth we've undertaken thus far, is a setting for two gambas, theorbo and soprano of a poem by renowned Australian poet, James McAuley. This is the second McAuley poem we've set to music. The first, "Nocturnal", was completed by Matthew Perry in 2004. Jazz composer and pianist Kevin Hunt has accepted the challenge this time around. We think Kevin's involvement is particularly appropriate as McAuley (1917-1976) was a skilled jazz pianist and at one stage of his life contemplated a career as a professional jazz artist.

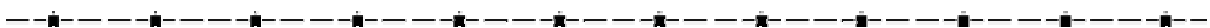
McAuley's standing as one of Australia's outstanding post Second World War poets is unquestioned, but rightly or wrongly it has been the political and polemical side of his many-faceted talents that has attracted attention in recent years.

As documented in Cassandra Prybus' acclaimed (and controversial) biography, "The Devil and James McAuley", McAuley was the founding editor of the conservative journal, *Quadrant*. At that time, financial support for *Quadrant* was channeled to Australia through overseas organisations strongly linked to the CIA. A mid-life convert to Catholicism, McAuley was avowedly anti-communist and a strong supporter and associate of BA Santamaria. As a Catholic lay intellectual, author and broadcaster, Santamaria had a significant impact on Australian religio-conservative politics and is credited by some as fomenting the split in the Labour Party that saw the creation of the DLP.



The Birthday Bash Team – Marshall, Cathy Tabrett, Jenny and Tommie Andersson celebrated Marais' life on May 14. Absent is narrator, John Barnard..

It is McAuley's poetry, however, that is focus of attention for Jennifer Eriksson and *The Marais Project* over the coming months as they prepare for another World Premier at our next concert, "Viol Dreaming: Music for Gambas and Voice", on October 22.



Hit the road Jack - with a gamba on my back

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 and world music artists and 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.

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 adapted Locke's original 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.

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, compose and there have even been school band, percussion ensembles and recorder groups that perform for us - or with us.

So, for the first time in 18 years, I thought it might be worth while sharing a little of what goes on when *Sounds Baroque* takes opera to the country. What follows is a cut down version of my notes from our recent two week tour of the Riverina. The full text is on our WWW site.

Day 1

Sunday 10am. Two teams collect our two station wagons 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. 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

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 bought the house down. It was some of the best playing we've witnessed on the road.

Finish at 1.00pm and head straight to the wineries. Following the advice of the locals we went to Berton Vineyards which only opened its cellar door a week ago. Wine is cheap and plentiful - it felt like the Boxing Day sales at Myers.

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, 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 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! 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.

Week Two

Over the next days we visit schools at **Yerong Creek, Junee, Gundagai, Tumut, Tumberumba, Tarcutta** and finally **Hay**. 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 live for the first time.

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!"

Comments like this make it all worthwhile...

Jennifer Eriksson, July 2006

