

The Marais Project 2005: reflections on a five-year journey

(Originally published in "Early Music News")

Achieving the five year point in any relationship is worthy of note. However when the relationship celebrated is with a person one has never met and who, for good measure, has been dead for almost than 300 years, most people will start to get a little concerned. But from the very beginning of my career as a gambist the object of my affection, Marin Marais, has fascinated and inspired me. So much so that in the year 2000, spurred on by the feats of Olympic athletes, I set myself the goal of performing his complete works. Give-or-take the odd piece, Marais composed more than 600 works for one, two and three viola da gambas so this was not, and is not, a simple goal. In addition, I had no financial backing, I doubted that my then-instrument was really of concert standard, and I did not have an ensemble to play with. If this list of minor problems was not enough, in my view the conventional Sydney classical music scene exhibited little interest in understanding and promoting the viol family of instruments—then and now. Nevertheless, we started giving concerts anyway and in 2005 we enter our sixth year as Australia's only regular viola da gamba recital series.

The purpose of this article is to reflect for a moment on the philosophy behind The Marais Project, where we are up to, what we have learned, and where we think we might be headed in the future. I hope that my musings will be of interest to EMA members.

Background and milestones

The purpose of The Marais Project is to perform the works of Marais and his contemporaries in a modern-day Australian context. To us, the expression of 'modern-day' has always meant collaborating widely with different artists and art forms and even commissioning new music for the ensemble. We wanted to avoid being pigeon-holed artistically in the so-called 'early music ghetto'. So we chose to conduct a number of collaborations including a joint event with leading ceramic artist, Barbara Campbell-Allen, three performances with The Early Dance Consort, a unique concert featuring readings in French of French Baroque poetry from the time of Marais, and what must rank as the only Australian performance of Marais' monumental 'La Folia' variations to be choreographed and danced 'live'. The Marais Project has also commissioned no less than three new works by Australian composers, including a duo for two gambas and a short ballet by Stephen Yates, and a setting by Matthew Perry of James McAuley's poem 'Nocturnal'. We intend to commission another work in 2005.

Over the years audience sizes have grown steadily from an initial 50-70 to as many as 200 people, and now seem steady at around 170-180. We deliberately decided not to aim our concerts only at the early music audience, which is small and already well catered for. We instead wanted to attract new audiences or become the chamber music series attended by those who might attend no other classical music concerts, early music or otherwise. We have a policy of donating free tickets to organisations such as public and private schools and even to university music departments. In addition, I give dozens of concerts to children each year as part of the Musica Viva Schools Program, which helps promote my instrument. The use of a number of different venues was initially a necessity as we tried to balance acoustics with cost and the availability of volunteers to support logistic requirements. In 2004 and 2005 we have settled on The Independent at North Sydney where we are happy and feel appreciated.

At this point we believe we have performed around 25% of Marais' solo works. In 2005 we will commence working our way through the Marais suites for two and three gambas.

What have we learned?

Firstly, as an artist this process has shown me that Marais' solo works are still technically and musically challenging and sometimes very hard to 'pull off' live. 'Le Labyrinth', for example, is the hardest piece I have ever performed. Over this work's twelve short minutes

Marais modulates through a range of distant keys and takes the viola da gamba to its technical limits. It took me months to learn and I had to develop special exercises to cope with the enormous left hand stretches dictated by the obviously big-handed (and male!) Marais. 'La Folia' made different but equally challenging technical and musical demands. As an aside, one downside of the limited opportunities for gamba soloists is that after investing the time in learning such difficult works I often only get to play them once or twice, which is not an ideal situation for me or the audience.

Secondly, we learned that we must keep programs varied in order to retain and increase the audience base. Most people simply cannot engage with suite after suite of French gamba solos. The time elapsed since Marais lived, the unique musical language and the general cultural gap combine to create a potential chasm between ensemble and listener. But my programming skills have improved over time and we have benefited from the talents and creativity of the gifted artists who work with us. Our audience seems to love singers and the voice of Belinda Montgomery, with its special qualities, has left many people breathless.

Thirdly, getting a promotional message out in a global city such as Sydney is tough at the best of times. It is even tougher for a niche chamber ensemble that plays music even music lovers do not know well. Nevertheless, we've had several modest successes and have developed some useful tools. For example, we have our own Internet site, <<http://www.maraisproject.com.au>>, as well as a promotional DVD made by young film- and documentary-maker, David Wild. The Marais Project has been reviewed in the *Canberra Times* and regularly in the Early Music Association journal, *Early Music News*. We even had a spot in the Herald's daily 'Spotlight' column in October 2004. In addition, I've conducted radio interviews with James Valentine on ABC Radio 702, with the ABC in Canberra, and given a Sunday Live recital for ABC FM.

Finally, I don't wish to complain, but raising money has been a huge challenge and like many of my early music colleagues I must report annually to my accountant that this is a loss making venture! A number of professionally-supported approaches for sponsorship were put in play and we applied for Australia Council funding but to no avail. In response, we decided not to get bitter and twisted but to 'cut our cloth to fit' and keep things simple. We spend the minimum we can on advertising, try to maximise word-of-mouth and free publicity, while seeking to pay reasonable remuneration to the wonderful musicians who 'volunteer' to work with us. However, things are looking up in 2005 as we've been offered a number of paid concerts which will help promote the ensemble as a whole as well as the two self-promoted recitals we will give during the year at The Independent.

Where to next?

I intend to continue focusing on my goal of performing the complete works of Marin Marais, while allowing the style and content of the performances to develop through engagement with new collaborators, newly-commissioned works and other composers from Marais' time. For example, we will stage a rare concert for three viola da gambas and continuo in 2005 featuring guest gambist Daniel Yeadon. I still find the music of Marais and his contemporaries both beautiful and stimulating and as long as my energy continues, so will the journey. And my purchase of a new gamba in 2003 makes the journey even sweeter!

Thanks ...

The Marais Project would not have survived without the support of many people from volunteer ushers to the guest artists who perform and collaborate with us. In the latter category, Tommie Andersson, Belinda Montgomery, Catherine Tabrett, Matthew Ridley, Monika and Stan Kornel have been wonderful and reliable performance partners, as have Fiona Garlick and John Bernard from The Early Dance Consort. Special thanks are due to Nicole Bannister for her ongoing French-English translations and work with the French-speaking media such as SBS, The Leading Partnership for administration and marketing support, Early Music News, and Peach Advertising for their wonderful brochure design skills.

Jennifer Eriksson
Founder and Director of The Marais Project