

MUSIC  
THE MARAIS PROJECT, RE-IMAGININGS  
KEITH GALLASCH

Real Time Arts  
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# Viola da Gamba: acoustic, electric, other

TO CELEBRATE ITS 15TH YEAR, THE MARAIS PROJECT—ITS AIM IS TO PLAY “ALL THE WORKS OF MARIN MARAIS (1656-1728) AND OTHER SIMILAR MUSIC FOR THE VIOLS”—MOUNTED AN INTRIGUING CONCERT TO PLACE THE MASTER'S FAVOURED INSTRUMENT, THE VIOLA DA GAMBA, IN A 21ST CENTURY CONTEXT.

First up was Marais un-re-imagined—a mellow E minor Suite from 1725 in which the viola da gamba seemed a little uneasy tonally and rhythmically, but after which the playing was immediately more confident. Three of four movements of saxophonist Paul Cutlan's engaging Spinning Forth were presented, viola da gamba and harpsichord in dialogue, reaching atypically sweet heights and dark depths while retaining a Baroque feel, the viola da gamba at times harp- and even koto-like. Pianist and composer Matt McMahon was looking for “an approach that takes the viola da gamba out of its traditional setting” (program note) in “At Carna,” an attractively melodic, folk-ish evocation of Ireland, for piano and a melancholy seven-string fretted electric version of the instrument, with its sometimes

steely sound. Siebe Pogson's “Dark Dreaming,” for bass and viola da gamba, both electric, and inspired by Jaco Pastorius, was song-like, layering the melody with a variety of techniques including plucked bass and seemingly extempore wordless vocals that headed in the direction of rock with nightmare intensity—the instruments becoming one disturbed voice.

McMahon's “For Thomas Wyatt,” the 16th century innovative English lyrical poet, courtier and lover of Anne Boleyn, is eloquently elegiac, its melody Celtic, its tone dark; electric viola da gamba, piano and bass guitar in melancholy embrace. In jazz bassist Steve Hunter's Three Rivers, as arranged by McMahon, viol and bass build the melody and are fluently joined by tenor saxophone

(Cutlan) on its way to a full-bodied compelling solo, rising with feeling over the jazzy warmth of the ensemble. As ever, McMahon's rich pianism produced beautiful, unexpected resonances. Finally, his arrangement of Guy Straz's Zawi (Ode to Joe Zawinul) paid tribute to the great Weather Report pianist in a performance that suggested both sadness and soaring liberation.

Re-imaginings certainly conjured other ways of being for the viola da gamba, especially in its electric incarnation—releasing a greater range of sound: double bass and cello-like, firm but warm—in Jenny Eriksson's more than able hands.

The Marais Project, Re-imaginings, Sydney Conservatorium, 26 Oct