

## Backstage with...

# THE MARAIS PROJECT

The Project has a new album in the works. And when you have Swedish roots, the journey can often be the destination, says viola da gamba player **Jennifer Eriksson**

**B**ack in 2000 I felt I lacked a goal. Inspired by Gerard Willems, who conquered one of music's mountains by recording the Beethoven piano sonatas, I set myself the task of performing all 600 of Marin Marais' pieces for viola da gamba. Over the past 15 years The Marais Project has performed 80% of them, but we've kept the door open to interesting side projects along the way. And thus to our Swedish adventure.

Lutenist, Tommie Andersson and I share a Swedish heritage. He was born in Sweden and immigrated to Australia in 1984. My paternal grandfather was a Swedish sailor who arrived in Melbourne in the 1920s. He never went home. His cousin wrote to us in English each year. If it weren't for him I would not have met my Swedish family in Stockholm in 1986. I couldn't believe it: they looked like me, laughed like me and they ALL loved music. Every evening out came the violins and guitars and we'd sing the night away.

Tommie and I had planned a Swedish concert for years. In 2012 we finally made it happen. In Johan Helmich Roman (1694-1758) Sweden has a baroque composer of high repute – often called “the Swedish Handel”. Then there is Carl Michael Bellman (1740-1795), Sweden's national poet. Many of Bellman's compositions are about drinking and women. Generations of Swedish children have grown up memorising his more chaste songs. Underneath the gloss, however, he manages to elucidate fleeting themes of love, death and the enjoyment of life. For example, (from Fredman's Epistle No 2 – “To Father Berg, concerning the Fiddle” as translated by Tommie Andersson):

*“I love the beautiful Maids,  
But Wine even more;  
I look at both,  
And smile at both  
But keep them apart.  
A Nymph on the green grass,  
And Wine in green glasses:  
Just as good a Feast,  
They both draw me in.”*



Melissa Farrow, Fiona Ziegler  
and Jennifer Eriksson

Tommie made arrangements of four Swedish fiddle tunes and one of the saddest songs I have ever heard, *Om sommaren skona*. All we needed now was a Sydney-based tenor who spoke Swedish or could learn the language for a one-off performance. Enter Pascal Herington, acclaimed for his appearances with Pinchgut Opera. A few weeks coaching from Tommie and his daughter, Freja, and Pascal had the accent and pronunciation. Baroque violinist Fiona Ziegler and flautist Melissa Farrow seemed to get the folk style immediately. Tommie and I made them honorary Swedes!

The week before our first concert disaster struck. Tommie was knocked off his push bike and badly bruised. Then my half-Swedish father got appendicitis and was rushed to hospital accompanied by his sister, my aunt. Tommie made the concert but my father and aunt did not. I was devastated. By the last song, the heartbreaking *Om sommaren skona*, I was in tears and could barely play. We were moved by the audience response. The clips on YouTube have attracted hundreds of views, including many from Sweden.

***“The week before the concert disaster struck. Tommie was knocked off his push bike”***

Fast forward to 2014. We have almost finished recording a CD of this repertoire rounded out by Tommie's arrangements of a Swedish hymn and a tune by Swedish jazz greats, EST. Why an Australian CD of Swedish music? Why not? Does art have to be sensible? All worthwhile music is a labour of love. Our project tells a story of our two homelands: of the hot summers, fantastic musicians and open-minded audiences we have in Australia, but also of Tommie and my heritage rooted in the northern snow and ice. The journey is the destination.

**The Marais Project's next concert is on August 24 at the Sydney Conservatorium. Their CD of Swedish music is due to be launched later this year.**