

## MARIN MARAIS

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Gerald Hayes, in his important book on viols and other bowed instruments published in 1930, was, I think, the first to suggest that Marais was ‘ a composer whose gifts, were they but fully appreciated by his countrymen, should set his name beside that of Couperin, at the head of French music’.

Marais published five part-books of music for viola da gamba, Book I in 1686, although there was a further wait of three years for the basso continuo parts, Book II in 1701 in the same divided way, Book III in 1711, Book IV in 1717 and finally Book V in 1725

The chief source of information for Marais’s imperfectly documented life is Titon du Tillet’s *Parnasse Francois* (1732), a gold mine of penetrating insight into the lives of musicians and composers active in France in the early 18th century, many of whom would otherwise be lost to posterity. We know nothing of Marais’s parents or antecedents, but he was born in Paris on 31 May 1656. As a child he entered the choir of Sainte-Chapelle and, as a youth, he studied the viol with Hottemann and with Saint-Colombe, a great master of the instrument, whose sixty seven *Concerts a deux violes esgales*, an astonishing corpus of music for gamba duet, remained totally unknown until transcribed and edited by Paul Hooreman and published by Heugel in 1973.

But Marais’s apprenticeship with Saint-Colombe was short-lived. After six months he was dismissed, not because his master could teach him nothing further, but because Saint-Colombe feared that, as things were going, the pupil would soon outstrip the master. He went on to become *batuer de la mesure* in the orchestra of the *Academie Royale de Musique* under Lully, with whom he studied composition. From then on, until his retirement in 1725, he was to hold the position of *Ordinaire de la Chambre du Roy pour le Viole* for forty six years.

Not all that surprisingly, his first *Book of Pieces de Viole* was dedicated to his master, Lully. It is a publication of great historical significance, being the first collection of its kind in France written for viol with basso continuo, the few earlier publications of viol music being for unaccompanied viols. In this book and his subsequent books of viol pieces, Marais set standards of viol technique that inaugurated a whole school of French viol players and composers such as De Caix d’Hervelois, the great Francois Couperin himself, and lesser luminaries about whom we know so little, but whose music is of the very highest quality such as Charles Dolle and Jacques Morel. And yet this flowering was of short duration. At the very peak of its excellence, the popularity of the viol came to a sudden end as changing tastes and changing styles overtook the older composers from about the mid-18th century. The golden age was over almost as suddenly as it had begun and only recently has the music of Marais and that of his disciples been re-examined and brought back to life.

Marais’s part-books abound in detailed directions not only about the correct ornamentation for the interpretation of this music, but also a wealth of information about performing techniques of bowing and fingering that are of importance for a true understanding of a much wider range of French music of this period which performers will ignore at their peril. His *Pieces de Viole* constitute a *Gradus ad Parnassum* for the instrument that has been approached by no other composer, but, while constituting by far the most extensive, as well as the most important, part of his output, Marais did, in fact, write other and impressive things. His ‘*Pieces en Trio*’ of 1692 are a case in point. He also wrote at least four operas, much praised in their time – *Alcide* in 1693, *Ariane et Bacchus* in 1699, *Alcyone* in 1706 and *Semele* in 1709. *Alcyone* in particular, achieved especial fame with a notable storm scene, and a suite from this opera was recorded. There was also a celebrated *Te Deum*, now seemingly lost, composed, as Titon du Tillet tells us, for the convalescence of *Monsieur le Dauphin*, presumably after that famous occasion in 1701 when he recovered from an ‘*accès d’indigestion*’ after eating a surfeit of fish which rendered him unconscious. Thought to be on the point of death, he was saved only after doctors had effected an *evacuation prodigieuse haut et bas* and a great service of thanksgiving was celebrated at the *Oratoire*.

Marais lived all his life in Paris and, except on the domestic level, it appears to have been rather uneventful. He married, at the age of nineteen, one Catherine d'Amicourt, who bore him no less than nineteen children, nine of which survived infancy and four —three boys and a girl— achieved fame as viol players. Another daughter married the great composer of cantatas, Nicolas Bernier. If we are to believe the constantly changing addresses found on his publications, Marais moved house a great deal. Perhaps his ever increasing and growing family required a series of moves requiring more spacious apartments, who knows? But in 1686 we find him living in the Rue de Jour; by 1692 he is in the somewhat notorious Rue Quincampoix in the financial quarter of Paris; in 1709 he is found in the Rue Bertin Poiree and later in the Rue de la Harpe, which according to Titon du Tillet he finally retired to a house in the Rue de l'Oursine with a fine garden when he tended in his declining years.

The pieces included in Marais's five books are sub-divided into a number of suites according to key. While they are devised to exploit every aspect of viol technique they are also arranged to provide pieces of varying difficulty to suit performers at all stages of development. Most of the suites contain a great many movements, mostly in dance forms and the player would have been free to select both the number and order of the movements he chose to play. The last movement of the first Suite in D from Book II ends with the Folies d'Espagne. The original suite contains twenty pieces including four preludes, two sarabandes, two giges, three menuets besides other individual movements and the Folies, an extensive set of thirty two variation on the old Spanish sarabande that inspired so many other composers right up to the present day, provides the impressive finale. Marais's variations obviously invite comparison with those of his famous Italian contemporary, Corelli. Corelli's variations are a brilliant display of violin virtuoso technique; Marais offers a totally different approach of grace and finesse and subtlety of expression— a different aesthetic and a different musical world altogether, yet in their own way they are as impressive to hear and as challenging to the performer as anything Corelli could provide.

Les Voix humaines“ is the penultimate movement of the third suite. It has a quality of dark and brooding contemplation. The Suite no. 5 in B minor has thirteen movements including two sarabandes, two giges and two menuets and othe dance movements all leading up to an impressive 'Tombeau pour Mons de Lully,“ Marais 's tribute to his master, who had died some years before. It is a wonderfully expressive piece. It is an object lesson in the variety of expression that can be effected by a performer who has mastered the subtleties of unequal bowing technique and who fully understands the great opportunities offered by Marais's delicate "agreements“ which, if properly executed, makes his music so individual and utterly French, as opposed to the brash Italian virtuosity that some French composers of the time adopted as their own—most notable Antoine Forqueray, who offers an approach so different that it led Hubert de Blanc to make his much quoted remark in his 'Defence de la Basse de Viole“ (1740) in which he compared Marais to be a performer who played like an angel and Forqueray like the devil.

On his own terms Forqueray wrote some magnificent music for the gamba and being more extrovert it has enjoyed greater popular appeal. His 'Pieces de Viole“ is a much more modest offering in terms of size (five suites in all). With Marais, the performer and recording companies are confronted with a corpus of music as extensive as, say, the sonatas of Scarlatti.

Pieces like the 'Folies d'Espagne “and 'Les Voix humaines“ show one side of Marais. There is also his amazing 'Suite d'un Gout Etranger“ “and the tragi-comic 'Tableau de l'operation de la Talle“ found in the seventh and last suite of Book V which tells in graphic, hair-raising detail the ordeal of a gall-stone operation, clearly based on Marais's personal experience, which is routine enough misfortune today, but in the 18th century performed without anaesthetics and often fatal.

When Marais died on 15 August 1728 he was buried in the church of Saint-Hippolyte in the Quarter Saint-Marcel with all the honour due to a celebrated musician. Shortly before the Second World War his first modern champion, Arnold Dolmetsch, with his wife Mabel, went on a pilgrimage to this church with the intention of leaving a bouquet of flowers on his tomb but they were shattered to find no trace of the church remained. Unknown to them it had, in fact, been destroyed at the time of the French revolution and with it

Marais's earthly remains have been lost forever. In consolation they scattered their flowers in the gardens of Versailles where he must have so often walked. Thus Marais, with no known grave, shares a distinction with another great composer, namely Mozart.

Since this article was written more information has come to light including the identity of Saint-Colombe and, happily, a lot of Marais's music is available on CD.

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