

A brief history of the Courtly Arts Performers of Victoria

The Courtly Arts Performers of Victoria (www.courtlyarts.com) is the “offspring” of the 40 year labour of love of Helga Hill OAM and her devoted husband Mark. Together they formed the Early Arts Guild of Victoria, and its performance groups; the Early Music Consort of Melbourne and the Ripponlea Renaissance and Baroque Dancers. Over the decades the group has grown and encouraged the development of musicians and dancers – along with an extraordinary body of research into the music, dance and gesture from a period spanning the medieval to the late baroque. With hundreds of performances in Melbourne and across Victoria, the joys of early music and the “Courtly Arts” have been shared with thousands of people over many decades.

Helga Hill and her family formed the Early Music Consort in 1973 inspired by their mutual love of Renaissance and Medieval music. Their four children, then ranging from 8-12 years in age, all performed with their parents in the Consort. They performed in many venues across Victoria, delivering dozens of concerts across all the major regional towns, including Mildura, Bendigo and Ballarat, Warrnambool and Wodonga. At the time it was observed that there was probably no regional area in the world where Early Music was better-known than the state of Victoria. Of course, the Consort also performed in Melbourne with performances in conjunction with a range of Music Societies and the National Gallery.

In 1976 the Consort was invited to base its Melbourne activities at the National Trust estate Rippon Lea in Elsternwick. The historic property had only recently been bequeathed to the Trust and it was decided that the Consort would be an ideal vehicle to promote the relatively unknown estate. The Consort staged three programs in 1976 that made up Australia’s first Early Music subscription concert series. This was followed in 1977 by the country’s first public classes in Renaissance Dancing held in the historic Rippon Lea ball room and the formation of the Rippon Lea Renaissance Dancers. The following year the ball room was also the venue for the Early Music Proms – a popular series of Sunday afternoon concerts that ran until 1980. By then the estate was well-known throughout Victoria and beyond.

By the early 1980’s between 20-24 people were actively engaged in performing music, song and dance. The group delivered their audiences a rare sight of court life in past ages as history-based scripts were written and theatrical productions were mounted. Around this time, the Consort formed a volunteer organisation, The Early Arts Guild, to attend to the growing tasks of fund-raising and general organisation for such major projects.

In addition to Melbourne programmes, Regional festivals continued to be a major part of the performance calendar including week-long Renaissance festivals in Sale (1982-85) and a 3-day Renaissance Workshop in the Maryborough Golden Wattle Festival (1980-88). These festivals included Renaissance dance classes, costume-making sessions, brass rubbing, student concerts, a Renaissance banquet with the Consort and Rippon Lea Dancers – as well as performances by the group. Bairnsdale, Geelong, Hamilton, Horsham, Warrnambool and Yarram were other Victorian centres to enjoy major productions which were also staged interstate in Adelaide, Canberra, Deniliquin and Goulburn. Additionally, from its very beginnings the Consort took historic music and instruments to numerous city and country schools.

On November 27, 1983, the Consort and the Early Arts Guild presented the Renaissance Masque *Totentanz – the dance of Death* in both Melbourne and a number of regional centers. This unique production, with its period costumes, original dances, rare instruments and historically based scripts set the standard for a flowering of the work of the team in the following decades. Helga Hill, as the artistic and musical Director developed the dance choreography and musical arrangements based on original research from primary sources in Europe and the UK. Helga's expertise was increasingly recognised overseas, with her services in demand to run Renaissance Dance courses in New Zealand, Austria and at Dartington in the UK. During this time she also worked with globally recognised performers such as Emma Kirkby.

During the '90s the group began to feature professional performers, both actors and singers, to deliver increasingly sophisticated masques. And from 2000 the Art of Gesture was incorporated in both song and spoken material. Over the following decades period productions explored many themes including the lives of Elizabeth the first, Mary Queen of Scots and key figures such as Baldassare Castiglione and Arbeau (The "Dancing priest of Langre"). End of year performances always reflected the yuletide. While it had long recorded its music for internal use, over this period the work of the consort produced a number of CD's which are now downloadable through its website.

At the end of 2017, and after more than 40 years of research, direction and performance, Helga retired. Over this time, she built an extraordinary asset base of deeply researched choreographed dance material and supporting musical arrangements. And a rich collection of early music instruments and costumes. It is this legacy that the dancers and musicians of the original groups have continued to maintain and leverage. As the Courtly Arts Performers of Victoria they continue to develop and perform programmes that bring alive the vision of creating authentic immersive performance experiences that bring alive an earlier era.



The Courtly Arts Performers of Victoria Inc. with Patron Helga Hill OAM on the occasion of her last appearance as Director and performer. From left: Jan Turner, Liz Mackie, Jennifer Foo, David Danson (rear), Roderick Laird (front), Sally Ranson, Andrew Parkin, Helga Hill, Dominique Murphy, Roger Palmer, Judith Duncan, Michael Noble, Koko Murakashi, Sakia Wells, Tonia Chapman, Trevor Trotter. Image: Courtesy of The Courtly Arts Performers of Victoria Inc.

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People L-R

- Jan Turner
- Liz Mackie
- Jennifer Foo
- David Danson (Rear)
- Roderick Laird (front)
- Sally Ranson
- Andrew Parkin
- Helga Hill
- Dominique Murphy
- Roger Palmer
- Judith Duncan
- Michael Noble
- Yoko Murakashi
- Sakia Wells
- Tonia Chapman
- Trevor Trotter