

## Pioneering Historic Arts

### **The Early Music Consort of Melbourne**

When Helga Hill and her family formed the Early Music Consort in 1973 they were inspired by their mutual love of music and excited by the fact that they were involved in a new/old musical form that had much to offer listeners.

Their basic aim was to purchase and play historic instruments but, as things turned out, their music was to take them into fields undreamed of by them and most other music/arts lovers.

From the outset their music-making proved popular. Renaissance and Medieval instruments attracted much attention, the sounds they made were fascinating and there was the additional appeal generated by a young family playing together – a sight especially appreciated by the elderly who, in many instances, had once enjoyed family music-making around the piano.

In 1973 the ages of the Hill children were Clement (12), Christopher (11), Kathleen (9) and Charmaine (8). With their parents Mark and Helga, they set out to take Early Music around Victoria. Mark Hill had spent most of his early years in Sale in Gippsland and this experience drove him to find performance opportunities in regional areas. In his view, country people should not miss out on the chance to hear the historic music that was now gaining popularity in Melbourne.

Accordingly, during the 1970's, the following country centres had their first experience of Early Music as a result of Consort performances:

Ballarat (2 concerts), Bendigo (2 concerts), Colac, Harrietville (3 concerts for CAE), Hamilton, Horsham, Kyneton, Lorne (3 concerts for CAE), Maryborough (3 concerts), Mildura, Moe, Sale (2 concerts), Shepparton, Warrnambool, and Wodonga.

While many of these tours were arranged and financed (out of ticket sales) by the Consort, a helpful sponsorship through the then Hotham Permanent Building Society greatly assisted the group from 1976 to 1980. By the end of the decade the Consort had presented 24 performances in regional Victoria. It was around this time that the comment was passed that, apart from London and its environs, there was probably no regional area in the world where Early Music was better-known than the state of Victoria.

It should be remembered that these regional presentations had to be spaced between school commitments for the Hill children and a growing call for concerts in and around Melbourne. In those early years the group performed for such organisations as the British, Camberwell and Peninsula Music Societies. They gave an early music festival in Canberra in 1976 and played a major role in the National Gallery of Victoria's Medieval Festival in 1978. The Consort visited the Maryborough (Vic) Golden Wattle Festival each year from 1980 to 1988

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, through its performances, the Consort would be an ideal vehicle to promote the relatively unknown estate. The group's response was to stage 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. These were held in the historic Rippon Lea ball room. 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.

A significant change for the Consort occurred in 1978 with the first appearance of costumed dancers at the *Early Music Proms*. This followed the formation by Helga Hill of the Rippon Lea Renaissance Dancers – a development that had flowed from the dance classes at the estate. This led to a change of emphasis in the Consort's pioneering work as the group took on the additional, quite invaluable, role of accompanying the dancers.

That Melbourne has long been held as one of the world's leading centres for the research, teaching and performance of Renaissance Dance is in no small part due to the willingness of the Consort musicians Helga Hill, Charmaine Arnephy and Kathleen Van Zuylekom who have now supported the dance team for 30 years.

By the early 1980's the addition of the Rippon Lea Renaissance Dancers to Consort performances added substantially to transport and accommodation costs so there were fewer regional tours but, when they did happen, they were a lot more spectacular as the entire team (often with 20 – 24 performers) now wore colourful, as-original court garments – most of them designed and made by Helga Hill. The group, with singers and actors added, gave country people 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.

Sale became a major beneficiary of these developments. From 1982 to 1985 the city enjoyed annual week-long Renaissance festivals that included Renaissance dance classes, costume-making sessions, brass rubbing, student concerts, a Renaissance banquet with the Consort and Rippon Lea Dancers, and Art Gallery and church performances by the group. The Sale Theatre Company joined in this wide-ranging historic arts panorama. There was little like it elsewhere in Australia.

Maryborough in north-west Victoria was another centre to enjoy an inventive, on-going project involving the Hill Family. From 1980 to 1988 the Renaissance Workshop of the Maryborough Golden Wattle Festival was presented by the Early Arts Guild over three days each year in the local Band Hall. Brass rubbing and exhibitions of rare artefacts were part of the Workshop which concluded each time with a wine and cheese tasting of local products and a costumed performance by the Early Music Consort and the Rippon Lea Renaissance Dancers. Again, there was nothing quite like this presentation elsewhere.

Bairnsdale, Geelong, Hamilton, Horsham, Warrnambool and Yarram were other Victorian centres to enjoy major music/dance/drama productions which were also staged interstate in Adelaide, Canberra, Deniliquin and Goulburn. Again, such historical presentations, that combined period instruments and costumes with dances researched from original sources, were unmatched by anything available elsewhere in Australia.

Regional and interstate tours were only part of the Hill Family's contribution to the growing public awareness of Early Arts. For every major performance away from Melbourne there were a number in or near the city.

Additionally, from its very beginnings the Consort took historic music and instruments to numerous city and country schools. The city list is too long to outline here, but – in regional terms – Consort school performances ranged from Mildura in the North, Terang and Camperdown in the West and Sale in the East.

In the 1990's there were changes in the Consort membership. Christopher Hill died in 1991 – a tremendous loss to the group. His performances on Renaissance wind instruments, especially the cornetto, will long be remembered. Mark Hill had been obliged to retire from performances because the growing amount of administration and fund-raising for the Early Arts Guild demanded his full attention. Clement Hill had left the group in the mid-80's due to study and work commitments. However Helga Hill and her now-married daughters Kathleen (Van Zuylekom) and Charmaine (Arnephy) have remained with the Consort to the present day.

On November 27, 1983, the Consort and the Early Arts Guild presented the Renaissance Masque *Totentanz – the dance of Death*. Over a year of planning, costuming and rehearsals preceded that first performance which took place at Caulfield Arts Centre. The program was repeated in Melbourne and at the Sale Renaissance Festival in 1984. This unique production, with its period costumes, original dances, rare instruments and historically-based script set the standard for a flowering of the work of the team in the decade after 1989. Splendid theatrical productions during this period included :

- 1989 *The Royal Entertainment of 1618*  
 Re-enactment of an entertainment for King James I  
 Two presentations in Melbourne
- 1990 *Blame it on Sir Walter Raleigh*  
 An anti-smoking production based on the life of Sir Walter Raleigh.  
 Four presentations in Melbourne plus Canberra, Horsham & Adelaide
- 1991 *A Tale of Three Cities*  
 Based on Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1541)  
 Two presentations in Melbourne, plus Geelong, Hamilton & Horsham
- 1993 *To Catch a Queene*  
 The life and loves of Elizabeth I  
 Two presentations in Melbourne
- 1996 *Crown of Thistles*  
 Based on the life of Mary Queen of Scots  
 Two presentations in Melbourne
- 1998 *Poet, Painter & Musician*  
 Re-enactment of an entertainment for Elizabeth I in 1598  
 One presentation in Melbourne – “400 years to the day”
- 2000 *Dressing up the Queen of England*  
 An entertainment that focussed on the Elizabeth I garment, complete with 4000 pearls, that was made by Helga Hill. The program had a number of performances, including at Yarram Town Hall and at the National Trust home *Labassa*.

Apart from *Blame it on Sir Walter Raleigh* these productions did not enjoy any form of government funding.

From 2000 yet another dimension was added to the work of the Consort as it was called upon to provide music for the growing number of young University of Melbourne singers who were studying the rediscovered Art of Gesture at the Early Music Studio under the direction of Helga Hill. As each vocalist reached a satisfactory standard they are engaged to perform in programs with the Early Music Consort providing the music. The Consort's support for the development of Renaissance Dancing over the years has been increasingly matched by this musical assistance for Gesture – especially in Medieval programs. The value of this work in providing performance experience for young artists can hardly be overestimated.

An important aspect of this promotion of young artists is to be found in the highly successful *Early Music in the Very Round* annual six-concert series set up by the Early Music Consort in Brighton in 2000. Bayside City Council gives substantial support to this venture which employs many young musicians and singers (with gesture) coming from the University of Melbourne's Early Music Studio.

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**The Early Arts achievements of Kathleen Van Zuylenkom and Charmaine Arnephy have been attained despite the demands of work and married life and the arrival of two children (each). Their 35-year contribution to the promotion of Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque arts through their music-making on historic instruments has been a unique gift to the Australian community.**

**Their pioneering presentations of Early Music in the 1970's and 80's (well before local universities became involved) are especially noteworthy – keeping in mind their teenager status during much of this period.**