

1976 – 2006

## Melbourne's Thirty Years of Renaissance Fashion Design

Within two years of the formation of the Early Music Consort of Melbourne in 1973 it was decided that there was little point in playing Renaissance dance music unless dancers were performing to it. And Renaissance dancers just had to be attired in period court garments!

Three years later these simple propositions gave rise to Australia's leading early dance ensemble, the Rippon Lea Renaissance Dancers, and to the spectacular collection of garments the group wears.

The team takes its name from the National Trust's mansion *Rippon Lea* in the Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick where the director, Helga Hill, commenced teaching historic dance in 1976. The Early Music Consort had been invited to use the heritage property for old-world arts, so dance was promptly added to a growing list.

Among the first intake of students was Shane Dunn who, despite little experience in designing, volunteered to make the first period garments for the group. It was a significant offer from one who turned out to be a perfectionist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Renaissance arts and artistry. His view of elaborate Renaissance court garments was that their making was more a matter of construction than of sewing! He aimed for an as-original collection that could be seen up close. This enables the team to process through an audience and to perform in the round instead of being confined to a more distant stage.

Before his departure some years later to follow a career interstate and abroad as a costumier and interior designer, Shane Dunn established a standard of quality for the Rippon Lea Dancers/Early Music Consort costume collection that has been maintained to the present day by Helga Hill.

The fascinating, almost mysterious, old-world image created by the collection is brought about by the use of patterns taken from Renaissance costume books or made up from period paintings. Modern colours and cuts of materials are excluded, while materials and fastenings, as well as jewellery, bags, gloves and other accessories must match those used in Renaissance times. Also, the extensive use of brilliant braids adds a distinctive antique image when a number of costumes are seen together.

Once in historic garments, the Rippon Lea team found that fashions of the past had a profound influence on dance movements. The designs generally prevent elevation of the arms above the horizontal, with the result that early dance manuals had little to say about arm movements. Renaissance dancing is mainly an arms-down activity.

A number of garments that are heavy to carry by hand are surprisingly easy to wear due to their form-fitting designs. In addition to the weight of brocades and other heavy fabrics, some garments have up to twenty metres of braid added for decoration and to

**cover seams. One Elizabethan costume in the collection has over 4000 pearls! In the Renaissance courts they dressed to impress!**

**Much thought is given to garments made for members of the Early Music Consort of Melbourne. While male costumes pose fewer difficulties, female attire has to allow for bass wind instruments, or a bowed gamba or fidel to be held between the knees. Easy movement of the upper torso is important for a lutenist whose sleeves must also be free of buttons or metal or bone attachments. And care is required when musicians change places or move around during performances because garments can become entangled with the twenty or more instruments that may be on stage around the performers' feet.**

**Over 100 garments make up the collection which is unmatched elsewhere in Australia – keeping in mind that this is as-original court attire, not theatre costume.**

**Apart from members of the University of Melbourne Renaissance Dance Ensemble, who for some years have used the wardrobe for their annual first semester concert in Melba Hall, the collection is unavailable to outsiders. The Rippon Lea Renaissance Dancers and Early Music Consort have taken the collection as far afield as Perth, Adelaide and Canberra – and to many places in between – and Helga Hill has used selected costumes for presentations at the Dartington International Summer School in England where she worked on early operas and masques from 1986 to 1997. They have also been used in Austria, Sweden and New Zealand.**

**The Early Arts Guild, which finances the making and maintenance of the costumes, sees the collection as a valuable cultural asset for the people of Melbourne and beyond.**