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Spanish Master

ADAM WASSERMAN talks to the singular maestro Jordi Savall, whose eclectic concerts and recordings are like nobody else's.



Jordi Savall

Over a career that has spanned more than three decades, instrumentalist, conductor, composer and impresario Jordi Savall has established himself as a one-man force of nature in the customarily staid field of early music. With his chamber and vocal ensembles, Hespèrion XXI and La Capella Reial de Catalunya, respectively, and his period-instrument orchestra, Le Concert des Nations, Savall has thrown light upon vast swaths of repertoire straddling the border between medieval and Baroque, Orient and Occident. He has simultaneously and single-handedly revived the viola da gamba, the virtuoso's instrument of choice during the Renaissance and Baroque. Savall spoke about his myriad efforts over green tea and croissants on the morning before the first of his annual recitals at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan.

OPERA NEWS: You've been instrumental in reviving the repertoire of the viola da gamba, yet you began life as a cellist. What inspired the switch?

JORDI SAVALL: The specific character of the viola da gamba is different from every other string instrument. The viol has seven strings and frets like a lute. You can play melody, you can play chords, you can play concertos, you can play chamber music, you can play arias with [separate] voices - everything is there. Sometimes the viol can sound like a violin, like a cello, like a harp, like a lute. This richness of possibility, plus the fact that it has so many strings, makes its sound quite special. And it's a much closer instrument to the human voice. My fascination came especially because it's a forgotten voice, a forgotten sound. As a young musician, I found the possibility of saying, "This instrument has not been played for 200 years" and then making it alive again very attractive.

The instrument is a little mysterious. The pressure of the strings doesn't allow it to have a very strong sound - it's always intimate. This makes its sound a little elegiac. This is why, for example, when Bach had to make a choice in the *St. John Passion* of how best to represent the drama of the moment of Jesus's death, he chose the viola da gamba as the instrument that could express the melancholy, the deepness, the sadness. The viola da gamba was specialized - in *lacrimae*, in *lamento*, in *tombeau* - for this darkness and this resonance. That the viola da gamba's repertoire was so virtuosic and so difficult to learn by the end of the eighteenth century was, in fact, one of the reasons that many people preferred to play cello, which had just four strings and [played] melody.

ON: You've performed an enormous amount of repertoire - from ancient Sephardic songs to J. S. Bach and Marin Marais viola da gamba sonatas to divertissements by Lully to music culled from the Ottoman empire. How do you go about programming performances with so many possible choices?

JS: It is always an evolution. I realized very early that one of the most important things in life is to have the possibility to choose what you would like to do. With music, you have to engage yourself one hundred percent, and you cannot be convincing if you are not convinced by the music itself. If you play a concert, you have to be convinced that this music tells you something, or else it's imperfect. One of the responsibilities we have, as program-makers, is to choose from these many, many pieces. Sometimes you spend days and months examining manuscripts, just to say, "From these one hundred pieces, I need to find six that are really the most beautiful." Not all of the early music written was great in a similar way. Sometimes you have more circumstantial music, which is not so interesting. But you have to find a way to see which pieces are really relevant to be part of today's repertoire.

Of course, the choice is always a personal one. Normally, when I look for new repertoire, I receive a microfilm, I look at the scores, and I listen in my mind and imagine the sounds of what I am looking at. The first choice you make is to look for what is emotional and also what is beautiful. But you also have to find the contrast in the program. Then we start to practice, and sometimes you realize how different these things are when you pull the instruments and the voices from the abstract reading. And then you do the concert. Sometimes one piece doesn't work as well as you imagine it, so you change. It is a long process. People ask me how it's possible to do so many different concerts. I started working and researching in 1965 and then made my first recording in 1976. I had eleven years to prepare.

ON: Your efforts seem always to have been guided and inspired by the confluence of cultures that occurred during the Middle Ages in Spain, when the country was a nexus for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

JS: It's true that the fact that I'm from Spain has inspired me and my wife [early-music soprano Montserrat Figueras] to follow and research these roots. Today Spain is a country that still has problems

with its historical memory. Normally, Spain doesn't accept that we had Arabic and Jewish roots. It's like the Franco period - Spanish people prefer to forget. But it is important to remember that this is part of our culture, part of our richness, part of our originality. You can see this in the architecture, in the literature, in the gastronomy, in everything. It's important to remember how we have reacted to this big injustice at the time of Isabella of Castile - the brutal expulsion, the Inquisition. You get choked up when you realize these things today. When we first started recording with Hespèrion in 1976, one recording was devoted to the printed music from the *Reis Católicos*, and the second record was devoted to Sephardic music. The classical world many times finds oral-music traditions a little incomprehensible. We think that the oral tradition of music is so important in the lives of humans because when a melody has been conserved through three, four hundred years, without any print, without any important name or composer, the only explanation is because this music was essential to the people. They have sung it to the children, and then *they* have sung it, because without this music their life was impossible.



Savall, with harpsichordist Pierre Hantaï and theorbist Xavier Diaz

ON: You conduct performances of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* this month at the Edinburgh Festival, and the production is also preserved on an Opus Arte DVD. Do you have plans to present more opera?

JS: I'm working on *Alcyone*, by Marin Marais. But I'm also preparing one opera by Caldara, *Il Più Bel Nome*, which was the first opera to play in Barcelona, 1708. This was during the war of succession between the Hapsburgs and the Bourbons in Spain. Catalonia was more for the Hapsburgs, and the opera was a gift in honor of the marriage between the prince of Hapsburg, Archduke Charles, and Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Lüneberg in Barcelona.

ON: Through your record label, Alia Vox, you've begun to release discs inspired by both historical and fictional figures - Christopher Columbus, Don Quijote - that are essentially meticulously researched pasticcios cobbling together an era's different strains of music and literature, high and low. Where did the

idea for these history-inspired operas come from?

JS: My inspiration came from [novelist] Elias Canetti, who wrote in his notes in 1942 in Berlin that "Music is the true living history of Humanity," because music always talks to us with emotion, with sensitivity. History without music is something very cold, very not expressive. So I realized the best way to bring music and history together was to take the music alongside original texts of the time. A project like this is a result of twenty years of looking in libraries, books, reading, thinking and finally making a resumé of principal information, then putting it together with music.

Next, we have a project on Francis Xavier, the great missionary who went to Japan for the first time in 1549. He was born in Navarre, went to Paris to study at the university and was one of the first Jesuits. Then he went to Rome, and the Pope asked him to go to the Orient. We'll take the plot of his travels and go through all the principle events of this time. It's a very beautiful project, because it's around the time of *Utopia* by Thomas More, *In Praise of Folly* by Erasmus, the Luther publications against the Roman Church, *The Prince* by Machiavelli. The recording will be the music related to these things, along with the principal texts of these people's theories and readings of this time - from the Christian world to all the contact with the Buddhist monks and the Hindus. This is a very beautiful, very rich project. You will go from Europe - Italy, Portugal - to Africa, Goa, the Malukus, Japan and China. We have some Japanese, Indian and African musicians collaborating.

ON: Because you often perform with your wife and children [Ferran plays theorbo, Ariana is a harpist, and both sing], the Savalls have come to be known as something of an early-music version of the Partridge Family. Not many kids might be clamoring to take over the family business if that business was Spanish Renaissance music. What's the secret?

JS: In a certain way, it's a very natural thing, because our children have always been with us, especially in the summertime, when we travel for concerts. They have always been in contact with music, with our musicians. And they *chose* music. We have never imposed, never forced them to do music. It was very late that we decided to do music together, because for me and for Montserrat, it was very clear that we had to respect their way of making music. We don't perform together very often, because you need to respect the lives of your children - they have to have the feeling that they are independent. But, in a year we do maybe twenty or thirty concerts. It's something we don't push, but when it happens, we are *very* happy. □

More information can be found at [Alia Vox \(http://www.alia-vox.com/\)](http://www.alia-vox.com/).

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