



Theme & Variations

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Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions.

Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

Early music: vocation and devotion

Despite using them regularly, I have always considered the terms *ancient* and *early music* to be somehow dubious and inconclusive, given that they commonly refer to vocal and/or instrumental music from the Baroque, Renaissance and even Middle Ages. Does it make any sense to exclude from this scope for example the very interesting recording of Mozart's *Requiem* with the Akademie für Alte Musik and the Choir of the Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR-Klassik, 2020) or the captivating recordings of Haydn's symphonies with Il Giardino Armonico (Alpha)? Or, if we are thinking for example of the use of historical instruments, is it not legitimate for any specialist to claim that gut strings continued to be used by most instrumentalists until the 20th century, that the cello only began to be played with endpin at the beginning of the XIX century or that Johannes Brahms preferred to hear his symphonies or the famous *Trio op. 40* played with natural horn? By the way, it should not be forgotten that one of the last masterpieces in which the composer wrote specifically for the natural horn was Maurice Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, in the orchestral version dated... 1910.

FEATURED GUEST

Jordi Savall



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Gambist and conductor Jordi Savall is an unavoidable reference in early music. Founder of the groups Hespèrion XXI (1974), La Capella Reial de Catalunya (1987) and Le Concert des Nations (1989), and of the record label AliaVox (1998), he recorded more than 200 records, of which more than 2 million copies were sold. Widely awarded and distinguished throughout his career, among others with the title of Doctor Honoris Causa by the Universities of Évora, Barcelona Leuven and Basel, he was named Artist for Peace by UNESCO in 2008.

Trying to put aside the ambiguity of the terms and confessing right away my great personal admiration (certainly inherited from the same passion of some of my first teachers) for the music of Machaut, Palestrina, Bach and their contemporaries, it is curious that, at times, the field of early music seems to be considered as a world apart: either you flaunt the flag of a "historically informed interpretation" or you don't. Is it really so?

One of the great savants and specialists in ancient music of our times is the Catalan Jordi Savall, whom I asked where his vocation for this genre came from, bearing in mind that he even took his first steps in music by the most conventional path. «The enthusiasm for the music of Simpson, Marais or Bach came from before, but it was especially after finishing my cello studies that I realized there was a huge repertoire for viola da gamba to be discovered. So I decided to give up the cello because the challenge of tracking a new world and creating something in that world fascinated me.» It should be noted that Savall was self-taught in learning the viola da gamba: «I practised 8 hours a day for 10 years to learn how to play the viola da gamba correctly, without any help. My teacher was the music itself and finally I could find my way based on the information I could gather and assimilate.»

His vocation was therefore joined by the devotion to the instrument and to its repertoire, often found under a blanket of dust in an almost immaculate shelf of a library in Paris, Rome or London. «In the 1960s, nothing was edited and the only possibility of accessing the music of Ortiz or Sainte-Colombe was to go to libraries and ask for microfilms of the originals», says Savall. I ask him if he believes that this commitment to the historical music heritage, so characteristic of a specialist in early music, is being lost with the passage of time and with the emergence of new digitalization technologies. «It is true that nowadays any *facsimile* can be found on the internet and modern editions of old works abound, but there is one thing that does not change: even if you have an *urtext* version, it always turns out to be an interpretation of the original.» Savall underlines the uniqueness of the original document as the only truly reliable link to its creator: «even in Beethoven's symphonies I continue to discover details in the autographs that are not included in modern editions, or rather, they appear slightly altered and are already a supposedly rational interpretation.»

At 80 years of age but with unshakable energy and enthusiasm, Savall argues that it is not that Monteverdi or Haendel have anything that Hindemith or Bartók do not have, or vice versa: «Each era produces its level of composers geniuses, as well as of painters, who represent the discovery of new creative ways. Some composers are simply indispensable and we cannot forget or ignore them regardless of the time in which they lived. And today we know that the closer we get to the composer's idea, the easier it is to evoke and highlight the genius of his music.»

In this sense, it is pertinent to remember that the great evolution in the quality and quantity of specialized ensembles has completely transformed the interpretive paradigm of the last 40 or 50 years. «Modern orchestras usually don't have the proper technical resources to make early music. In the 1970s, I made much more early music with modern orchestras than I do today, because there are already many specialized groups with excellent technical and practical resources. They have gained their own space and programmers prefer to invite these artists to their seasons and festivals.»

Finally, there is a topic on which I am particularly interested in the experience of Jordi Savall: whether or not there is sometimes some contempt for musicians who even started training or a career in a more "traditional" field, but who finally opted exclusively for early music? «It exists and I suffered this disregard myself», says Savall categorically, acknowledging that «it is true that there have always been many mediocre musicians who hide in the supposed specialization in ancient music and others who use almost exclusively musicological knowledge to justify the music they make.» But he also emphasizes that music is an art with different and diverse parameters and levels, and nowadays the technical exigency and the supposed perfection sometimes swallow up other much more important values, such as the musician's humanity and the artistic dimension of the music itself. «Even at an amateur level, where some of us might think that the musicians are out of tune and everything sounds bad, the music happens and these musicians are enjoying immensely the music they are creating. Like when a mother sings a lullaby to her baby: the baby doesn't care at all if the mother is out of tune, he cares to feel emotion and love. This is the magic of music.»