

THE KING OF SPAIN

by ALEX ROSS

Jordi Savall at the Metropolitan Museum

Issue of 2005-05-02

Posted 2005-04-25

When the Catalan viol player Jordi Savall presented three concerts at the Metropolitan Museum earlier this month, one musical border after another seemed to melt away—borders between past and present, composition and improvisation, “popular” and “classical,” East and West. Centuries-old songs and dances glowed with sadness and jumped for joy. The sounds of a dozen different nations and three world religions consorted in a richly believable utopia. Savall’s first program opened with a trio of far-flung pieces: “Quantas Sabedes Amare,” a *cantiga* by the thirteenth-century Galician poet Martin Codax; “Nastaran,” an instrumental piece from Afghanistan in the *naghma* genre; and “Noumi, Noumi Yaldatii,” a Hebrew lullaby. Later in the performance, Savall pointed out that the music of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures often features similar or even identical melodic shapes. As he illustrated with a few phrases on his viola da gamba, a sentimental vision of global unity acquired heartbreaking force.

The Met called the series “Celebrating Jordi Savall,” and, amid the usual parade of famous, anonymous maestros, here, finally, was a man worth celebrating. Savall is not only a performer of genius but also a conductor, a scholar, a teacher, a concert impresario (he founded the Hespèrion XXI, Le Concert des Nations, and La Capella Reial de Catalunya ensembles, all of which accompanied him to New York), a record-label director (his is called Alia Vox), a minor film personality (he played on the soundtrack of the 1991 movie “Tous les Matins du Monde”), and the patriarch of a formidable musical family. He was born in Barcelona in 1941, and still lives in the area. With his wavy mane and courtly beard, he could pass for one of El Greco’s more debonair Spanish knights. Part of his mission is to restore the splendor of Iberian musical traditions, which have long been disparaged by the Teutonic mind-set of the classical world. Appropriately enough, Savall performed two of his concerts in the Medieval Sculpture Hall, in front of the great choir screen from Valladolid Cathedral, where King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were married, in 1469.

The ancestry of the viola da gamba, or viol, can be traced to Central Asia, where bowed string instruments were first observed in the tenth century. Viol-like instruments appeared in Moorish Spain not long afterward. (Perhaps this is why Savall placed a *naghma* piece at the beginning of his series.) The viol looks like an ancestor of the cello, but it has more in common with the guitar or the lute. It is much lighter in construction, so that even the softest tones resonate handsomely, and its strings lie flatter on the bridge, so that a single stroke of the bow can produce rich chords. On the debit side, the viol has a hard time making itself heard in a large ensemble, which is why the more muscular cello began to supersede it in the Baroque period.

No one plays this eccentric, eloquent instrument more beautifully than Savall. Minute details of phrasing, dynamics, and timbre join together in an endlessly varied singing line. The constant interweaving of melody and chords has a pronounced hypnotic effect, as Savall and friends prove on classic recordings of such masterworks as John Dowland’s “Lachrimae,” William Lawes’s Consort Sets, and the *Pièces de Viole* by Marin Marais and his teacher, Sainte Colombe (the lead characters in “Tous les Matins du Monde”). Anyone who thinks that the music of several centuries ago is less emotionally immediate than the modern product needs to hear a few of these disks. The Dowland, in particular, should have been packaged with appropriate medication: “Lachrimae” was published in the same year as the Second Quarto of “Hamlet,” and it goes to the brink of the same abyss.

Savall has recaptured, as far as anyone can tell, not just the technique but also the artistic spirit of the Renaissance musicians who made the viol the center of their world. One of his guiding lights is a treatise published in 1553 by Diego Ortiz, a composer-performer from Toledo, which shows the novice gambist how to embroider a given melody or chord progression with ornaments, variations, and outright inventions. It is an art of controlled improvisation, closer to jazz than to modern classical composition. Richard Taruskin, in his monumental new history of music, describes such instructional treatises as glimpses of a “great submerged iceberg of sound”—everything about the musical past that dots and lines on parchment do not preserve.

From the beginning, Savall has been lucky to find musicians who share the disciplined freedom of his style. His most important collaborator is the soprano Montserrat Figueras, to whom he has been married for thirty-seven years. She, too, looks beyond the cold facts of notation to grasp the spirit of the age: her smoky, penetrating, flatly expressive voice falls somewhere between grand opera and rural folksinging, and combines the best aspects of both. The other dominant presence in Savall's smaller ensembles is the percussionist Pedro Estevan, whose technique runs the gamut from traditional Spanish folk music to Senegalese drumming and the European avant-garde. A heavily bearded man who slightly resembles Professor Dumbledore in "Harry Potter," he contributes pattering polyrhythms, swaggering martial beats, and crisp splashes of tambourine. Whether anything like this racily smooth, head-nodding sound was heard in the background of Renaissance songs and dances is anyone's guess, but the earthiness of Estevan's approach rings historically true: even the courtliest European music of the Renaissance and the Baroque overlapped at every turn with the music of the streets.

Savall's two concerts in the Medieval Sculpture Hall provided a rough map of his world. One, with the players of Le Concert des Nations, presented a sumptuous portrait of court music of the Baroque: the ballet given for Louis XIII in 1627, excerpts from Purcell's "Fairy Queen," Rameau's "Les Indes Galantes." The other was an almost purely domestic affair, with Savall and Figueras joined by their children Arianna and Ferran. Arianna plays the harp and sings in a light, pure voice; she has released a record under her own name. Ferran has studied the theorbo, or bass lute, and has also taken up singing, not in early-music circles but in jazz clubs around Barcelona. With the addition of Arianna and Ferran's pop-inflected songs to the music of Spain, Greece, Israel, Afghanistan, and so on, the program became mentally hard to navigate; as a friend commented, the border between early music and smooth jazz is one that should perhaps remain intact. But it was a thrill to watch this extraordinary family making music together. During the slower stretches, I imagined a Savall Family sitcom: "But, Dad, I don't want to play theorbo!"

The final event in the series, with the players of Le Concert des Nations and the singers of La Capella Reial, was an overwhelming experience, the concert of the year. It took place at the Temple of Dendur, where the Met presents music several times each season. Savall chose the theme "Music and Songs of War and Love," with vocal works by Monteverdi predominating: the mini-opera "Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda," in which the baritone Furio Zanasi gave a happily blood-curdling performance; "Tirsi e Clori," with Arianna Savall again; and, the ne plus ultra, Monteverdi's time-stopping madrigal "Lamento della Ninfa," with instrumentals by Marini and Rossi providing a sombre frame. Figueras drenched the vocal line with her wine-dark tone; Andrew Lawrence-King offered piercing embroidery on the harp; and Savall somehow remained the master of the scene even as he confined himself to four repeating notes. That one quarter hour of music was as good as it gets, and I became downcast in the middle, because I realized that it had to end.

Even amid the prevailing gloom, the spirit of the dance was present throughout. By finishing up with Juan Arañés's 1624 *chacona* "A La Vida Bona," which can be heard on Alia Vox's unofficial dance-party CD, "Villancicos y Danzas Criollas," Savall reminded us that certain of Monteverdi's gravely expressive bass lines echoed the sensual dances that the conquistadores brought back from the New World. Estevan banged out fat beats on his big green drum, and the circle of Savall's world was complete. ♦