

Jordi Savall - Goodwill Ambassador

Interview by Philippe Venturini (Classica n ° 233, June 2021)

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How did a busy musician like you, always on the road, experience the silence imposed by the covid?

In two ways, one very positive, the other negative. The second, everyone can guess, it is linked to the cessation of concerts leading to the suspension of the remuneration of musicians. It is very difficult for the members of my ensembles, especially for those who do not live in France, where there is a real policy of assistance to intermittent workers. This is not the case in countries like Italy or Spain. But I also discovered an aspect of life that I hadn't enjoyed for years: that of having time for yourself, the pleasure of going out for a walk with my wife, of sitting on a café terrace, of being able to discuss, read, take care of the garden, tidy up my library. Getting back in touch with everyday life and not thinking about the plane you take the next day, the scores to prepare, the strings of the viol to replace ... The pleasure of living from day to day. So much so that preparing the luggage again costs me ...

I guess work was not excluded from this period.

No, of course. I took the opportunity to do research, study scores, immerse myself in long-term projects, like *La Clémence de Titus* by Mozart in Salzburg in 2023, and short-term, like *La Création* by Haydn which I will be directing at Barcelona then Paris in June, Bach's *Mass in B minor* in Leipzig and Barcelona in July and the end of the Beethoven cycle which was interrupted by the covid, while on tour and nearly all recorded. Last October, in fact, we had to abandon the recording of *Symphony No. 9* without the finale because there were members of the choir and I who were infected. Fortunately, I had no no breathing problems or fever, but I was exhausted for three weeks. I didn't even have the energy to read or listen to music anymore. We then reflect on

our vulnerability, on our way of approaching life. Daily walks and gymnastics, which would not normally be possible, allowed me to go back up the hill.

If this painful episode has slowed down your activity, it feels like time has no hold on you. You are going to be 80 years old and still lead a very active life.

I still have the same pleasure to work, study, and the privilege to passionately love my job, but also the happiness of having found love and to live intensely with my wife Maria Bartels. Finally, it is this balance between personal and professional life that brings me deep serenity. And then we, the musicians, have the chance to meet all day long with geniuses who have left us this wonderful music. Spending a week with the sacred music of Tomàs Luis de Victoria is like smoking spiritual cannabis. A month with Beethoven's symphonies remains an extraordinary experience, When you have time to go deeper into the work, to see that each member of the orchestra invests himself like a soloist and that it works, it gives an incredible energy. In the musician's life, there is added the dimension of sharing and exchange which is fundamental. I have many faults, but not that of being an authoritarian, autocratic leader. I think it is always better to convince than to impose. Collective success depends more on the support of all than on the authority of one.

How is this authority obtained, moreover?

One can not have it without the knowledge, the ideas, the project, the arguments of one who wants conductor. Authority is given to us by the musicians who recognize competence and artistic quality. But the art of interpretation can only develop in freedom, not in constraint.

There is, however, in Beethoven's symphonies a pugnacity, a sense of challenge, a power which seems to call for this authority and which does not correspond to your personality. But these Beethovenian characters can be seen in your recording.

How did you do it?

There are several answers, and the keys are very varied; first of all the historical and philosophical knowledge of the time, of the life and ideas of Beethoven as well as the testimonies of the great artists of his time. Then, the in-depth study of the structure and musical dynamics of each symphony, and all that can be decisive to understand them, from the autograph scores and the annotations kept in the individual parts used during the first performances, such as bow strokes, character and tempo indications. And finally personal experience in the conception of musical phrasing from the mastery of the language and techniques of the bow. This last aspect relates especially to my learning of the viol. When I became interested in this instrument in 1964, I was struck to find that the last viola da gamba players had all disappeared for over 180 years. No teacher could therefore be the bearer of this ancient art and I thought that I had to fend for myself and find out what was the specific knowledge of this instrument so long forgotten. I decided to discover their mysteries, starting from the study of the original scores, the secular treatises, the prefaces of the old masters and their correspondence. I had to decipher and understand a new world; to know why we considered the third finger (the one which rests the horsehair against the strings) as the soul of the music, why we had to play the bow in the air. It was fascinating to learn why the viol had such a varied number of bows, on which no other instrument had left any written traces. After ten years of study and intense work, in 1975, thanks to Michel Bernstein's new label Astrée, I was able to start recording the forgotten wonders of Couperin, Marais, Forqueray, Caix d'Hervelois, Sainte-Colombe, De Machy, Bach, Ortiz, Hume, etc.

How was the work organized on Beethoven's symphonies?

To succeed, it took time. The nine symphonies have been divided into four programs. To prepare each of them, we had to organize two academies, the first, for preparation, and, after one month, the second, for improvement. For each, we had six days of work, six hours a day, with master classes on sound, articulation, how to establish tension, the difference between piano and pianissimo, sforzandos, dynamics. You first have to prepare the ground well and pay attention to all the details that are the soul of the music. Again, today I use the same method to develop a Beethoven symphony as that of yesterday for a piece by Marin Marais. I had no idea then how to play this music. And I came back to it every day, applying the knowledge discovered in my historical research. It is then that little by little the music gives the keys, it ends up indicating in which direction to go to find its fullness. The same goes for Beethoven. From historical knowledge and the score, you have to know where you are going, but, by interpreting it, it is the music itself that inspires us to find the right way, the natural phrasing and not artificially accentuated or imposed by a metronome. And for that, it takes time and listening. As in a romantic relationship.

About the metronome and therefore the tempo, the ones you adopted are quite lively.

They approach those of Beethoven but I do not make it an absolute principle. A tempo gives an indication but it does not prevent fluctuating, varying, breathing. Coming from the Baroque and not from Mahler, I know that stringed instruments could experience a great diversity of bow strokes, such as those indicated in Etienne Loulié's treatise [1654-1702]: "*Coups d'Archet express. Dry, of double expression. Fed, express discard. Throw, express throw followed by a throw. Swell, cut. Supported or fed.* » He thus indicates to us a line where, after the tension on the string, we must push and « throw » the bow. [He sings .] It goes laaaaaa and tac at the end with the bow in the air. This figure is often found in Beethoven's symphonies, as in the first two chords of the "*Heroic* " *Symphony* . We put a lot of pressure and we make a kind of pizzicato with the bow. As a gambist, I am used to often stretching the string like the string of a bow, to use the bow as one does with the

arrow, to tear the sound. As a young cellist, I remember playing a concerto by Romberg, a contemporary of Beethoven, in which a passage was mentioned " *alla Gamba* ", which was the equivalent of the Italian term " *ponticello* ", that is to say playing very closely to the bridge so as to give a tension and therefore a particular sound. This is necessary in some passages, as in the second movement *Adagio* from *Symphony # 4* which often add twenty-four notes on one stroke of legato bow. This supports the tension without deploying large gestures and avoid dividing the bow stroke. Gut stringed instruments also offer a sound that is at the same time much more articulate, fuller, warmer and more colorful. My bedside book has long been *On the Spiritual in the Art* of Kandinsky. The sound is not born only of the technique but also of the feeling, the emotion...

Color remains one of the remarkable characteristics of your orchestras. There is a Savall sound. How do we go about preserving it, especially in Beethoven's symphonies where young musicians trained during academies take part?

Our orchestra brings together about thirty faithful with whom I have worked for more than twenty years and twenty young people, chosen after demanding auditions, and who participated in the project for two years. They therefore had time to integrate. The evolution has also been surprising. While the first academy took a little time to be organized, the third, devoted to *Symphonies Nos. 3 and 5*, allowed a symphony to be put on correctly in two days. There was already a coherence, but also a formidable emulation between the experienced musicians, carried by the vitality of the young people, and the young people, supported by their elders. It was of course necessary to keep the same team to carry out the project during 2019 and 2020.

While following the course of the nine symphonies, have you noticed a regular evolution of the language or particular points?

For Beethoven, each symphony operates a revolution, calls into question the previous one, even if we know that the *Third* is the most radical. On the other hand, we tend to neglect *Symphonies Nos 1, 2 and 4*. The latter is however extremely beautiful, passionate, tender... Think of the *Adagio*. Wonderful! [He *sings*.] You can't help but be touched while playing this. I often say that you can't lie with music. If we pretend, even a person without musical training will immediately notice it.

How to find this emotion when we record?

I discovered the key to this phenomenon very early on, when I made my first records. During a series of takes in a studio in Germany, the artistic director exclaimed: "*It's okay, we've got everything!*" And I replied: "*No, no. We were together, it was fair, the sound was beautiful, but we haven't started making music yet*". It was a little later, in 1975, that I became aware of this, during the recording of pieces from Marin Marais' *Second Book* for Astrée in the church of Saint-Lambert-des-Bois. The acoustics are perfect there, but this small town in Yvelines is located near an aerodrome and we could only record from 8 p.m on. We often finished at 8 a.m. and I found that my playing from 2 a.m. had absolutely nothing to do with the one I had prepared at home. There is a mystery born of fatigue which obliges us, in order to overcome it, to have access to this other dimension, so nicely defined in French as "an extra soul". This effort, this fusion between body and mind then allows us to approach the emotion of the concert. There is no emotion without suffering ...

Does this mean that musicians who want to work with you should expect special hours?

Yes, up to a point. The musicians who accompany me on my adventures are wonderful because they know that to be successful you need an extreme involvement, so they accept the suffering that can be part of very intense and sustained work. But today we work with fairly normal schedules: six hours of work, between 5 p.m. and midnight, or a little later, but we do sessions of a maximum of two hours. My reputation comes mainly from the way we worked in the heroic years, between 1974 and 1994, and which even became a subject of jokes. We experienced a borderline case in January 1994, during the first recording of the "*Heroic*" *Symphony*. The recording began at 6 p.m., when the museum was closed, and after a night of intense work, only interrupted through a few coffee breaks and buffet breaks, around 7:30 a.m. The following morning, we found that we were still missing the recording of the *Funeral March*, without which all the work done during the long night would have been for naught. I then asked if everyone was still ready to finish the recording, given that the third horn player had to leave at 8 am for the airport. While we had just finished recording, some musicians were discussing the need to form a union to regulate working conditions. But thinking of the enormous effort of a whole night's work, another replied, jokingly, that they should rather alert Amnesty International! Seriously, I am aware that the fatigue that results from intense and continuous activity can cause problems, worrying some musicians, especially singers. And you have to know how to take breaks between sessions. But when we reach this limit point, extraordinary things happen, which can always be heard, like in our recording of *The Vespers of the Virgin* of Monteverdi which was carried out in the Church of Saint Barbara in Mantua, in a very cold November of 1988, and which also ended in the very late night. It is a reality that I have had to experience often. If you go beyond your comfort zone, it is more likely to reach a certain dramatic intensity.

Your upcoming concerts will of course show Beethoven, delayed by the covid, but also Schubert. There was a time when Bruckner's name had even been mentioned. What is it?

At 80, the horizon is narrowing and we therefore want to include projects that are close to our hearts, to learn more, to discover. Schubert is thus on the program of the 2021 academies of the

Concert des Nations, with his *Symphonies Nos 8 and 9*. And if all goes well, then come Mozart's Requiem, Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I am preparing a program for the Brucknerfest Linz in 2024, with the so-called symphony " No. 0 " Bruckner, associated with the " *Unfinished* " by Schubert and *Symphony " Zwickau "* by Schumann.

These works, essentially symphonic, integrate elements from popular music, a phenomenon known since the Middle Ages. How do you hear it?

It is a constant in the history of music. All the great composers wanted to address the people, including Beethoven, who did not compose only for the elite. He was very familiar with popular dances and sought to harness their energy. Schubert did the same as evidenced by his *Symphony No. 9* .

Other news, discographic this time, you have just recorded music for Holy Week of Tomás Luis de Victoria. You also really appreciate Cristóbal de Morales. Do you still intend to carry out a complete of these two great masters of the Spanish Renaissance?

Alas, no, I gave up the idea for lack of national support. Spain is unaware of the richness of its heritage. It's a shame. I had already expressed my disapproval by refusing the National Music Award in 2014 and by sending an open letter to the then Minister of Education, Culture and Sports, José Ignacio Wert, denouncing " *a dramatic disinterest and a profound incompetence in the defense and promotion of art and its creators* ". Nothing has changed since then. I took advantage of the covid crisis to organize the Federation of independent professional ensembles and performers of early music in Europe [FEIPIIMHE], whose statutes were filed last February. This non-profit association brings together, among others, the Baroque Orchestra of Amsterdam, the Baroque Orchestra of Seville, the Copenhagen Concerto, The Circle of Harmony, the Choir and the Balthasar-Neumann Ensemble ...

What is the objective ?

To be a relay towards the European institutions, the Commission and the Parliament, and the public authorities to improve the cause of independent musicians and obtain recognition and harmonization of their statutes. It is not normal that, during a crisis like the one we are going through, the musicians of the subsidized orchestras are paid while the independent musicians remain deprived of all resources. Musical life today still operates on structures inherited from the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, when orchestras played everything, including Bach's Passions. Since then, things have radically changed, the repertoires are distributed among different types of ensembles but the funding method has remained the same. Independent musicians are therefore in a particularly precarious situation, but also concert halls which can only offer fees that barely cover the cost of the performance. The rehearsals are then voluntary. We cannot continue like this. It is also necessary to homogenize the tax regimes relating to musical life.

Is there also an artistic dimension in this project?

Yes, and it is driven by history. It should be understood that Europe created, as early as 1400, a unique, polyphonic musical language, which has taken over the entire territory since the Renaissance because musicians traveled more and more in all the main courts of Europe. "*It is the true language of all Europeans, and it has offered it to the whole world*" (Georges Corm). Monteverdi and Vivaldi or Mozart and Beethoven are not only Italians or Austrians or Germans, we consider them above all as Europeans. We should therefore support the groups that bring this music to life, which represents the true European language. If the works of art of the past can be admired in museums, music needs performers to be heard, to exist. This is why the FEIPIMHE Prometheus XXI wants each independent musician and ensemble to be recognized as a "living museum of music". Without all these

independent musicians, who do rigorous and in-depth work on historical practices, it would be impossible today to listen to Josquin Desprez, Monteverdi, Bach, Rameau, and even the original versions of the classics and romantics with period instruments. It is the survival of the music of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque and even the recovery of the original sound of the classical orchestra that is at stake.

There is a second anniversary this year, the 30th anniversary of the release of Every Morning in the World. Looking back, what do you take away from this experience?

I remember that by choosing the music according to the scenario, I realized that we were going to give a very melancholic image of the viola da gamba when its literature can be extremely varied. And I was convinced that, despite the film's obvious qualities, it would not leave the closed-circuit of the art cinemas and would therefore only reach a small audience. The success surprised us all enormously. I believe that it is explained by the adequacy between the character of the music, the novel of Pascal Quignard, the beauty of the images of Yves Angelo and the work of the actors. I think that thanks to the subtle and expressive art of Alain Corneau, this film made it possible for a young generation to discover, which knew nothing about the viol and its repertoire, a music to which it could be sensitive, by its expressive and intimate character.

And what memories do you have of working with Alain Corneau?

I consider him to be my last viol master. Let me explain. I was about to record (Marais') *La Rêveuse*, in the middle of the night. The music was to accompany the scene during which Marin Marais declares to his wife Madeleine that he is leaving her. It's obviously a very trying moment, but she asks him to play *La Rêveuse* for her one last time. I start, and Alain interrupts me very quickly and says to me: " *No, no, Jordi, that is not going at all! It's not a concert. You are Marin Marais and you must play for this woman whom you loved and who, you know, is going to die*". I

then understood that you could make music by being an actor, by slipping into the skin of the composer. To be Hamlet, not to read Hamlet.

Does this mean that you identify yourself each time with the author of the music you are performing?

Not exactly, but during the concert there is an intense exchange between him and you. It's inevitable. In a studio, deprived of the presence of the public, you have to find a way to get in the mood. This film allowed me to become aware of this phenomenon, the cinema being moreover the meeting of all the arts.

Opera can also claim it. However, it does not occupy an essential place in your artistic journey. Why ?

I first worked a lot on the viola da gamba, practiced chamber music, then conducted my orchestras, the choir. All this requires a great investment. Opera can mobilize you for two months at the theater. It is very restrictive and I must admit that sometimes it is complicated to combine it in a satisfactory way with my commitments as a soloist or as conductor of my different ensembles, Hespèrion XXI, La Capella Reial de Catalunya and Le Concert des Nations.

And you have to find an agreement with the staging. How do you do when what you see goes against your beliefs or the music?

In July 2023, I will be conducting *Le Couronnement de Poppée* at the Liceu in Barcelona in a production by Calixto Bieito which will probably not correspond to my ideal vision of this opera. What to do? You have to

try, accept the bet. But there is always some form of dialogue that is necessary to find a balance. For *Alcyone*, I thus obtained, during the magnificent final chaconne, that the stage was not to be completely invaded by a noisy troupe which drowned the music and ignored its rhythm. Collaboration between the stage and the music is essential. There is no reason that one should prevail over the other. And it is not a question of modern or not modern. For example, I really liked Katie Mitchell's staging of George Benjamin's *Lessons in Love and Violence*. But seeing a singer in a frock coat and underpants seems to me of no interest.

You are currently preparing a new production of *L'Orfeo* by Monteverdi at the Opéra Comique. Do the first things you saw reassure you?

Yes, because the director Pauline Bayle starts from a deep knowledge of the mythology and the philosophy of the time to conceive a show which is neither historical nor modern, but preserves the spiritual dimension of the work, an absolute example of perfect love, the story of a man who descends into hell to save the one he loves, even at the risk of his life. There is also, of course, a sacred, Christic reading of this drama.

Did Monteverdi then use a particular language?

Yes, with his ideal of *recitar cantando*, he limited the singing and excessive ornaments to make room for the poetry of the word. He is the first great master to recreate the ancient theater in which text and music come together. It thus fits fully into an era which marks the birth of opera. We sing, we dance and we tell stories, and the great lyrical and dramatic moments are carried by Orfeo and the Messaggiera, but also by the choirs of nymphs and shepherds, the intervention of the Musica, the duet of Apollo and Orfeo, and of course the famous "Possente spirto" during which Orpheus begs Charon, the nautonier, to let him cross the Styx. I also like to say that *L'Orfeo* is the first and the last

opera. The last because *The Return of Ulysses* and *The Coronation of Poppea* , were intended for a paying theater and no longer for an aristocratic audience, resort to another language, more subject to the imperatives of the time, to the taste of the public. In *L'Orfeo* , Monteverdi composes exactly as he wishes. Each note and each interval have been chosen with an impressive economy of means to express the text while maintaining its intelligibility.

How to interpret the end, different from that, traditionally accepted, validated by Ovid for example, who sees Orpheus die under the blows of maenads? In the opera, he ascends to heaven, accompanied by his father Apollo. Is it a Christian vision?

Yes, absolutely. Orpheus, who perhaps thinks of himself as being invincible because he is a demigod, is punished because of his excesses. But he was saved by his father, which in fact gave him a Christian dimension.

France is fortunate to welcome you regularly. You have a long-standing relationship with our country.

Yes, because France is aware of the value of culture unlike Spain. When Malraux was in office, Franco was still in power and that changes everything. Here, we chose men like Marcel Landowski to direct the music, who knew what they were talking about. I was lucky, a young musician (still a cellist), in 1965, to come to the National Library to discover the scores of Marin Marais, Sainte-Colombe, Couperin, Forqueray. A little later I got to know Geneviève Thibault, Countess of Chambure, then head of the Musée instrumental du Conservatoire de Paris. Whenever I went to London to play with Trevor Pinnock and his English Concert, I would stop over in Paris and drive to her place. This musicologist, a specialist of the 15th and 16th centuries, had built up a fabulous collection of old instruments. One evening, she suggested that I try out several viols because she wanted me to present a Sainte-

Colombe et Marais recital as part of the concerts of the Société de musique d'Alliennes which she had co-founded in 1926. I found one, marvelous, which, I think, belonged to Antoine Forqueray, and which she authorized me to keep as much as I wanted! I was not touching on the ground.

And then you have been associated with emblematic places, the Ambronay Festival yesterday, the Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans today.

From the end of the 1970s, my artistic relations with France Musique (Jacques Merlet) were very important, and with several festivals, cities and concert halls in France: between 1975 and 1980, the Festival de Saintes (Alain Pacquier), from 1988 with the Ambronay Festival (Alain Brunet), then 1989 with Les jours baroques de Versailles (Vincent Berthier de Lioncourt and Philippe Beaussant) and also with the Concerts of the Palace of Versailles (Laurent Brunner), not to mention the Parisian Concerts and the Salle Gaveau (Philippe Maillard), or the Festival de Saint-Florent-le-Vieil (Jack Lang), and more recently our Festival de l'Abbaye de Fontfroide, our residence at the Philharmonie de Paris (Laurent Bayle) and that at the saline royale of Arc-et-Senans (Hubert Tassy). In 2015, I needed additional help to carry out symphonic programs or large ensembles which take time and require large numbers. It was then, that for the first time, I asked for the support of the Ministry of Culture in France, and, since 2016, we have been fortunate to be able to work at the saline royale where I have since been in residence with Le Concert of Nations. This is also where we carried out the Beethoven 250 academies during 2019 and 2020, with all of Beethoven's symphonies, thanks to the support of the French Ministry of Culture, that of Catalonia (Diputació de Barcelona) and various private patrons (Ariane de Rothschild Foundation, Banco de Sabadell ...).

This year also marks the fifteenth edition of the Fontfroide Festival, a "Time of resilience and joy". You who are concerned about the march of humanity, committed to many causes, how do you see this world which seems more and more divided, compartmentalized, for religious, economic and identity reasons?

We have a duty to be optimistic but also to fight against what affects us. And we must not wait for change to come from the political class. In an increasingly unjust and unequal world, we should no longer hope for a welfare state that would solve all the problems. Everyone must also take their responsibilities, be aware of the consequences of their actions in order to participate in the improvement of the world. It starts at home, in the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children, then in our building, our city and so on. Respect, harmony must reign. In addition, we can no longer think only of our comfort, our privileges, if we hope for change. And no longer accept the unacceptable.

For example ?

The way Europe treats refugees. About a hundred have recently perished at sea. Money is paid to Turkey so that it welcomes them and that they do not come to Europe, but to receive them in decent conditions. Denmark does not renew the residence permit of Syrians settled for several years, including students in the course of their studies, and encourages them to return to their country of origin. The fear of the other, of the unknown, of the foreigner arouses irrational reactions, even violent, favourable to the movements of the extreme right. It is appalling. If in the European territory we are not able to enforce our own human rights standards, that is the end of Europe.

The commitment in favor of ecology holds today, and rightly, an important place in the projects of the future. Are you sensitive to it?

Yes, this is part of the individual actions I was referring to, like buying organic fruits and vegetables whenever possible and preferably. I am also lucky to have a small vegetable garden and I have been a vegetarian for over forty years. Everyone can, at their own level, help

improve things, avoid food waste, eat more simply, but above all react against industrial massification by buying local products.

So you don't plan to stop?

Why stop doing what nourishes you and gives meaning to your life when you're in good health? I think of Gandhi, who, at the same age as mine, wanted to consider each day as the last, therefore not to leave anything essential for tomorrow, but, to continue to work and to study each day, as if he was going to live again hundred years. This is the only possible philosophy. Every morning when I wake up, I am amazed to be still alive, not to suffer too much pain, to still have my clear head. It is extraordinary to have the chance to be able to live in harmony and the happiness of shared love and to exercise a profession that gives you such human and creative fullness.

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