

A Meeting of Worlds

Where do the worlds of traditional music and classical music meet?
When you travel back in time, as **Simon Broughton** discovers

Granada's Alhambra Palace, which means 'Red Castle' in Arabic, dates from the ninth century

Jean-Christophe Frisch, the director of the French ensemble Le Baroque Nomade is talking to me from Bahrain where he's researching a new project. "You know the word 'baroque' comes from here?" he says. "The original meaning of baroque was 'irregular pearls' in the Arabian dialect of the pearl fishers. It meant they were not good for sale." The Portuguese, who occupied the island in the 16th century, borrowed the word and described irregular pearls as *pérola barroca*. You can see how all those cherubs with bulbous cheeks and buttocks typical of Baroque church architecture might have merited the etymology, although it seems less fair as a description of the decorative, but more restrained music of Bach or Vivaldi.

Meanwhile, Jordi Savall, one of Europe's best-known 'early music' specialists, tells me after a Wigmore Hall concert of Renaissance and Baroque music that "the best way to come close to this style was to work with musicians that have this [Middle Eastern] oral tradition and ability to improvise."

In short, what both these artists are doing is looking beyond the confines of the classical tradition and working with Turkish and Arab musicians. Or using world music as an aid to travel back in time. After all, Baroque is seen as the first international style in both art and music, taken by the Spanish and Portuguese to India, China and South America.

In recent years it's noticeable how many 'early music' groups have blurred the boundaries between classical and world music. There's the Dufay Collective from the UK or L'Arpeggiata in Paris, but I've been most impressed by Jordi Savall, Le Baroque Nomade and American *viol* (or *viola da gamba*) player Gerald Trimble. "If you want to get an idea about playing the viol in the 16th century," Trimble says, "it's probably better talking to session musicians in an Irish pub than somebody at Juilliard."

Jordi Savall's latest release is *Granada (1013-1526)* featuring music from the city over 500 years, from its foundation by the Berber king Zawi Ibn Ziri in 1013 to its incorporation into the Kingdom of Castile and Leon and the forced conversion of the remaining Muslims in 1502. "We did a concert in Granada in 2013 for the 1,000th anniversary of the city," explains Savall. "It was originally a Jewish village and the music begins with the destruction of the Jewish city and the arrival of the Moors and then the Christians." Savall has an impressive list of international musicians he works with on such projects. In this case the Israeli-born singer in the Andalus tradition, Lior Elmaleh, Syrian-born vocalist and *oud* player Waed Bouhassoun and Moroccan singer and *oud* player Driss El Maloumi. The Sufi song the latter two sing from the Almoravid period is glorious.

"All these musicians come from improvising traditions and Middle Eastern musicians are at their best when playing live," says Savall. "Unfortunately, the Jewish and Arabic music wasn't written down, but we use *muwashahs* and other forms that were created in that time and conserved in the Andalusian tradition. The Christian pieces are derived from actual documents in the *Codex las Huelgas* (c1300) and other manuscripts till the time of Charles V and later."

Savall's recorded output with his group Hespèrion XXI is vast – alongside many recordings of JS Bach and French viol composer Marin Marais, there are major CD and book projects like *Jerusalem*, a homage to the holy city; *Istanbul*, featuring Ottoman music of the 17th and 18th centuries; *Orient-Occident*, a homage to Syria and *Mare Nostrum*, a

dialogue of Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions around the Mediterranean. But with projects like these, how much is instinct and how much is based on research?

Savall smiles. "It's a mixture of both, of course. I've done a lot of research on historical performance and from experience you know how to use your instruments. Nowadays a Turkish *kanun* player is so good he can play Chopin, but we need to limit ourselves to the possibilities and style of the time. We have information about these to create the right atmosphere."

Jordi Savall was born in Igualada, Catalonia in 1941, soon after the end of the Spanish Civil War. Catalonia had been a stronghold of Republicanism and suffered heavily under the victorious General Franco. Savall was known by the Spanish form of his name, Jorge. "When I was six and about to go to school, our city was full of tensions between Franco's people and my father who'd been in the Republican army and an atheist." Savall chuckles, his eyes sparkling behind his glasses, as he enjoys the irony. "But the best school in the city was a religious school with lots of right-wing falangists. There was a mass each day and a small vocal ensemble of children. I thought it was the most beautiful music I'd ever heard and I auditioned for the choir I learned to sing by ear. I didn't learn to read music until much later."

Savall believes that learning to sing by ear and witnessing the power of music first hand in the chapel set him on his particular course. He learned the cello and started playing music he found in a local music shop by Bach and Marin Marais. The latter, made popular by the film *Tous les Matins du Monde* about the composer and King Louis XIV, was one of the leading composers for the viol, which like the cello is played between the legs. When the singer Victoria de Los Angeles needed a viol player, Savall put himself forward.

This was pioneering stuff in 1965. The tradition of viol playing had been broken after the death of Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787) in London and Jean-Baptiste Forqueray (1699-1782) in Paris. The bass viol Savall plays dates from 1697, but only survives because it was transformed into a cello in the 1780s. Those who began the revival of viol playing, Arnold Dolmetch, August Wenzinger and Nikolaus Harnoncourt, had to work it out for themselves. Savall's teacher at the Schola Cantorum in Basle (founded by Wenzinger) played by holding the bow the same way as a violin. "But I discovered letters from the viol virtuoso Jean-Baptiste Forqueray which said the finger has to push the tension of the bow and this finger is the '*l'ame de la music*', the soul of the music. And the hand has to follow the arm – as in *kamancheh* playing. I said I want to try this new way and he accepted. You start to learn the solutions from the music – the tempo and phrasing. I think creativity is based on intuition."

With the singer Montserrat Figueras, who he'd married in 1968, and two musicians from the Schola Cantorum, Savall formed Hespèrion XX in 1974. "The XX was to show that it might be early music, but it's still from the 20th century." Since 2000 the group has been renamed Hespèrion XXI.

"It's not my intention to say this is exactly what was played at the time," says Savall. "It's an evocation or like a soundtrack from a movie. And Middle Eastern musicians are very good in this respect because there's a continuity in the music which is surprising, there is a direct connection."

The American-born Gerald Trimble came to the viol from folk and Middle Eastern music, not classical. He first made ▶



chords, single solo lines, microtones and pluck it like a guitar. At a time when East and West are struggling to understand each other, this instrument is a living example of the connections.”

Le Baroque Nomade are a French group also exploring these historical connections in a very different way. I first saw them at the Fes Festival where they were playing in Dar Mokri, a beautiful mansion in the old city. There was an Indian singer (Shyam Sundar Goswami), a French singer (Cyrille Gerstenhaber) and musicians on *tabla*, *sarangi*, viol and Jean-Christophe Frisch, their director, on flutes. The performance, *Reflections of an Indian Night*, comes out of manuscripts by Lully, Couperin and Marina Marais found in the home of the French governor of Chandernagore (now Chandannagar). “The French governor was also a viol player and married to an Indian singer,” explains Frisch. “They gave concerts of Indian and Western music when they invited VIP guests.”

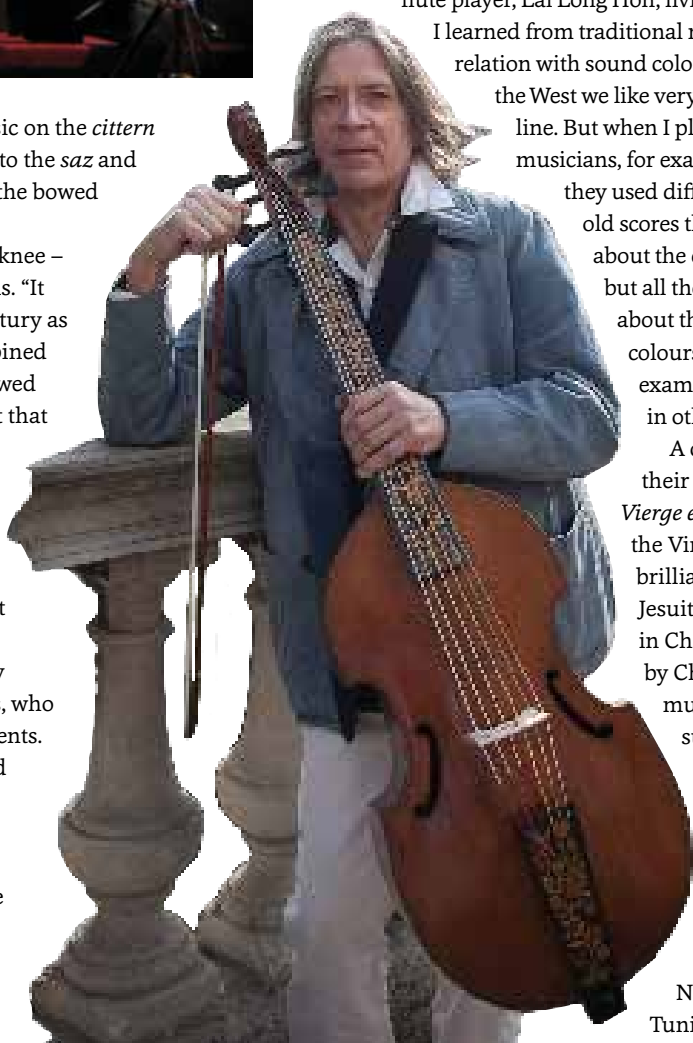
Alongside their regular classical concerts, Le Baroque Nomade do spectacular projects exploring Baroque music in China, the trade routes of Venice, Jesuits in Ethiopia and the ambassadors of Louis XIV in Tunis. “All my youth I liked traditional music from everywhere,” says Frisch. “While my friends were listening to punk, I was listening to Ravi Shankar, Baroque and ancient music and already I could feel the connections between them. The oral tradition was still very important to the end of the Baroque period.”

Frisch’s first excursions beyond the Western canon were into Chinese music because there was a Cambodian-Chinese flute player, Lai Long Hon, living in Paris. “What I learned from traditional musicians is the relation with sound colour,” says Frisch. “In

a name for himself playing Celtic music on the *cittern* (Renaissance lute). He went from that to the *saz* and other Eastern lutes before picking up the bowed *kamancheh* and then the viol.

“The *viola da gamba* – fiddle of the knee – is a product of two worlds,” he explains. “It appeared in Spain in the late 15th century as a simple bowed instrument that combined early guitars and fretted lutes with bowed fiddles of the East.” Trimble points out that the ‘underhand bowing,’ which is what Savall had adopted, links the instrument to the *kamancheh* and Central Asian shamanic fiddles like the *kobyz*. “The viol owes as much to Islamic and Eastern civilisation as it does to the West,” he says.

The viol spread from Spain into Italy where it was refined by Italian luthiers, who created treble, tenor and bass instruments. They were the most important stringed instruments in Europe for about 300 years with their final flowering in England and France in the late 18th century. “The English viol players were the greatest improvisers, like the jazz musicians of their day,” says Trimble. “For me it’s the most versatile stringed instrument you can find. You can play



the West we like very clean sound – a pure line. But when I played with Chinese musicians, for example, I heard how they used different colours. In the old scores there’s no indication about the quality of sound, but all the old treatises speak about the diversity of sound colours. I feel the best examples are to be found in other cultures.”

A clear example is their recording *Vêpres à la Vierge en Chine* (Vespers to the Virgin in China), which brilliantly reimagines the Jesuit music composed in China and performed by Chinese and Western musicians. With its surging choir, drums and Chinese percussion, it’s like nothing you’ve ever heard before, either in classical or world music.

Le Baroque Nomade’s new Tunisian project, The

Sun King Dreamed Nouba, was premiered in Tunis earlier this year. The idea comes from a visit by the ambassadors (and their musicians) of King Louis XIV going to the Sultan of Tunis to collaborate against the pirates in the Mediterranean. “A few tunes from the Tunisian *malouf* are very similar to dances from the time of Lully,” says Frisch. “From listening you don’t notice it, but looking at the scores it’s very obvious. And when you play those pieces in the French baroque way it’s just like a *gavotte* or *rigaudon* because the structure and melody are similar. Maybe it’s accidental or maybe not.”

Their French viol player brought a baroque bow and lent it to the Tunisian violinist. He said “this is just the bow I need to perform Tunisian music!,” just like Jordi Savall’s experience when he abandoned the regular violin bow on the viola.

One of the pieces they perform is a famous ‘*Air de Cour*’ by Michel Lambert, but they translated the words into Arabic. “Fifty per cent of what we play is imagination,” Frisch admits. “It’s not a history lesson, it’s just a concert. I asked the Tunisian singer to put her normal ornamentation and it’s very close to the Baroque ornaments of the French style. She sings ‘*Air de Cour*’ with Arabic language and Arabian ornaments and maybe it’s closer to what you could hear in 17th-century Paris than any modern interpretations.” ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Jordi Savall’s album, Granada, comes out this month*
 + **DATES** *Savall plays at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare’s Globe in London on August 27. For more information, visit: www.shakespearesglobe.com*

Clockwise from top left: Jordi Savall, Le Baroque Nomade performing in Fes, Morocco and Gerald Trimble

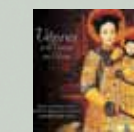
Video: Chantia/William Ellis/Simon Broughton



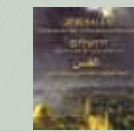
DISCOGRAPHY



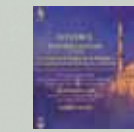
Le Baroque Nomade
Melothesia Aethiopica (Evidence, 2015)
 Traditional Ethiopian and Baroque music taken by the Portuguese Jesuits to Ethiopia.



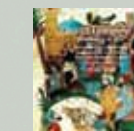
Le Baroque Nomade
Vêpres à la Vierge en Chine (K617, 2004)
 A collaboration with the Beitang Cathedral choir in Beijing, with Chinese and Western instruments and singers. Perhaps the group’s most remarkable disc.



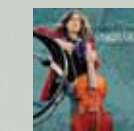
Jordi Savall & Hespèrion XXI
Jerusalem (AliaVox, 2008)
 Two CDs and a book featuring Montserrat Figueras and musicians from Israel, Palestine, Armenia, Greece, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Morocco and Afghanistan.



Jordi Savall & Hespèrion XXI
Istanbul (AliaVox, 2009)
 An ambitious project of music by Romania’s Dimitrie Cantemir, composed during exile in Istanbul (1687-1710), featuring Kudsi Erguner, Derya Türkan, Yair Dalal, Driss El Maloumi and others. Reviewed in #67.



Jordi Savall & Hespèrion XXI
Orient-Occident II, Hommage à la Syrie (AliaVox, 2013)
 As Syria tore itself apart, a celebration of Syrian music including Waed Bouhassoun, Moslem Rahal, Yair Dalal, Driss El Maloumi and others.



Gerald Trimble
Uncharted (MSR Music, 2014)
 Trimble describes this as a ‘*viola da gamba adventure*’ and juxtaposes English and Turkish repertoire with important contributions from River Guerguerian on diverse percussion. Reviewed in #108.