

Interview with Jordi Savall

# «Genius needs to be cultivated to grow»

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Jordi Savall (Igualada, 1941) is considered one of the most relevant viol and early music players. He discovered his passion for music with only six years of age, while he was singing at the choir of his school. In his words, «everybody has a special talent for something, but it needs to come with effort and tenacity». Nevertheless, an artist cannot be made without an essential basis. Catalonia needs to provide the mechanisms that allow to set the conditions for a creator to develop. We have no tradition in supporting artists, and we should think what we are and what we can do culturally speaking to be truly us without comparing to anybody from abroad, just looking for our roots. Talent also requires freedom to choose the project giving satisfaction without caring about whether it will be a commercial success. Savall does not like to talk about success but the joy to share with the audience what you cherish most: «It is the recognition that occurs when somebody tells you after a concert that you have been part of their live for thirty years».



Let's start with an old say: «Is the artist born or is the artist made?»

*Jordi Savall (JS):*  
The artist is born and made. Not all having the spirit of being artists become an artist, but an artist cannot be made without an essential basis.

One day we were in Basle at a workshop on the Eastern and the Western world, and we asked the singing professor how they did it to teach, and he didn't really understand the question. Finally, after some explanations, he told us that they were very clear about it, they had the children sing, and those who sang well studied singing, and those who didn't learned to play an instrument.

Would you say that «being gifted» is a synonym of talent?

*(JS):* Having talent is being able to communicate feelings, to express the beauty in multiple shapes, either a drawing, a tune or a building... Everybody has something inside them. The artist who has talent is able to convey it to the others.

While preparing this interview I read that the viol is like those actresses who experience such magnificent highlights that they lose contact with reality, and once they lose their youth and the admiration of the audience, they die lonely and in oblivion while a new beauty – that of violins – breaks into music with an unheard strength. Why did you choose to play an instrument that, let's say, «speaks lower» than a violin?

*(JS):* I don't believe that feelings and beauty can be measured in decibels. I'd rather say the opposite: everything essential between two persons who love each other is said with sweetness. All essential things in life are said piano. So I chose

to play an instrument that «speaks» gently, in the most essential way.

What was the trigger in your life that made you think that playing early music was your way?

*(JS):* It all developed by and by, but the trigger might have been my first day at school, when I was allowed to sing in the choir at mass. I was six years old. Then I went to class, and in the evening I thought about the moments I had had my best time. One of these moments was when I listened the children sing. I decided to sing, and this was one of the most important decisions I've ever taken in my life. When I entered the small school choir I entered the world of music in a natural way, still unable to read nor write. When you have to sing you are taught reading and writing. The seven years I spent singing all kinds of music were the seed that stayed in me without noticing it. There is yet another trigger, namely the moment my voice changed, and I felt quite frustrated not to be able to sing any longer. One day I was at the conservatory and they were rehearsing Mozart, and I was astonished by the emotion that music conveyed to me. I thought that if music was able to move me so much, I would like to do that professionally. I decided to study cello because it was the instrument I felt closest to.

You are considered one of the most relevant viol players; you founded three groups – Hespèrion XX (now Hespèrion XXI), La Capella Reial de Catalunya and Le Concert des Nations – you have an own music label, Alia Vox, not to speak of over a hundred recorded albums. We could say that all this activity involves a great deal of talent but also tenacity. What relation is there between these two concepts?

*(JS):* In the beginning there is a quarter of talent and three quarters of tenacity. Later, all you have been acquiring over years of work, movements, technique, etc. requires some maintenance, but you don't need to work eight hours a day anymore, like when I was 25. The organisation and project part does require a very big capacity to create and devote time.

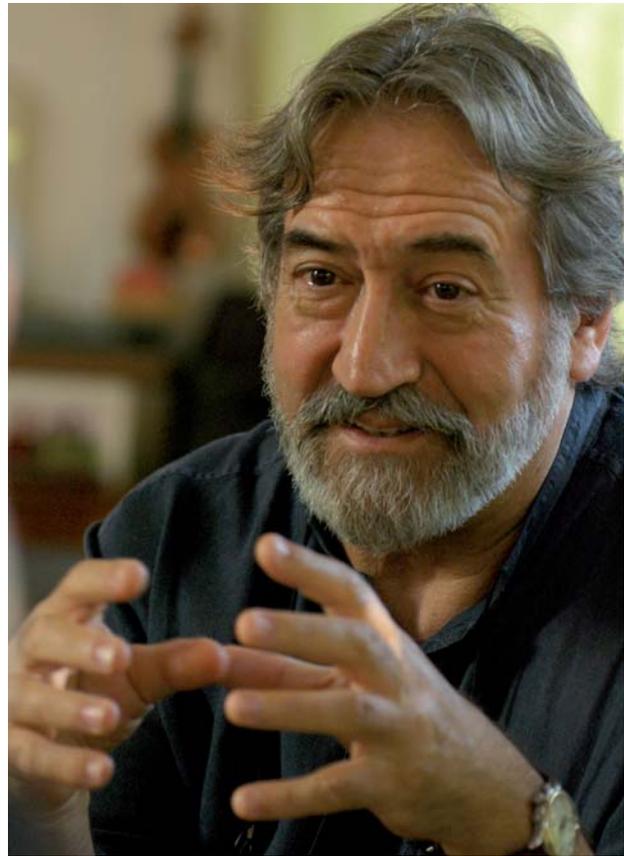
We've been talking about your activity as a musician, founder of ensembles and record entrepreneur. You have been successful in these three aspects, but is the same kind of talent needed or are rather different abilities required according to each?

(JS): I believe in daily work; the future is made day after day and you cannot lay back. All is at stake at every concert and every project, because if you cause disappointment there are doors closing, and if this happens you are off. When you do something, you need to be satisfied with what you are doing. You give it all at every concert and every project. I don't like the word success, I prefer to talk of ease to share with the audience what you cherish most. The maximum recognition is that somebody approaches you after a concert with a bunch of records of yours, tells you that you don't know them but you have been part of their live for thirty years.

**«Talent in a composer is the ability to provide emotion and beauty at any moment. This is what I have always searched with my wife; in our productions it were the tunes we believe to be indispensable, those bearing the brand of inspiration».**

How would you explain that Catalonia has had great people in the first aspect but so few in the other two before yourself? Do we need more organisational talent, talent to market ourselves better?

(JS): Catalans sometimes have, let's say, a drive to self-destruction. To carry out any project you need a good deal of optimism, confidence and self-discipline. You need to believe in the project and have the important people around you who will help you bring it forward. I have to say that we have had lots of support in Catalonia and our team is great. But as to our project, we wouldn't have made it if we had kept to Catalonia only, because there is no tradition to support cultural projects and artists here. I think we still



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▲ «If you want to meet a goal there is a whole process that requires command of your work and being free to do it».

have a «colonised» mindset culturally speaking. We always end up comparing ourselves to... For instance, Catalonia or Barcelona is important if it has a symphonic orchestra that has to be like that in other European countries. What we haven't done is to think what we are and what we can do culturally speaking to be really us. We have done things in architecture, in literature, but there is still a way to go in music. It is probably one of our pending tasks. At La Capella we try to raise the awareness that Catalonia is the troubadours, the Golden Century songbooks, the music of the Montserrat School... and Josep Soler and so many others who have fallen in oblivion.

**Within this subject, let's talk of music education and childhood. What is your opinion on**



▲ «Everybody has something inside them. The artist who has talent is able to convey it to the others».

how things are being done in this respect and what should be done? There are many musicians from Central and Eastern Europe. Do they have more talent there or do they work better at school and is there a sociocultural environment more favourable to music?

(JS): There have been very positive things in Catalonia; many talented musicians came out of here because we have a long-standing, traditional, common music culture, which is a source producing from time to time outstanding people like Pau Casals, Victòria dels Àngels, Frederic Mompou, etc. Music has an important footprint in common life and this has its effect. Music is

not learned at the conservatory. Music is like any other language – first it needs to be learned at home, during celebrations and as long as it is a part of social and family life. This is a thing missing today that we used to have when there were no record players. In Europe they have certainly noticed that and are starting reacting. Here it is wrongly considered that music is a sort of luxury subject, but I think that music is basic, it is one of the best ways of being happy. Music has been the moral support of entire communities in difficult times. After being expelled from Spain, the Jews created a music heritage of songs in Spanish and Sephardic that has been preserved in the communities in the

Mediterranean basin because these tunes have been essential in extremely painful times. Music has survived and helped overcome hardship. Music is learning for life; learning to sing is learning to express one's own emotions, learning to communicate what you feel. Music is the language of the heart.

**«Music is learning for life; learning to sing is learning to express one's own emotions, learning to communicate what you feel. Music is the language of the heart».**

**In this respect, you mentioned before that singing in the choir was one of the things that drove your talent towards music. Having a choir at school is perhaps something to be fostered?**

*(JS):* Absolutely, singing is the basic foundation of any musical learning. This we learn just after being born. Babies understand neither language nor words, what they seize is the feeling how words are uttered, what the child feels is the melody of words.

**Along the lines of what is done in Central European countries to foster musical learning, what other recommendations would you give?**

*(JS):* Central European countries have more money and are better organised, but this doesn't mean that they work better. I don't think that people living in Berlin are happier than those living in Barcelona. There are some things that work better, but it's because there is a culture of responsibility; the farther North you go, the more responsibility people take. Responsibility gives you a certain safety in things and thus a better life quality. This doesn't mean that all works well; for instance, in Northern countries communication works much less, you can't generalise but people are more closed-up. Though, as to the audience, they do not only love music but they are also grateful to the musician who makes them have a great time. They are very sensitive. When you do concerts in those places,

### **A family of troubadours**

Jordi Savall is married to the soprano Montserrat Figueras. They have been collaborating in different projects and performing together since 1974. Savall has often said that his wife has been a true muse who has allowed him to deepen into vocal repertoires. Four years ago, while they were on holiday in a village on the Costa Brava, the proposal to perform together with their children, Arianna and Ferran, came up by chance. Their father says that living in a musical environment has helped, but not having forced them to play together – they only used to do so for family celebrations and Christmas – has been decisive. They decided to make music because they did not feel the pressure to do it. They got there by themselves, it is not something they were determined to do. In Savall's words, «it's a great experience to make music with your family, though it is not easy, especially for the children, who do a musical career with people with a twenty-year experience, knowing that they will automatically be compared to them». It is great, but it is also a delicate situation, according to Savall, because the relationship between parents and their children is always so, especially if working in the same field. In any case, there is much room for improvisation so everybody can give their best at the concert.

you immediately feel that the audience is expectant, excited with what is about to happen. Here, and I don't know why, the audience doesn't react as spontaneously. Such things probably fade away with education and practice. People don't dare to express all they feel. Contrarily, in poor countries, the audience is extraordinary, because they starve and are thirsty but they are thankful for you going there; when you enter the hall to perform the concert, it's great to feel so warmly welcome.

**It is said that we are experts in seizing talent from abroad in two areas. One is football and the other the musicians coming from other countries to contribute to the symphonic ensembles and jazz bands. Do we have the capacity of attracting talent thanks to labour opportunities, the appeal of the city and the country, or do they need to come from abroad and be imported to create top level music groups?**

*(JS):* When you organise a very specific project you need to be very precise. We have orchestras

and groups made of people from different countries because the level of specialisation also matters. In football, for instance, it is not that there are no good players; perhaps it occurs that we don't trust enough what we have here. We believe that anything coming from abroad will be better. I think that French or English people will have it easier to be recognised in their country than a Catalan. Nobody is a prophet in their own land, but there are countries where it is more difficult.

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**As you need to find the best to feed your orchestras, how do you detect talent?**

*(JS):* I've been teaching for more than 25 years at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Basle; we also gave an early music course during more than twenty years, first in La Seu d'Urgell and then in Sant Feliu de Guíxols. Then there are the master classes and hearings we organise to listen to the voices of different singers, etc. All these contacts allow you not only to teach but also to observe the qualities of the students, without forgetting the hearings for the orchestra – if we see that musicians perform well, we take them on board.

**As you have revived forgotten authors, what do you consider to be talent in a composer?**

*(JS):* Talent in a composer is the ability to create emotions and beauty at any moment. What my wife, Montserrat Figueras, and myself have been always looking for in our productions has been music we consider indispensable, that music you think that has to be known because it yields something outstanding. And this occurs, to give some examples, with the music of the troubadours, that viol concert piece or Monteverdi's madrigal. Over these thousand years of music-

making, much of it has been done to cater for circumstances, with much skill but not necessarily inspiration. What you seek in life are those special moments, those tunes bearing the brand of inspiration.

**And inspiration comes without calling for it or, as somebody put it, waiting for the muse of inspiration to come but catching me at work?**

*(JS):* Inspiration, without a pen in your hand... (laughs). Inspiration is often related to tenacity, sacrifice and effort. Generally speaking, when we record an album we can't rehearse during the day because we do it in a museum and need to start once people have left. We have stated that when you do music without any audience there is no adrenaline, you are relaxed, but when you have been working for a few hours and you are tired, you need that additional spirit necessary to get what you are looking for. Generally speaking, it's at around four or five o'clock in the morning when the magical moments come up, and then it's really exciting. But you need to work for this moment to come.

**Do you think there is an artistic, a scientific and an organisational talent?**

*(JS):* I think that any talent, to put it in few words, is the need of freedom. You only have freedom when you have knowledge and control. Without any knowledge there is no freedom to choose the best, to choose what you need. Without any control, the situation will get out of your grasp, you won't have time to rehearse nor time to prepare. If you wish to reach a goal, there is a whole process that requires to control work and be free to do so. When we decided to create our own record label, it was not because we wanted to be entrepreneurs but because we felt that unless we did it, we wouldn't have the freedom to choose and develop the projects we liked without hearing that they are not feasible because they are not commercial. Having an own label allows us to choose the projects based on their musical quality, which will be perhaps less successful from a commercial point of view because they are more difficult, but we think they need

to be done. We also created La Capella Reial to be certain to keep an organisational structure that is basic to do our work. There are musicians who have been with us for 33 years. Behind that is a job done, but also friendship and human relations that need to be respected and kept.

**There are talents being successful abroad and they are only recognised here once they have had success far away. Do you think this was your case and that, at a given point, action was taken to recover your talent as is now occurring with doctors, for instance? Would a policy to recover people be necessary as it would be good if they came back to do networking and mentoring?**

*(JS):* I haven't been aware of such action as to myself. After 1986, when we created La Capella Reial de Catalunya, we started doing a task to recover our heritage; I don't know if this has to do with such action to recover my talent. Having said that, I think that what the country needs is to provide the mechanisms that allow to create conditions so a creator may develop. What is more difficult here is to have long-term support and trust any creator or artist needs. The musi-

cian wishing to devote to music will be unable to do their job if they don't have a guaranteed number of concerts over a period of time. This is a thing we don't know how to do or we do few. We need convergence between local musicians and directors of festivals. It seems that they're looking for an artist with a foreign name rather than inviting people from Manresa or Igualada.

**«I think that any talent is the need of freedom».**

*(JS):* If the ensembles had the opportunity of performing in more concerts and festivals, there would be more talent that could be developed. If we hadn't moved to Basle in 1968, we probably wouldn't have had the same success. There I earned my living with teaching and giving small concerts in Protestant churches on Sunday. We earned our living doing that over some difficult years. Here it would have been impossible. Over there was a whole set of opportunities that were inconceivable in our country. We should open up and give more opportunities to the youth – put in other words, doing as they do in Europe.

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