

Review**Jordi Savall and Hespèrion XXI:
CMA "Masters of the Violin" (November 1)**

by Nicholas Jones



Hespèrion XXI has long broadened from its original musical base (the viol music of the Renaissance in western Europe) to encompass the music of areas usually considered the margins of Europe. The program they presented last week at the Cleveland Museum of Art was a witness to the diverse musical cultures of one of those margins, the rich and dangerous mosaic of the Balkan countries.

In a beautifully crafted program led by the Catalanian gambist Jordi Savall with scrupulous attention to detail as well as overall coherence and impact, this ensemble of seven instrumentalists and five singers took the audience through a moving geographical and emotional journey.

The program was the best tour one could imagine of this troubled and fascinating region. The songs moved through whole worlds of language — Serbian, Greek, Hebrew, Bulgarian, Bosnian, and more. The program's mobility itself reflected the area's many diasporas — of Jews, Ottomans, Roma, and Christians alike, who through the centuries have migrated through the region. The singers and instrumentalists themselves were a United Nations of the Balkan peninsula, each a master of their regional style and instrument.

Just to name the instruments is to summon up something of the remarkable diversity of the ensemble and the regions it represents: the *oud* (a Turkish lute), the *kaval* (Bulgarian end-blown flute), the *qanun* (a Turkish zither), the *duduk* (an Armenian double reed), the *santur* (an Iranian hammered dulcimer), the *morisca* (an Iberian guitar). The group was rounded out by a Spanish percussionist playing on a number of drums (the instruments were unnamed in the program) and Savall himself playing two stringed instruments from the middle ages, the *vielle* and the *rebec*.

The people of the Balkans are known, in ancient as in recent times, for their fractious attitudes toward each other's lands. In this program, however, there was no fighting: the differences were subsumed under a tight musical purpose and direction, almost certainly the result of the leadership of Savall himself. With a quiet hand, often barely looking up from the frets of the *vielle*, this contemplative and profound musician channeled all this diversity towards a notable unity of affect.

The evening was crafted as a journey through the cycle of life, beginning with Creation and leading through human life from birth to death and through the natural world from spring to winter. The dominant tone was melancholic, though there were some lovely romantic pieces and occasional humor (there was, for example, something about a pastrami being "cured" by the touch of a pretty girl, about which I had better not say more).

The music was often hauntingly modal, as with an astounding Bulgarian widow's lament sung with deeply moving glottal stops. As in jazz performances, some of the songs featured each of the virtuoso instrumentalists in turn, on extended riffs. Other songs allowed the excellent vocalists a chance to solo (each seemed to be comfortable singing in a number of languages).

The program was carefully planned, one song leading almost seamlessly into the next through instrumental transitions. Supertitles in English reproduced the printed order of things in the program, keeping the audience abreast of what might otherwise have been a confusing welter of unfamiliar pieces, and providing us with translations of the lyrics. (This should be done more: it's an excellent way to let us follow the words and meanings without burying our heads in printed vocal text sheets.)

Even with all this planning, the music always felt fresh. One sensed that the players were often improvising, and that the transitions, while apparently sketched in advance in broad strokes, were left open for the invention of the moment.

The program notes assert that the term "Balkan" is a compound of the Turkish words for "blood" and for "honey." The blood that flowed through this program seemed to me the blood of the heart, the music deeply emotional at almost every moment (the program avoided the blood of battle and of revenge, about which I would guess there must be plenty of musical material to draw on). The honey was evident at every turn in the sweet affect of the songs themselves, and in the generosity of the musicians who presented them to us.

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