



To be loved with intelligence

Interview with Leonardo García Alarcón

When you were offered a residency at the Dijon Opera in 2017, what persuaded you to accept?

The first element that counted in this decision was the hall. I had conducted the Freiburger Barockorchester in a programme of Cherubini and Beethoven in Dijon in November 2014, and I fell in love with the hall and its acoustics. I had also heard good things about how the house promoted baroque music and enjoyed good relationships with the artists who practice and perform it, such as Emmanuelle Haïm and Le Concert d'Astrée or Les Traversées Baroques. I therefore kept informed about projects that they mounted in this domain, notably the Rameau cycle, and I also realized that it was a place that programmed rare or lesser-known works, such as *La Pellegrina*, for example. Generally, the Operas have a in-house orchestra, which means the repertoire is often limited to the repertoire of that orchestra. Few or no baroque operas get mounted, because under these conditions, bringing in a specialized outside orchestra adds to the financial costs. I realized that at Dijon there was a real desire to produce, co-produce and mount this type of repertoire, even the most rare works.

I then began serious discussions with Laurent Joyeux, and I immediately understood that at the Dijon Opera they were particularly attentive to the artist and to what they could offer. We were not invited with the idea to do one or more particular projects that had already been decided, but rather to construct future projects together that corresponded to our mutual ambitions. They listen very carefully to the artists, and take great care in the mounting of projects that will appeal to the audiences in the region, those already known or not yet known, so that a strong relationship could develop between them and La Cappella Mediterranea. And this has been achieved, in my opinion.

What is your view on the opera productions you have done at Dijon ?

The first opera that we mounted in Dijon, *El Prometeo* by Antonio Draghi, was an opportunity to appreciate the extent to which the work that we would do was in continuity with what we had experienced at the Festival d'Ambronay with Alain Brunet and at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence with Bernard Foccroule. In other words, we had the same power to create without fear of taking risks, such as tackling works that were unknown to the public. The next production, *La Finta Pazza* by Francesco Saccati, revealed the extent to which the Dijon Opera is a place in which my artistic desires and ambitions could take wing, within the panoramic coherence and inventiveness of baroque music and its history : in 2019, for the 350th anniversary of the Academie Royale de Musique, performing the first opera played in France in 1645 before Louis XIV made perfect sense.

The programming of *Il Palazzo Incantato* in December 2020 is also a bold choice. It is a work that I have wanted to mount for a long time, without finding any opportunity. It is a very difficult and costly opera in terms of production, but it is also clear that certain opera houses fail to fully appreciate the importance of Rossi in the history of the genre. Had Laurent not been so receptive to my proposal, I would have had to continue to dream about this project so dear to my heart for a long time. Such a project requires not only an appreciation of its musical interest, but also the willingness to take on the risks of such a production.

At Dijon, we have found what La Cappella Mediterranea and I need, in order to continue to grow. Today, with a more informed vision of opera houses in France, from an artistic and strategic point of view, I see the Dijon Opera as a place, for baroque music in general, where the artists' vision for their projects is supported and developed to a level of exceptional quality. As an artist, having a house like that is a tremendous asset, and great good fortune. All the more so in that we also give concert series, and perform older works such as the oratorios of Falvetti or Carmina Latina, which have allowed us to reveal to the public of the region other

sides of our artistic trajectory and develop a very warm and loyal relationship with them.

The residency at Dijon is therefore a magnificent stimulant to continue in the coming years to develop projects of stature with the same force, the same momentum, the same vision.

This succession of works that had not been mounted for centuries, was it preconceived as a cycle or did the idea develop progressively during the residency?

This theme could only have been developed thanks to this residency. It quickly became clear to Laurent and me that it was more interesting to adventure out into terra incognita, in particular insofar as the identity of La Cappella Mediterranea has been built up around the idea of creating a dialogue between unknown pieces and the great works of the repertoire. The ability and willingness of the Dijon Opera and Laurent to listen to and discuss my needs, desires and artistic requirements concerning music and creation is, I must insist, extremely rare in the world of opera. Elsewhere, the possibility to discuss the repertoire often simply does not exist, because the choice of works is done in advance by the director and the stage director, the choice of a conductor usually comes much later. At Dijon, the residency allowed us to develop musical choices, rather than theatrical choices, which for a musician is ideal. For a musician today, the ability to develop such varied and innovative projects is something of a utopia. This willingness to take risks is something I experienced at the Dijon Opera, and for this I remain extremely grateful.

Conductors are not always involved in the choice of singers...

On each production at Dijon, there has always been a very open dialogue on the choice of soloists, the comments and suggestions of each party being taken into account and evaluated, in a spirit of mutual trust. I do not recall any blockages in terms of casting. It is obviously very pleasant to be able to work in such an atmosphere of trust, especially from an aesthetic point of view, which is even more rare.

Among the concerts of La Cappella Mediterranea in Dijon, we have noted a sort of Bach cycle, the *Mass in B minor* last season, the *St. Matthew Passion* in spring 2020. Is this a desire that comes from you personally?

Bach's music has accompanied me since my childhood, and it has very intimate significance for me. I have not felt the desire to share it elsewhere, even in places that were nonetheless key to my musical life, such as Ambronay. My relationship to this music does not require external demonstration. I immediately felt this desire at Dijon, no doubt because of the acoustics of this Auditorium, in which the music of the *Mass in B minor* could permeate the entire space. This concert was a memorable moment. I had the impression of hearing this mass for the first time. We rarely get the opportunity to do that in an Opera. But Dijon is also a concert venue and in certain aspects a festival. These three spirits inhabit this house. I suspect this is also the case for other houses, but I personally haven't experienced it elsewhere.

La Cappella Mediterranea and you already enjoyed notoriety and a wide audience prior to your residency at Dijon. What relationship have you developed with the public in the region?

The geographic situation of Dijon allows us to reach an audience that follows us to Paris, to Geneva and in the region around Lyon. And we have also had the pleasure of finding here fans that followed us already but that we didn't know lived in Dijon and its region. Dijon is situated at the crossroads of all our usual audiences. We have also discovered a new public, who came to see our concerts or *El Prometeo*, and who have come to trust us and follow us in the next unknown works. I never felt the slightest resistance to our proposals here in Dijon. When we see the impact of a production such as *La Finta Pazza*, which continues to be talked about at national as well as international level, we do not have the impression of being isolated in Dijon. We reach here a vast, varied and truly European audience.

La Cappella Mediterranea is a rather unique ensemble. Its musicians and you have had a sometimes difficult and painful path in South America. We sense that human values and sharing count a lot in your relations and in your approach to the music. What are the values that you felt at work during this residency? What have you sought to share with the Dijon public?

What we experienced in Dijon, for me, is first great generosity, in the fullest sense of the word. For us, this signifies also the possibility to be loved with intelligence. We feel we have been given *carte blanche*, and are surrounded by an intelligent team that will help us, protect us and advise us. This spirit of accompaniment, which we have always felt at the Dijon Opera, is ideal and absolutely essential for artists. Ambronay, where we were in residence, is a festival and also a cultural centre. When I arrived in Dijon, I wondered what it would be like to be in residence at an Opera. Everything we enjoyed in Ambronay was also present at the Dijon Opera, which in my view also incarnates that same spirit of a cultural centre and festival. This is important because an Opera generally tends to be a lot more closed, isolated, and reluctant to look to the future. It is usually very difficult to develop over time an artistic residency with the level of trust that we have had here at Dijon. Through all our creations, I hope to have shared and transmitted to our audiences a spirit of openness and curiosity towards distant and unusual aesthetic worlds, to have led them towards utopian worlds that they could not have imagined. I do not know if we have always been completely successful, but in any case at Dijon I always felt that this was possible. When I witnessed the public's extraordinary reception of *El Prometeo*, Falvetti, *La Finta Pazza*, I sensed the power of baroque music and the vibrant role it can play today. At Dijon, I never had the sensation of creating museum pieces. On the contrary, I even had the freedom to compose an entire operatic act without anyone, prior to the rehearsals, having heard a single note of this music. It was perhaps a bit audacious, but we were able to

do it. I do not know anywhere else where this would have been possible.

This incredible public reception of unknown works is only possible thanks to the long, hard work and policies of the Dijon Opera over the years regarding the early and baroque repertoire. In my entourage, among the musicians who play in Cappella Mediterranea, everyone knew Dijon for this reason. It is a place where the baroque can exist at the same level as the operas of Verdi or Mozart in other theatres. For our music, it is a place of musical and lyric creation absolutely unique in the world. Presenting in Dijon works from such different periods has progressively led the public to understand this music, without considering it as a remote or perilous world. We all know it takes a long time to develop this throughout a territory. To date, the Grand Theatre of Geneva has yet to play a single opera by Rameau. This shows how avant-garde Dijon is on this type of repertoire.

What we do today is what I call science-fiction. In other words, we focus on authenticity, on the relation to the score, on everything we know about a composer and their epoch, to make creative and inventive choices in the realization of the project. It takes humility, to know what we can or cannot achieve with a composer such as Bach or Rameau. We have to rely on science to then enter into the fiction involved in the creation of a live show. At Dijon, we have found the possibility to enter into this domain of science-fiction, a domain of modern creation with all the elements possible for us to feel free.