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Jordi Savall, Hesperion XXI, and Tembembe Ensemble Continuo (Perth Festival)

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ROSALIND APPLEBY (</ABR-ARTS/AUTHOR/6187-ROSALINDAPPLEBY>)

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Jordi Savall's reputation preceded him and the Perth Concert Hall was bursting at the seams for the first night of his national tour. The Spanish musician and his band Hesperion XXI are renowned for their interpretations of early music.

This concert program was based around the folia – one of the oldest remembered European musical themes. The folia chord progression can be traced back to Italian and Spanish vocal music at the end of the fifteenth century and has been used by more than 150 composers since, from Lully to Liszt. Savall's concert program explored three centuries of folia music, making the connection between the Spanish original and its parallel evolution in the Caribbean, transported there by the conquistadors and early Creole settlers.

Savall's five-piece Hesperion XXI (viol, guitar/theorbo, Spanish Baroque harp, violone, and percussion) was supplemented by Tembembe Ensemble Continuo (assorted guitars, percussion, and violin, plus two singers and a dancer), which specialises in repertoire blending European Baroque with indigenous Mexican and Latin American sounds.



Rosalind Appleby (</abr-arts/author/6187-rosalindappleby>)

Rosalind Appleby is a Perth-based music journalist and author whose work covers a wide range of jazz, world and classical music. In

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The concert opened with two of the earliest uses of the folia from circa 1490, two years before Christopher Columbus made landfall in the Caribbean. 'Folias antiguas' (by an unknown composer) began with the folia as a gentle bass progression in the harp which was built upon by percussion and guitars with Savall improvising delicately over the top on his viol. The lilting hemiola rhythm of juxtaposed twos and threes was introduced, and there were snippets of flamenco-style strumming in the guitars, all underpinned by Baroque tuning with its colourful harmonic contrasts and occasional bright intervals.

We heard Gaspar Sanz's Baroque Jacaras with its intricate guitar solo demonstrating a huge range of textures and dynamics followed by 'La Petenera', a popular Mexican song closely related to the jacaras. The story of 'La Petenera' was evocatively told by singers Ada Coronel and Zenen Zeferino and dancer Donaji Esparza, whose flowing skirt was hitched to reveal intricate footwork. The whole band joined in the song refrain, and it was easy to imagine being in the streets of a Columbian village.

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Jordi Savall (photograph by David Ignaszewski)

The cross fertilisation between the two continents continued with 'Maria Chuchena' from the 'new world', which quoted rhythms from Spanish guitar repertoire and included an old Spanish children's song. The seductive slow build of a fandango (popular on both sides of the Atlantic) was a highlight, as was Savall's delicate bird calls and joyful improvisations on the treble viol in Canarios (a Canary Islands dance pattern which became popular in Baroque court dances).

A performance of Antonio Martin y Coll's 'Diferencias sobre las Folias' (1690), represented the early Baroque use of the folia as a continuo base line. Its sections contrasted the wistful serenity of the viol and the clatter of virtuosic castanet rhythms in a pattern of theme and variations that became a favourite of composers like Corelli, Scarlatti, and C.P.E. Bach.

The program included more than twenty works blending the Spanish and American worlds. The mood flickered from sobbing slow bass guitar progressions to the lyrical lines of the intricately inflected treble viol, coloured by multiple hues of guitar strumming and myriad percussion (including the jaw of a horse!) Occasionally I thought I heard a harpsichord in the tonal colours; at other times I was in a Cuban night club with a hip-

swinging groove.

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Jordi Savall and Hesperion XXI, and Tembembe Ensemble Continuo (photograph by Toni Wilkinson)

The performers slid smoothly between sections of improvisation and notated music, all delivered in a relaxed, polished manner. The final work 'Gallarda napolitana' by the Italian Antonio Valente was blended with the near identical Mexican 'El Jarabe Loco' with lyrics sung by Zeferino, who has a mesmerising tenor voice. The song described the unity between the old and new worlds, divided only by the ocean. This was a fitting conclusion to a concert which so eloquently demonstrated how music can traverse culture and time, linking all humanity.

Jordi Savall, Hesperion XXI, and Tembembe Ensemble Continuo (<https://www.perthfestival.com.au/event/jordi-savall-with-hesperion-xxi-tembembe-ensamble-continuo>) performed at the Perth Concert Hall for the 2018 Perth Festival. For details of Jordi Savall's national tour, go to www.alia-vox.com (<https://www.alia-vox.com/en/calendar/>)
Performance attended: 17 February 2018.

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Studio 2
207 City Road
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