

Album review

How an 80-year-old conductor produced the ultimate symphony cycle

Reviewed: Beethoven by Jordi Savall

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Spanish conductor Jordi Savall · ROBERTO SERRA/REDFERNS

Jordi Savall

Beethoven

★★★★★

Beethoven by Jordi Savall

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During his lifetime Beethoven kept battling on in the face of difficulties, deafness included. In the same spirit, the Catalan conductor and viol player Jordi Savall wasn't going to let a global pandemic curtail his Beethoven anniversary plans for recording the master's nine revolutionary symphonies, played on period instruments. The first five symphonies were duly released in 2020. For a time completion was uncertain. But here we are with the remainder, performed as before by Savall's Les Concert des Nations, enhanced with the vim and new blood of young musicians picked through auditions, and recorded after extensive workshops.

Luckily, those weeks of study only seem to have increased the electricity and freshness of these performances, mostly caught in the warm resonance of Savall's regular recording venue outside Barcelona. Following the first album's template, speeds align with Beethoven's metronome markings, guaranteeing some exciting and hurtling speeds, especially in symphonies seven and eight. Orchestral forces reflect the modest instrumental contingent usually used in Beethoven's day, allowing for much increased textural clarity, more vivid colours too. The one acoustic peculiarity is that woodwinds sometimes seem too recessed, their charms muted, their rhythms blurred, almost as if they were burbling their way through the more relaxed portions of Brahms.

Don't you just love the timpani, though, thwacked in period fashion with wooden sticks? It's if the music has been kicked in the pants. At the same time, you never sense that Savall is being dictatorial, deliberately pushing speeds, dynamics and phrasings to extremes. Everything emerges naturally, as if from Beethoven's fiery mind, or at least from his original manuscripts.

The sixth, the "Pastoral", is particularly delicious, a joyful celebration of the fellowship of nature and humankind. As for the mighty ninth, the "Choral", stacked at the end with youthful voices, and recorded just after Savall turned 80, the exultation level reached is quite beyond the norm. A few bars are scrambled, but who cares? No matter how many Beethoven symphony cycles you have – there are over 150 to choose from – two qualities make Savall's set absolutely essential: its roaring energy and its humanity.