

Barcelona's united front



Barcelona is known across the world for its beautiful buildings, delicious food and summer festivals. Now a new project wants to add classical music to that list by creating the complete tourist experience. **Andrew Anderson** finds out more

I've not been to Barcelona before, although I have heard lots about its incredible Gaudí architecture, wonderful weather and amazing atmosphere. A Catalonia novice, I head out to Spain for the launch of Barcelona Obertura, a new joint venture between the city's four leading classical music institutions who hope their new partnership will draw classical music tourists to their city.

As I step off the plane a wall of heat and sunshine hits me. When I left England it was barely above freezing: you couldn't sit outside without being weighed down by layers of clothing. Here in Spain, I wear my sunglasses as the taxi driver shuttles me to my hotel in the Gothic Quarter. It certainly feels like a city break. The buildings we pass remind me of the Rue Saint Honoré in Paris, only prettier, while the art nouveau street lamps conjure a bygone era – like you've just stepped on to a film set.

Creating a city famed for its classical music is a huge task. The sphere is dominated by just a handful of places: Paris, Berlin, London, New York and Vienna. These big cities are home to outstanding orchestras, bring in the superstar soloists and – with the possible exception of London – can boast some of the best concert halls in the world. And so if a city can break into this exclusive trade in arts tourism there is plenty of money to be made. Classical music fans tend to have more disposable cash than most and so the benefits go

beyond just concert ticket sales. As well as the chance to catch a few shows there's the hotel booking, a fancy dinner or two, sightseeing and, of course, the shopping sprees. All going well, tourists head back home with their spirits lifted, their wallets lightened, and their suitcases heavier.

So you can understand Barcelona's eagerness to get a piece of the action: when you consider the figures, you can see why. Since the 1992 Olympics, the city has seen an astonishing growth in its tourism industry, with visitor numbers up from 1.7 million to 7.8 million in the last 20 years. Tourism now accounts for 11 per cent of Barcelona's economy.

On my first afternoon I take a tour of Palau de la Música Catalana, an art nouveau concert hall that is unlike anything I've seen before. Every surface is a maze of lines, patterns and shapes. Nothing is symmetrical, nothing is conventional. Home to Orfeo Català choir, it is a place where the beauty of the building matches that of the music.

On the tour I get talking to Mateu Hernández, CEO of Barcelona Global – the company behind Barcelona Obertura. 'We work to promote Barcelona to the world. We want to share our home, the culture we love, with as many people as possible,' he tells me.

He explains that Barcelona Global is made up of 500 members, some businesses, some individuals. Members can propose projects and these are put to a vote. The Barcelona Obertura project was part of this process and was approved two years ago.

'I had a conversation where someone said 'there is no good classical music in Barcelona' says project coordinator Víctor Medem. 'I told them they were wrong – we have amazing opera at the Liceu, the choir at Palau, Jordi Savall performing concerts with Ibercamera and L'Auditori. I couldn't believe they thought nothing was happening here.'

He pauses to reflect: 'But afterwards I realised it isn't that we don't have good classical music: it is that people don't know about it.'

So Medem, with the help of Barcelona Global and the directors of L'Auditori, Palau de la Música Catalana, Gran Teatre del Liceu and Ibercamera, came up with a plan: to coordinate the schedules of the four institutions, and sell the combined package to classical music tourists.

It is a simple idea, one so simple that I am surprised it hasn't been tried more often. Or is getting four arts institutions to agree on anything a challenge? Do rivalries, jealousies and egos get in the way?

'That was not the case here,' says Palau manager Joan Oller when I put this to him. 'I used to be the director at L'Auditori and am good friends with the others, which helped.'

'It would be a waste of our time if, for example, we booked Viktoria Mullova to play here in August and then she appeared over at the L'Auditori in December,' says Ibercamera president Josep Maria Prat, when I asked him about the reasons for launching Obertura. 'By coordinating our efforts we can use our resources better. We will keep separate programming, but can market these shows together.'

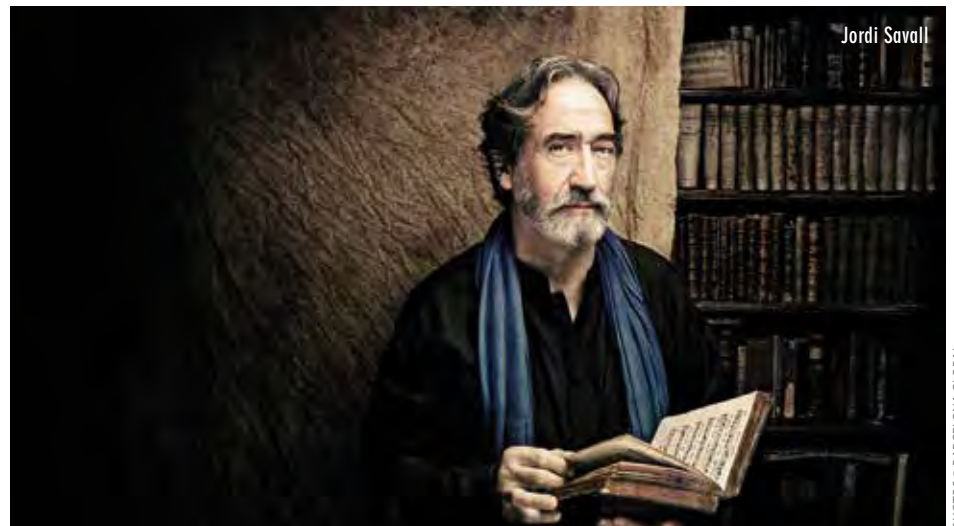
The result of their first effort is four coordinated programmes: Musical Christmas, Winter in Barcelona, Spring Festival and Mozart Weekend. Each of these features three or more concerts, spread across the four institutions. For example, Winter in Barcelona will see Jerusalem Quartet play at L'Auditori on Wednesday 25 January; Leonidas Kavakos and Enrico Pace play Beethoven sonatas for violin and piano at Palau on Thursday; Mariinsky Theatre Symphony Orchestra perform Liszt's *Piano Concerto no 1* on Friday; and Massenet's *Werther* is headed up by conductor Alain Altinoglu with Anna Caterina Antonacci as Charlotte at Liceu on Saturday.

'It would make for a lovely trip wouldn't it,' Ramón Agenjo says as we look over the programme together. Agenjo is typical of the people I meet in Barcelona: humble, eager to help and enormously proud of his hometown. He's so humble in fact that for the first half hour in his company I think he is the barman. It turns out he's actually the CEO of Grupo Damm, the producer of Estrella Damm beer, and one of the biggest benefactors of classical music in Barcelona. He is also president of the Barcelona Obertura project. 'I think people would really love to visit and see these concerts in January. Take a nice stroll afterwards: you couldn't do that in London in January.'

One problem I spot with the Obertura concept is that the programmes, while avoiding clashes, do not appear wholly coordinated. There is no theme running through the schedule, no overriding artistic thinking (like you might see at a festival); the concerts are more coincidence than curation.

'We are an association,' confirms Oller. 'I think it is okay that we still remain as separate institutions. I do not view the future as an office leading the programming; it is coordinating. We can adapt programming so there are links between one another, but we must stay separate.'

'We created our own ecosystem just to be free,' agrees Prat. 'We



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Above: Anna Caterina Antonacci
Right: Gran Teatre del Liceu



'It isn't that we don't have good classical music, it's that people don't know about it'

should try to keep our identity, because that is very important.'

It is a view echoed by the directors of Liceu and L'Auditori. However, the team from Barcelona Global see further coordination as the way forward.

'This is just the first stage, getting people to come together,' explains the Barcelona Global CEO. 'We want to increase coordination between them.' I ask him if this could look more like the mini festivals that I first pictured when told about the programme. 'That is definitely a possibility,' he agrees, before adding, 'but nothing is certain yet.'

With Barcelona Global pushing for coordination and the institutions themselves wanting to hang on to as much independence as possible, I suspect the next stage – creating programmes that are adapted and link with one another – is going to be much harder than what they have done so far. The evening ends at the Damm brewery, where a few glasses of Estrella in the warm spring night made those difficulties seem very far away – a problem for the future.

It is easy to understand why the four institutions are keen to keep as much control as possible: they have each carved out a comfortable niche for themselves within the city's cultural scene.

Palau, with its beautiful room and associated choirs, is both a destination for tourists – who pay to take a tour of the building – and for fans of choral singing. 'This hall was built by the choir, using their own money. The building is a huge part of our identity,' explains Oller. 'But another element that makes us different is that we don't have a resident orchestra, we have a resident choir. We put on much more choir music than any other concert hall similar to us.'

Oller also emphasises Palau's educational efforts: 'We are strongly involved in explaining music and helping people to better understand the music. There are free presentations before and after the concerts to help people prepare. For the Dudamel Symphonies [Gustavo Dudamel has conducted a number of works at Palau, including Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* in January last year] we had educational conferences. We want to improve the knowledge and expertise of our audience.'

It is a similar story over at L'Auditori, the city's largest performing arts space. Opened in 1999 the brutalist building contains four concert halls and is a centre for music of all kinds. It receives the most public funding and, as a result, outreach and community engagement are central to its mission.

'For example, we changed our prices so that every concert for people under 35 years old is €18 euros,' says Valentí Oviedo, the young and enthusiastic manager of L'Auditori. 'At first we had just 500 people under 35 attending, then last year it rose to 3,000 and then this year it is 5,500 already.'

'We don't have to reduce the quality of what we do to reach people. We have to show that what we do is good and champion new audiences.'

Liceu, on the other hand, is an opera house that is opulent to the extreme. With delicate paintings on the wall and rich decoration on every surface it feels exclusive. We tour the building – refitted after a fire in 1994 – and it is impossible not to be impressed. 2016 highlights include a recital from Joyce DiDonato and a new production of *La Bohème*.

Ibercamera is a different thing again. 'All the other organisations receive public money. That means we are representing this private tradition – and the private tradition built classical music here,' says Prat. The group has 1,300 subscribers in Barcelona, and has launched programmes in Madrid and Girona – growing rapidly even during the economic crisis.

'We have relationships with artists that we work with for many, many years. We have people who we have worked with for over 30 years. This means we can establish a fixed approach with the artist and choose the right programmes. Our subscribers know they are going to get these people and they trust us.'

'We already have great music here. This programme is just about sharing it with the world,' interjects Jordi William Carnes, CEO of the

Barcelona Obertura leaders. Back row (left to right): Valentí Oviedo, Marian Puig, Víctor Medem, Joan Oller. Front row (left to right): Roger Guasch, Ramón Agenjo, Josep Maria Prat, Mateu Hernández





L'Auditori

Barcelona Tourism Board. 'We want to bring in business for hotels, for restaurants, for airlines.'

Carnes and his team recently created a campaign called *Barcelona and Me*, which highlights all the things you can do in the city. At the moment classical music is not featured, but Carnes envisions a future where music is central to the city's brand. 'This kind of cultural tourism can be very important for us,' he says, 'it is something different, and another reason for people to visit.'

On a more practical level Hernández adds that Obertura will soon launch a new web platform: 'You will be able to buy tickets from all four companies on our web portal. This will make it much easier for customers – everything will be in one place, with one login, rather than signing up to four separate websites and buying four separate products.'

Once the portal is up and running, Hernández envisions further purchase options being added: 'We want to commit the four organisations, and other groups in Barcelona, to sell cultural trips. We will work with hotels and airlines to make package deals. So the website will suggest hotels and flights – the complete user experience. We'll have agreements with big tour operators. Our members will help with this too, so it will benefit everyone.'

It is soon time for me to leave, but in just a couple of days I've already caught the Barcelona bug. I visit La Sagrada Família twice and am fascinated by its bizarre architecture – what other city would try to build something like this? The food is amazing – even if people do insist on feeding meat to me (despite my protests that I'm a vegetarian). The people are friendly, and the managers at the classical music venues treat you as an equal – there's no snobbishness in sight.

'We know people aren't going to come here just for classical music,' says Damm's Agenjo when I ask him to sum up why people should



visit. 'They will come for the food, the weather, the architecture... but maybe classical music will be part of their experience. That is what we hope. We have made a beautiful baby – now we want to show her to the world.'

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Glass roof at Palau de la Música Catalana

'We have made a beautiful baby – now we want to show her to the world'