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## 'The Routes of Slavery' traces a musical journey of resilience in the face of inhumanity

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**Joined by a global array of musicians, music researcher and virtuoso Jordi Savall traces the relevant story of the African diaspora and its musical legacy across centuries and continents in "The Routes of Slavery."**

By [Thomas May](#)

*Special to The Seattle Times*

*"The most monstrous of all the man-made institutions created throughout history."*

Musician and researcher Jordi Savall's apt description of slavery underscores the sense of grave responsibility that inspired the performance project he and his colleagues are bringing to Seattle as part of a current U.S. tour.

Titled "[The Routes of Slavery](#)," this multicultural performance of music and dance, interspersed with dramatic readings, features artists from Africa, the Americas and Europe. Together, the artists trace the journey of enslaved peoples from 1444 to 1888, showcasing the musical traditions they brought with them and how these cross-pollinated with other indigenous cultures during the African Diaspora. It will be jointly presented by [Early Music Seattle](#) and [Seattle Symphony](#) on Nov. 6 at Benaroya Hall.

The vision behind "Routes" has the hallmarks of several other projects by Spanish musician Savall. The Catalan-born early-music luminary frequently combines his roles as a viola da gamba player and conductor with a passion for history. He has used his skills as a creative researcher into overlooked archives to craft programs addressing such topics as the [Sephardic Diaspora during the Inquisition](#) or the confluence of Muslim, Jewish and Christian cultures in medieval Spain.

At the same time, "The Routes of Slavery" arguably represents Savall's boldest, most challenging undertaking to date — in the range of its material, spanning continents and eras; its sense of moral imperative; and its potentially problematic narrative.

"It's a history that people know about in general, but I think we have forgotten how widespread and inhuman this practice was," Savall said in a recent discussion via phone from his home in Spain. He pointed out that while Europe was enriching itself, the slave trade was perpetrating horrors that are "the most terrible things human beings are capable of."

## Shaping the narrative

Savall is a respected artistic mediator of intercultural dialogue. Yet the prospect of a white European telling this story of the African Diaspora understandably raises concerns.

Last summer, the French-Canadian director Robert Lepage generated heated controversy with "Slav," described by its creators as a "theatrical odyssey based on slave songs," at the Montreal International Jazz Festival. The show had to close after just two performances in response to [protests over Lepage's choice to cast white people in the roles of black slaves](#).

When Savall first designed “The Routes of Slavery” several years ago, he chose from the outset to collaborate with, and give the performance platform to, artists representing the cultures to whose history the show pays homage.

Savall is sensitive to the imperative of centering the narrative around these voices. But the use of spoken texts that document the history of the slave trade — including the legal codes that were used to dehumanize and oppress fellow human beings, and texts by historical figures including Abraham Lincoln — has raised important questions. In bringing “The Routes of Slavery” to Seattle, Gus Denhard, Early Music Society’s artistic director, sought out African-American and Afro-Latino community leaders for artistic guidance.

“By its nature, the narrated script conveys a white colonial perspective, which puts the focus on victimization,” said Monica Rojas-Stewart, a cultural anthropologist who is assistant director of African Studies and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Washington’s Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies.

“My concern is that the story Savall is telling through the script can be seen as perpetuating the idea that the history of African people is framed by the narrative of slavery,” she said. “African descendants are more interested in talking about stories of resilience and survival.”

At the same time, Rojas-Stewart, who also founded the arts education initiative [Movimiento Afrolatino Seattle](#), said Savall “has done impressive archival research” and she applauds his “genuine interest in making sure this story is remembered. I’m excited that this is happening and think people should go and see it.”

Rojas-Stewart is one of several local figures who will participate in “[Roads to Reconciliation](#),” an evening of open community dialogue and performance presented by Seattle Pacific University’s (SPU) music department and scheduled to take place a week after “The Routes of Slavery.” Its aim is to “center the voices, experiences, stories and untold histories of the African Diaspora in various regions of the American continent,” according to SPU music professor [Stephen Newby](#).

A composer and conductor who is widely known for his tradition of national-anthem performances at Seattle Sounders games, Newby will also join the cast of “The Routes of Slavery” as the narrator in Seattle.

“I think it’s critical to have artistic spaces for all sorts of narratives,” he says. “‘Routes’ is an artistic representation that tells the story of enslavement. The texts come from a European lens, but the music is glorious. I want to tell a story of reconciliation and to help frame our thinking around the idea of what is at stake if we don’t practice a radical racial reconciliation.”

## Putting the program together

In his search for material, Savall set up a chronological framework from 1444 (when the Portuguese began mass slaving expeditions to Africa) to 1888, the year in which Brazil became the last country to abolish slavery in the Western world. This barbarous trans-Atlantic practice resulted in “over 25 million Africans [being] shipped by European countries to be bound in slavery,” Savall observes in the booklet notes to his recording of the program.

In previous early-music projects, Savall and his ensembles — respectively, the instrumental and vocal groups Hespèrion XXI and La Capella Reial de Catalunya — had explored music of the colonial era in the Americas under Spanish rule. Savall became aware of the powerful influence from African traditions on secular and religious songs in the New World. “I realized we were performing music that had been brought over by the slaves — but from the perspective of the Church and the enslaving powers.”

That realization gave Savall the impetus to research how the music of the slaves has been preserved as a tradition among descendants in Central and South America. He also began exploring which cultures in Africa are connected through these musical traditions.

Two areas especially rich in examples are represented in “The Routes to Slavery”: Mali, “one of the most important empires in Africa in the Middle Ages,” as well as Madagascar. Several Malian performers take part in the performance, including Ballaké Sissoko, a virtuoso on the kora (a kind of harp-lute), while the Malagasy musician Rajery plays valiha (Madagascar’s signature bamboo-tube zither).

Structurally, Savall composed the program as a sequence of instrumental and vocal pieces interspersed with narrated texts. The latter are culled from contemporaneous documents relating to the development of the slave trade, such as a grim extract from the “Slave Code of Barbados” and reflections by the philosopher Montesquieu on the topic of slavery. Other examples include texts from Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and a slave named Belinda, who petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for a pension.

The musical program of “The Routes of Slavery” additionally maps out sources from Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. Savall’s ensembles perform New World Baroque pieces from the era, while the Tembembe Ensamble Continuo presents rhythmically vibrant traditional folk styles such as the son jarocho from Veracruz. For the current tour, Savall has added three songs representing the perspective of North American slaves as well.

Another new addition to “Routes” for the Seattle performance will be jazz vocalist [René Marie](#), who will sing the three pieces Savall has added for the U.S. tour. “As an African American, I have my own vision of the aspect of slavery insofar as it pertains to me and my direct ancestors,” she says. “I totally get the role of music that is being shown. Out of unspeakable pain and tragedy, you have this beautiful flowering of music and expression that addresses both sorrow and despair and also the joy of just being alive.”

It’s a truism that history is shaped by those in power, who get to tell the story. But the message of “The Routes of Slavery” is that, in the face of the colonizers’ inhumanity, those who were enslaved refused to let their identities be erased.

For Savall, the musical traditions that he and his colleagues trace encode a legacy of resistance — one that, he hopes, will make people more sensitive to contemporary injustices, from the worldwide migrant crisis to the ongoing existence of slavery itself, in all its forms.

“The women, men and children who were brutally deported from their villages in Africa to the European colonies in the New World had only their culture of origin to accompany them on the journey,” writes Savall. “Song and dance, rhythmically structured by music, were the only context in which they could feel free and express themselves — something that nobody could take away from them ... It enabled all those people with their diverse origins and languages to create a common world and withstand the negation of their humanity.”

This explains the apparent paradox that much of the music heard in “The Routes of Slavery” is joyful, life-affirming, despite the context of cruelty and inhumanity. Savall pointed out that he has seen a similar phenomenon in the music of the Jews exiled from Spain in 1492 and the Celtic music of oppressed Irish immigrants.

“The music is what helped them survive. The more people suffer from their circumstances, the more they turn to music to recover hope. Music is the last language that makes it possible for us to communicate our soul with other human beings.”

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**Jordi Savall: “The Routes of Slavery,”** presented by Early Music Seattle and the Seattle Symphony. 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 6; Benaroya Hall, 200 University St., Seattle; \$21-\$97; 206-215-4747, [seattlesymphony.org](http://seattlesymphony.org) or [earlymusicseattle.org](http://earlymusicseattle.org)

**“Roads to Reconciliation,”** an evening of community dialogue and performance organized by Stephen Newby and presented by Seattle Pacific University. 6-9 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 15; Nickerson Studios, 340 W. Nickerson St., Seattle; free; [spu.edu](http://spu.edu)

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