

European interview
n°120
4th July 2023

« Music is the very essence of European cultural identity »

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, you initiated a chain of solidarity. What does it consist of?

The night of 24 February 2022 shocked me because it showed just how fragile peace is. I felt the need to do something and decided, with the *Centre européen de musique*, to help and facilitate the reception of Ukrainian musicians in Europe, but also to work to preserve the dialogue between Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian musicians. At the beginning of the conflict, there were moves to censor the Russian repertoire, and concerts were cancelled because the programme included works by Tchaikovsky - an absolute absurdity! Within this chain of solidarity, links are being forged, with musicians playing not only the repertoire of their own country but also that of countries with which they are at war. In an increasingly violent and divided world, music can be an instrument of peace, integration and inclusion. That's why I've worked so hard in theatres of war. For over fifteen years, I regularly travelled to the Middle East to work on musical projects. After the Taliban took power, we also supported Afghan musicians and the [Institute of Afghan Music](#), now based in Braga, Portugal.

Jean Monnet is quoted as saying: «If I had to do it all over again, I would start with culture». Can culture strengthen the feeling of belonging to Europe?

Of course, it is! The cultural foundation of European identity is necessary and fundamental. Unfortunately, it has never been fully implemented. The European idea is not just the brainchild of technocrats, it is also an idea that has been shared for centuries by musicians, thinkers and artists. Music is the very

essence of European cultural identity because it represents hybridity and interlacing, because it embraces opposites. When you go to the United States, Asia or elsewhere and sing Ravel, Bach, Beethoven or Schuman, you are performing «European music». European music is known in every country outside our continent. The beauty of music is that it is intangible heritage *par excellence* and, at the same time, it is the most tangible kind. I still believe that the day music truly finds its place in society, it will be able to save the world. The violinist Yehudi Menuhin used to say that music could make the world a better place. I would go further: music could save the world, provided we give it the power it deserves.

You are the founder and chairman of the Centre Européen de Musique (CEM), a musical, scientific, educational and cultural centre in Bougival, near Paris. What is its raison d'être?

The *Centre Européen de Musique* is a multi-faceted, highly innovative and ambitious project, placing music at the heart of society in a holistic way. The idea is to give substance and tangibility to the European idea, and our wish is to 'musicalise' it by reconnecting Europe. It CEM has its roots in the defence and safeguarding of a heritage that had been completely abandoned. It includes the Villa Viardot and the Maison Bizet - where Bizet composed *Carmen* before dying at the age of 36 - at the very heart of Impressionist Hill. After a long battle to bring its restoration to a successful conclusion, on 16 September we will be inaugurating the house of Pauline Viardot, who was undoubtedly one of the founding mothers of Europe, a true polymath, a remarkable musician, the «arch-musician» as Franz Liszt called her, a character who managed to bring together all the great minds of the

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age, from the Urals to the Atlantic. She understood that Europe was the answer to the dangers of nationalism and imperialism. And that's why the *Centre européen de musique* is taking up the baton from all those who gathered around this «Mother Europe» and aims to bring together past and future in the present tense. Our project is already a European constellation, with branches already established in Portugal and in the process of being set up in Spain and developed in Italy, Greece, Germany, Austria and Sweden. Each of these will have a specific mission, for example, music as an instrument of peace in Cordoba, music innovation and the headquarters of the VIA SCARLATTI constellation in the palace of Mafra in Portugal, or Bel Canto, European melody in Catania. In Lisbon, we're in the process of setting up a 'music and oceans' centre. because we now know that sound and music can make a major contribution to underwater biodiversity.

The CEM receives private and public, local and national funding. Does it also receive European funding?

The *Centre européen de musique* is a member of the [European Heritage Hub](#), a European Union pilot project devoted to heritage, which is already good news. I now hope that the *Centre européen de musique* will be seen as a European project in its own right and that it will be able to spread throughout Europe. It will then be able to play its part in building an open cultural identity, because the European continent is the result of cross-fertilisation and migration, which are part of our history. Europe has always been a receptacle for sources from all over the world. It has also been the originator of the magnificent idea of universality. We must not forget this. Without memory, the people of Europe will be lost.

The Lisbon Treaty accords a real place to culture and invites us to draw inspiration from Europe's cultural, religious and humanist heritage. Can we talk of a European culture?

A common culture does exist, but it is being lost. If we are not careful, it will disappear within a few generations. Today, our children's two great imaginary

worlds are Japanese and American. We need to recreate a European sense of imagination. With [the Fondazione Nazionale Carlo Collodi](#) (creator of Pinocchio), we would like to invite young European composers to create small chamber operas for puppets, inspired by the fairy tales of Andersen, Perrault and the Grimm brothers. The idea is to return to our heritage and bring it back to life. This is also why we launched the [Network of European Musicians' Houses and Museums](#) (MMME), which now has around fifty members from 23 different countries, including the Mozarteum in Salzburg, the Franz Liszt Museum in Budapest and the Chopin Institute in Warsaw, but also the Antonio Frago House in Portugal, the Casa Museo Jesus de Monasterio in Spain and the Enescu Museum in Bucharest, all of which need the chain of solidarity that started this initiative, which, strange as it may seem, did not exist before. It is this kind of Europe, a Europe of creation, a Europe that can only be open and humanist, that we need to fund and support!

The CEM also aims to work on the links between music and the brain.

The CEM is already fortunate enough to have a scientific council that includes fourteen different disciplines, such as neuroscience and cognitive science. And thanks to its initiative, we're creating a platform - a 'hub' - on the inexhaustible and hugely exciting links between music and the brain. It is extraordinary to see what music can do for education, well-being and physical and mental health. We know, thanks to medical imaging, that it is very important for concentration, memory and brain plasticity, that it can be a major therapy for Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease, and that it can facilitate communication in cases of behavioural disorders such as those on the autistic spectrum. It's been proven, and we have some amazing studies on the subject.

Various studies emphasise the contribution of music to education. Are they sufficiently taken into account in Europe?

No, European ministers still fail to understand the importance of music in education. We no longer instil the desire to learn, the curiosity that is born when we

are very young, because we have had the opportunity to create. We need to move from *homo economicus* to *homo artisticus*. That's how they'll find their true place in society, in the world. I've worked with autistic children; from the moment you let them improvise musically, all of a sudden there's harmony, thanks to listening. It is listening that is missing. Discourse has become extremist. Look at the situation we increasingly find ourselves in: we shout because we have the impression that we are no longer being heard, and this cry carries a great deal of anger and incomprehension, leading us into a cacophony that is unfortunately often manipulative. Let us also be sensitive to the human tragedies of the shipwrecks of immigrants in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic and to all those human beings who risk their lives to go into exile because they come from countries where freedom, freedom of expression, freedom to live a dignified life, to have a salary and a job, do not exist. Throughout its history, Europe has welcomed many migrations, to which we are indebted. Take, for example, the contribution of the Jewish people or the Arabs. Without «Al Andalus», without «Sefarad», Europe would not have been humanist, and neither would the Renaissance, a high point in our history!

Your mother was Spanish, your father Portuguese, you were born in Porto and are a Parisian by adoption. What does Europe mean to you?

It certainly represents a large part of my DNA and, perhaps because I'm an eternal traveller, the awareness of this strong feeling of belonging to such a small and rich continent. I'm a fervent European. Also because of the choice I made to be a musician and to serve European music in a wide range of my repertoire, as well as the cosmopolitan nature of my family history. Perhaps the marriage between a Spanish woman and a Portuguese man, my parents, has made me allergic to the idea of borders. And this sense of injustice regarding borders was quickly brought into sharp focus by the harsh reality of that day in 1978 when I left Porto in what could be called an «immigrant bus» to complete my education in Paris. Portugal was not yet a member of the European Union. It was a time when Portuguese immigration was very high and not always well accepted.

There were some rather dramatic moments, a kind of prepotency on the part of certain police and customs officers towards people who often did not understand French. I felt what racism was all about.

You like to refer to Ziryab, the musician who in the 9th century created the nuba, a form of music that is the result of a triple influence: Jewish, Christian and Arabic. How does music contribute to European identity?

Ziryab, who came from Damascus, was the founder of the first school of music in Europe! Another forgotten polymath of fundamental importance to European history. It is these examples that should be highlighted, particularly in our history textbooks. In the European constellation of the EMC, there will be Santiago de Compostela. The Way of St James was a physical link that enabled Europe - from the north, south and centre - to come together. Students travelled from one university to another, experiencing a kind of Erasmus before its time. These journeys also revolutionised European musical life since they encouraged encounters. These rivers and tributaries mean that music has always been the lifeblood of Europe, but also of my own awareness of Europe. When you hear a Bach suite, you hear a jig from Ireland, a minuet from France, a sarabande from Spain, and so on. Music has always carried the European idea of « [Unity in diversity](#) » the European Union's motto.

Europe also has an anthem, taken from Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. What does the Ode to Joy mean to you as a baritone?

One thing that has always struck me about Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is the recitative, which I've had the great good fortune to sing often, the recitative with the words of Beethoven himself, before Schiller's Ode to Joy. In these stanzas, Beethoven calls for fraternity and harmony. He felt deeply universalist and therefore European. He asked friends to tell him what music was important in other European countries, and he went on to write over two hundred «*Volkslieder*» from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Russia and the Ukraine.

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With one year to go to the European elections, are we seeing a new wave of nationalism in Europe?

I’m afraid so! We have to bury the little hatchets of political warfare and prevent this from happening since it would be the death knell of the European adventure. We have left the field of emotion to the extremes, that of the lowest and most negative emotions of human beings, namely fear, fear of the other, fear of foreigners, historical revisionism. And all this is very dangerous. If we are to avoid it, we need to raise awareness of European cultural identity, which will bring back emotion, but one that is positive emotion. That’s how Europe can win. When you bring musicians together, nationalities fade out. Culture cannot be nationalistic!

Let’s unite our goodwill and continue to believe in the greatest adventure launched 73 years ago after those two terrible wars, the fruit of nationalism. This adventure is called Europe: the adventure that looks to the future!

Jorge Chaminé

Musician and baritone Jorge Chaminé is the founder and president of the Centre européen de musique. He has been awarded the Unesco Human Rights Medal for his work on behalf of abandoned children around the world.

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Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

ISSN 2402-614X

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