

# Biography of José Vázquez



José Vázquez, Oberlin Conservatory, USA, June, 2003

José Vázquez was born in La Habana, Cuba, a city founded around 1500 in the reign of Charles V by Spanish colonists which soon became the gateway to the New World. He lived next to the then rabble-rouser student, Fidel Castro, with whose son he often visited the zoo, therefore his family knew what to expect: so after the delusion of the Revolution, José left his native land with his family for North America in 1961, where he spent the ensuing 13 years of his life. He studied at Northwestern University (Chicago) and performed in the Collegium Musicum of the University of Chicago under the direction of Howard Meyer Brown for four years before undertaking professional studies of the viola da gamba with Hannelore Müller and baroque violin with Jaap Schroeder at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Switzerland. In 1980 he was appointed to the Conservatory of Music in Winterthur, Switzerland, where he teaches performance practice, viola da gamba and baroque violin. In 1982 he was appointed professor for viola da gamba at the University of Music in Vienna, Austria. Concerts as

soloist (viola da gamba concerti, passions) with various European orchestras, including the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Zürich Opera Orchestra, Salzburg Chamber Orchestra, The Smithsonian Chamber Players under directors like, Riccardo Chailly, Florian Heyerick, Günter Jena, Helmut Rilling, Franz Welser-Möst. Recordings with diverse ensembles (Ex Tempore, Belgium; Hans-Martin Linde, Switzerland; Musica Antiqua Köln, Germany...). Founder and director of the Orpheon Baroque Orchestra and Orpheon Consort, with which numerous recordings have been made.



Jose Vazquez at the Musée Calvet, Avignon, July, 2006

In recognition of his artistic achievements the Austrian Government awarded José Vázquez the Silver Cross-of-Honour for Merit of the Republic of Austria. (Silbernes Ehrenzeichen für Verdienste um die Republik Österreich).

Orpheon is an ensemble specialized in the performance of the music of the Renaissance and the Baroque respecting the aesthetics of the diverse styles which these periods encompass. The ensemble employs instruments of the private collection of its director, Prof. José Vázquez, of the University for Music and the Performing Arts Vienna, which comprises over 170 choice string instruments - violins, violas, violoncellos and violas da gamba - from the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries and historical bows, all in original condition or faithfully restored to the original measurements of the Renaissance the Baroque and the Classical Periods. This collection of fine old instruments, recognised as unique in the world by the directors and curators of prestigious museums (Metropolitan Museum in New York, Smithsonian Institute in Washington, Sotheby's London) is at present being presented as an exhibition all over Europe, together with concerts of Orpheon, funded in part by a generous grant of the European Commission Culture-2000, Mozart-Call. A permanent museum, with its own institute for performance practice and workshop for the restoration of historical string instruments, will be established in the near future.



# "The Man Plays"

## *Profile of a Viol Player*

### **The first crossing: from the jungle to the metropolis**

True, he spent his childhood - every free moment of it - playing in the subtropical jungles of his native Cuba, where he learned to draw taut another kind of bow. Nevertheless, his parents, both ophthalmologists, envisaged another, "complimentary" form of education for him: the bilingually-run English school of St. George in Havana. As if by a fortuitous twist of fate, this better enabled him to better cope with the new environment in Chicago, where the tribulations of the Revolution displaced him on his tenth birthday. The North American sojourn - initially expected to be a mere respite - lasted thirteen long years, during which he completed secondary school at the most progressive institution of the country: Evanston High School, with its innovative system of - independent study, which equipped students with the ability to learn on their own. It was also here that he made the portentous choice of German - "the most difficult of the three offered" - as his foreign language. Did he already know towards which shores Fate would navigate him next? At Northwestern University, he also, by choice, enrolled in upper-level musicology courses, in addition to regular studies towards his biology degree.

Even in his jungle days, the Beethoven Violin Concerto had been his most treasured record (incidentally, he has never taken to anything except classical music). So when the time came - at twelve years of age - he exchanged his outwardly curved Indian bow for an inwardly curved one, but only for a short time... His fondness of the Baroque masters led him while in high school to organise playing sessions of the Brandenburg concertos, Vivaldi, Handel, Corelli and the like: a premonition of things to come. Inquiring into the history of the violin, he came across the viol, becoming instantly convinced of this instrument's virtues, above all, of the richness of the consort repertoire. Acquiring a viol from a local violin dealer shortly before entering the university, he set out to find himself a teacher: a difficult task in Chicago in 1969. The systematic search of the region yielded a total of sixteen viol players, none of whom felt himself competent enough to teach. One of them, the internationally renowned musicologist, Howard Meyer Brown, invited him to join the Collegium Musicum of the University of Chicago, in which he played for the next four years. The works studied under Professor Brown's supervision ranged from the Cantigas of Alfonso el Sabio, through the unpublished transcriptions of Florentine music of Lorenzo de' Medici to the cantatas of Rameau: one of the most worthwhile learning experiences of his life. For professional tutelage on the viol in America one had to rely on the summer courses; at the Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute Catharina Meints and August Wenzinger changed his stroke to a more elegant one and, more importantly, his attitude towards music to a more serious one.

## **The second and third crossings: the Atlantic, the Pyrenees**

The year 1974 ushered in an even more drastic revolution in our subject's life: he left the USA for Europe, more specifically, for Spain, the land of his grandparents, ostensibly to continue his medical studies. Realising rather quickly that the University of Madrid differed substantially from its American counterparts (where helicopters, mounted police and tear gas were seldom employed for didactic purposes), he decided - *carpe diem* - to explore this wonderful country. He did so with viol in hand, by joining every early music group in Madrid for concerts all over Spain. This intense concertising was to prove an immense help during the next stage of his life, heralded by yet another dramatic revolution: in 1975, after completing the year's exams at the medical faculty, he packed up his viol and left for Basel to commence studies with one of the finest teachers of the instrument, Hannelore Mueller. The regular concert trips to Spain helped to provide a minuscule pecuniary basis (supplemented by a position as violinist in a chamber orchestra and teaching Spanish and English at a language school) while also bringing a welcome change of scene from grey (the weather) and grim (the school) Basel. Not knowing how long the Helvetian days would last or even how long he would remain in Europe, he decided right from the start to make use of the opportunity to work diligently on his German. Although auditioning with works by Forqueray, but his teacher called his bluff: from this point on, he decided to analyse the problems of viol technique and to master every detail of it step by step. This required approximately four to six hours of technical practising with no exceptions during a period of three years. While completing his studies, his interest in painting and history led him to found a concert series at the Basel Museum of Fine Arts, combining the pictorial arts with the music of the period. Thus, when in 1980, he was appointed to the Conservatory of Music at Winterthur, Switzerland to do courses in performance practice - a position he still holds today - he had already presented many lecture-concerts, although many more were to come. Similarly when in 1982 he was asked to audition to become professor of viola da gamba at the Vienna Hochschule (Music Academy) - a position previously held by Prof. Wenzinger - his knowledge of German was sufficient, the repertoire had been learnt, and a lecture on the change of aesthetics in painting and music from the Renaissance to the Baroque had been prepared. None of this was ever planned: only in retrospect does it seem so. Obviously this is the main tenor in the life of José Vázquez: should one call it "planned coincidence" or "coincidental planning"?

Meanwhile, the yearly meetings of the Winterthur viol class and friends, originally designed to get the viol players of the region acquainted with each other while doing some friendly consort playing, eventually coalesced through the efforts of some of his students into what is now the Viola da Gamba Society of Germany, Switzerland and Austria, with about one thousand members and a quarterly newsletter. A seed was planted and nourished and it grew!

## **The final crossing: from the Alps to the Apennines and the Mediterranean Coast**

Ever since his Chicago days, José has had a keen interest in musical instruments. From the initial idea of gathering a fine set of two violins and a viol for the performance of trio sonatas to the outstanding collection of about 100 string instruments from 1585 to 1780 - all restored to their original condition - is indeed a long way. And for anyone who has ever met him, it would seem that the search has just begun: this is almost like a game he plays. He has decided to look for a home for the collection. At the moment Vázquez, together with a board of associates - is planting a bigger seed: they are working intensely on the realisation of "Orpheon": a project that comprises not only the museum, but also the creation of a trust or foundation which will have as its purpose the maintenance of the collection and the running of musical activities - concerts and recordings - connected with these instruments and later on an institute for performance practice.

The instruments - the strings at least - will also be regularly exhibited abroad. In the past, the exhibition has been presented in Italy, Austria, Germany and Taiwan.

"Thus march we playing until our latest rest..."

**by Christian Fuchs (Vienna)**

*from The CONSORT - European Journal of Early Music,*

*Spring 1996 (Vol. 52, No. 1)*