

ORCHESTRA *Insight ...*

Basque National Orchestra

Our monthly series telling the story behind an orchestra

Founded 1982

Home Kursaal, San Sebastián

Music Director Robert Trevino

Founding Music Director Enrique Jordá

In some places, identity runs deeper than pride. Like Catalonians on the opposite side of northern Spain, the Basque people, who spread over the border into the south-western tip of France, are culturally distinct from the states they are part of. In a region where culture is politics, an ensemble like the Basque National Orchestra (Euskadiko Orkestra in Basque) exists for more than the provision of fine concerts.

The orchestra was established by order of the Basque government in 1982 (its board is still stacked heavy with local politicians), taking its first musical steps under conductor Enrique Jordá. The orchestra now plays seasons to a 7000-strong subscriber base across four cities: Pamplona, Vitoria, Bilbao and San Sebastián. In the latter two towns, it benefits from striking modern concert halls.

The cataloguing and disseminating of Basque music was always the orchestra's priority. The ensemble has commissioned composers Basque and non-Basque to express their own vision of the region in music. *Gramophone* closely tracked the orchestra's comprehensive Basque music series on Claves, whose highlights include music by Andrés Isasi y Linares and 'Donostia' – the Basque name for San Sebastián and that adopted by local composer José Gonzalo Zulaica.

Under José Ramón Encinar, the ensemble recorded the Basque-language opera *Gernika* by Francisco Escudero for Decca and did the same for *La Llama* by José María Usandizaga for DG, conducted by Juan José Ocón. Carlo Rizzi and former Music Director Jun Märkl have both recorded with the orchestra, laying the groundwork for its return to the microphones recently under boss since 2017, Robert Trevino.

Trevino insists that the orchestra's Basque identity sets it



apart. He argued as much in the first of his series of Ondine recordings, focusing on Basque-born Ravel (7/21). What the conductor describes as a characteristically Basque 'almost Prussian directness' gives his musicians just as much of an edge and validity in music by Mahler; 'Basque is not Spanish – there are big cultural differences,' he says.

The BNO take its audience as seriously as its locality. It was among the first European orchestras to find performance solutions during the pandemic and has built firm relations with marginalised societal groups. But whatever its musical DNA, it is a modern, versatile ensemble. Recently Trevino has been feeding his musicians a diet of music from his native America – they received an Editor's Choice last issue for 'Americascapes' on Ondine, which followed one in 2012 for an album of Gubaidulina. **Andrew Mellor**
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Harding staying in Stockholm



Daniel Harding has affirmed the ongoing strength of his relationship with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra by continuing his contract as Music Director and Artistic Director until at least 2025.

Already shortly to begin his 15th year in the post, it's among the longest such partnerships in the current orchestral scene. 'There is no doubt that here in Stockholm, in Berwaldhallen, I have found my musical family,' said Harding. 'The bond between us is immense and the spark that we had at the start seems only brighter and more intense.' New plans include three Wagner operas in concert – beginning with *Tristan und Isolde* – and a music film project.

Verbier and DG launch label

The Verbier Festival and Deutsche Grammophon are building on their collaborative partnership, which in 2020 included some enjoyable online albums from the past decade or so of performances, by launching a new label.

The initial three-year joint venture will delve into the archive of the past 29 years of the Verbier Festival's illustrious and starry history. That rich archive includes early recordings featuring many of today's household names making their festival debuts, as well as major artists collaborating with contemporaries to explore new repertoire, something of a speciality for the Swiss Alpine event. Like those releases from a year or so ago, the label will, it says 'focus on digital albums', with the first ones set for the spring. Selected performances will be available to watch online through the DG platform, while others will be made available as physical product.

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