

Acceptance speech

20 June 2024

George Benjamin, awardee in the Music and Opera category (16th edition)

Two overriding memories haunt me from my first visit to Spain – a holiday in Malaga with my parents and sister in the spring of 1971 – one ironic (at least for an English family in Andalusia) of incessant rain, the other the sight of a prominent newspaper placard announcing that “Strawinsky está muerto.” This momentous news shocked an already fanatical fan of the Rite of Spring at the tender age of 11.

But my connection to Spain goes back further, much further - to the first half of the 17th century when my Marano antecedent Isaac Abendana fled the Inquisition in Cantabria and travelled through Germany and the Netherlands before finally settling in England. There he had a highly distinguished academic career, initially in Cambridge and then in Oxford. This means that – at least on my maternal side – I have deep Hispanic roots, something which has meant ever more to me over the years as I have got to know this beautiful country and admire its wonderfully diverse and rich culture.

This direct ancestral link to Spain is one of the reasons I am so moved to receive this award. It also makes me think of that 11-year-old boy walking in a deluge near the Mediterranean, who, despite his youth, is already determined to devote his life to music and ardently hopes to be one thing and one thing alone: a composer.

And I ask myself: why? I would find it hard to respond today, as I have pursued this vocation throughout my adult life and cannot begin to imagine doing anything else. But if you had asked my 11-year-old self, he would probably have replied – with his enthusiastic though as yet restricted knowledge of Beethoven, Berlioz, Mahler and Stravinsky – that quite simply nothing is more exciting in the world than music, that music indeed defines beauty, and that light and, yes, truth reside in harmony as nowhere else in existence. And I now realise that several lives would not begin to be sufficient to serve and explore this wondrous medium.

But for the moment I want to express my heartfelt thanks to the selection committee and the BBVA Foundation for having given me this extraordinary prize and hugely appreciated honour.