

Ceremony to award honorary doctorate to Manuel Borja-Villel

Llotja de Mar, Barcelona

Chair and members of the UOC's Board of Trustees,
General Secretary,
Dr Borja-Villel,
Dr Fuster-Sobrepere,
Mayor of Borriana,
vice presidents,
professors,
museum directors,
ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to today's ceremony to award Dr Manuel Borja-Villel an honorary doctorate from our university.

We began by listening to the voice of Mayte Martín, accompanied on the guitar by Alejandro Hurtado.

With her musical sensitivity, she has brought us a taste of the rich tradition of flamenco. During her career, she has never ceased to explore new inspirations and fusions. Because as she herself says: Flamenco is my origin, not my yoke.

What guarantees the survival of a musical style – or any other artistic work, I would dare to add –is its ability to reach out to us, to move us and to become part of our own personal soundtrack, as individuals and as a society.

The same is true, for example, with opera. For those of us who enjoy it, it is as much ours as it is Italy's or Germany's, and the Liceu is as important as any of the major French or American opera houses.

To show just how much opera is embedded in our culture, the very first opera performance in all of Spain was given in this building, the Llotja, in 1708, coinciding with the presence of the Archduke of Austria's court in Barcelona during the War of

Spanish Succession.

Three hundred years later, this building and the institutions it houses remind us, through their art collections and their history, that economic and social progress is inseparable from technical and cultural progress.

And I am not just talking about opera, but also the Free School of Design, opened in 1775.

A pioneering institution that, with time, would change its name, but not its spirit as the core of art education in Catalonia. This is where the origins of the “Llotja”, as it was (and still is) popularly known, lie.

So, as you can see, there are more than enough reasons both to hold this event here, and to thank the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, ex officio member of the UOC’s Board of Trustees, for its hospitality.

Having briefly explained the significance of this building, it is now the turn of Dr Joan Fuster-Sobrepere, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, to speak and give the oration for Dr Borja-Villel.

Dr Fuster, please.

[Address by Dr Joan Fuster-Sobrepere]

Dr Pere Fabra, General Secretary of the UOC, will read the decision reached by the Executive Board to award an honorary doctorate to Dr Borja-Villel.

Dr Fabra, when you’re ready.

[Address by Dr Pere Fabra]

[The honorary doctorate certificate is awarded]

[The University’s Medal is awarded]

[Musical performance: Mayte Martín, Alejandro Hurtado]

We have just listened to another piece by Mayte Martín and I would like to publicly express to her my gratitude and the gratitude of the whole university.

Because, perhaps, from where the audience is sitting, performing a piece of music is a minor challenge, easily met if one has enough skill and experience.

But I know that the reality is quite the opposite. With just one piece, there is no margin for error, there is no time to tune your voice, there is no room to win the audience's favour.

You have to get it right from the very first note... And, judging from the audience's reaction, it seems obvious that the performance has been spot on.

Thank you very much, Mayte Martín, Alejandro Hurtado.

This pressure, this demand to be the best, to not disappoint but to enthuse, has also been a constant in the career of Dr Borja-Villel.

As Dr Fuster-Sobrepere has explained, he has been – and is – the manager of and mastermind behind institutions that play key roles in the cultural life of Barcelona and Madrid.

And, like Mayte Martín, he had to take up the challenge and get it just right. And he did.

And it is he who, today, the UOC is proud to welcome as a member of the university.

Dr Borja-Villel, the stage is yours.

[Address by Dr Borja-Villel]

Awarding an honorary doctorate means that leading figures from outside a university can be invited to form part of it. It is an honour, and what is more, an honour for both sides. Firstly, these awards let the institution establish the kind of genealogy it aspires to, a way of understanding the scholarship and academia with which it identifies and wishes to project.



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In this respect, the career and vision of Dr Borja-Villel is a spur to explore a path that no

one better than him exemplifies: the ability to think “outside the box”, to use a colloquial expression; to see opportunities where others only see obstacles.

In all frankness, frontiers don't get very good press, as they are often seen as barriers or obstacles. I say often, because that's not always the case.

The lines drawn on maps, for example, separate spaces on an administrative level, but that doesn't mean that they cut off any type of bond or relationship between the two sides of the line.

On the contrary, we know that frontiers are porous, and divisions are more for political than economic, cultural or historical reasons.

If we look southwards, to the area lying astride the provinces of Teruel, Castelló and Tarragona, we will discover that, above provincial divisions –and far from their respective provincial capitals – there is a linguistic, cultural, social and economic unity.

I don't know to what extent having been born in Borriana, in that frontier land, shaped Dr Borja-Villel's future approach to the world of art and museums, but, looking back on his career, it is obvious that frontiers have never been a limit, but a challenge, a space to conquer.

This was said earlier by Dr Fuster-Sobrepere, when he highlighted how, throughout his career, our new honorary doctor has always sought to break pre-established limits, explore unknown territories, and see frontiers as spaces for innovation and creativity.

For example, when he transformed both the institution and the vision of Tàpies and his work; when he opened MACBA beyond its physical and foundational limits; when he broke the chronological boundaries that had defined the Museo Reina Sofia; or when he became the ideal partner to help us turn “that's impossible” into a successful Bachelor's Degree in Art that is currently being rolled out at our university.

As Dr Borja-Villel said, this programme is our contribution to the fight to help transform institutions.

This way of seeing frontiers as both dynamic and fragile can also be found in many other disciplines.

In my work as a researcher, when we used to grow crystals from a fluid, we would see how those atomic structures gradually acquired volume in ordered networks.

However, order and growth had a limit: when the crystals came into contact with each other.

Contact brought with it a region of disorder between the crystals, where the inner spaces were larger, where contamination with other elements was more feasible, where corrosion could find paths for entry thanks to the greater presence of oxygen...

In other words, homogeneity disappeared and gave way to a dynamism, where order was replaced by uncertainty.

Heterogeneity, dynamism, uncertainty... these are words that we immediately associate with opportunity, creativity, knowledge; words that we associate with the concept of frontier.

Exploring these frontier lands has been a constant in Dr Borja-Villel's career. Exploring these frontier lands should be a necessary prerequisite for anyone who devotes themselves to art, humanities, science, engineering, research, teaching or management.

It is toward these unexplored lands that the UOC must go. Because, if we stay within our known comfort zones, maybe our lives will be quieter, but we will not be fulfilling what a university should be; what our university has been since its foundation.

At the same time, exploring new limits must be compatible with a necessary spirit of societal impact, public utility, the progress of knowledge.

Marc Bloch, a leading French historian, made some very pertinent reflections on this very issue. In fact, as a man faithful to his philosophy, his work was almost lost when, in 1943, he joined the French Resistance to fight the Nazi occupation, until he was arrested and executed in June 1944. Fortunately, the manuscript could be published after the War.

In this manuscript, Bloch said that in order to lend social legitimacy to intellectual effort, history cannot be confined to aesthetic enjoyment or to accumulating erudition, but, like any other scientific work –and let me add artistic or cultural work –it must also make that studied more intelligible. And it must do so while helping us to live better.

In his work, Dr Borja-Villel has more than fulfilled the requirements defined by Bloch.

He has eschewed pure aesthetics and erudition and devoted himself to the intelligibility of artistic creation, tradition and contemporaneity, and to helping us live better.

This is what the UOC must hold itself up to, this must be our aspiration as a university.

To help us, we have a powerful educational, training and research tool in the form of the web; and we have built a brief but impressive track record, driven by people accustomed to thinking “outside the box”, going beyond limits, leveraging the disruptive power offered by the internet to turn away from emulating the past and envisage a university of the future.

Dr Borja-Villel, today a new honorary member of our university, leads the way and reaffirms us in this commitment. And for this we thank him sincerely for his example and generosity.

We will end with a rendering of the Gaudeamus Igitur with which it is customary to close academic ceremonies.

However, this won't be the traditional version. With utmost respect and musical, sonorous, visual and audiovisual rigour, we have sought to make it ours – make it the UOC's. So we close today's ceremony with this dignified yet festive version of Gaudeamus.

I invite you all to join us in the courtyard of the Llotja to celebrate with a glass of cava.

Thank you very much.