

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Pablo Casals and Catalan Folk Music

On October 22, 1973, Pablo Casals, one of the great giants of music, passed away. The longevity of his fruitful life is attested by the almost unbelievable fact that in 1976 the world will commemorate the centenary of his birth. He was the last great link with the musical tradition and creative personalities of the last century. Throughout his long career — and active to the very end — he had been recognized and revered on many levels, first and foremost, as the world's outstanding cellist. Indeed, as Fritz Kreisler acknowledged: "Casals is the King of the Bow," and by the other leading musicians as "the master of us all." Casals' virtuosic skill served him solely to convey the highest levels of musicianship and fidelity to the composers' intentions, as if it were a sacred trust to transmit the profoundest meaning of the musical score.

Much has been written on Casals the performer, but no one, it seems to me, has more eloquently summed up this master's ineffable, luminous artistry and transcendent musicianship than Paul Henry Lang, reviewing the appearance of Casals at the White House at the invitation of President John F. Kennedy on November 18, 1961: "His delivery is simple, direct and economical; the bow never quivers, the wondrous sound never falters — we are given the immediate movement of the mind. The music pours forth from the magnificent instrument with a depth of strength that gives a strangely still and tranquil beauty to its agitated emotions."

This unique art Casals always desired to share with the great mass of the people, the peasants and workers of his native Catalonia, from whose ranks he rose and whose native music nurtured, enriched and shaped his whole life. "It has been my greatest pleasure," he declared on numerous occasions, "to bring the best music within the reach of the simple workers."

Through his patience, devotion, uncompromising faith, and immense personal financial sacrifice he fashioned the "Orquestra Pau Casals" in Barcelona; this was his proudest achievement. "A few years ago," he declared in 1926, "they [the humble folk, whom he inspired and encouraged in their musical studies and in the mastery of their instruments] had no idea of the possibilities of music. Now they work by day, and come to hear and make classical music evening after evening." This applied equally to the members of the *Obrera Associació de Concerts*, the "Workingmen's Concert Association," to help bring the finest music to all those who could not afford the usual price of admission. These became true "peoples' concerts." Casals saw to it that the various administrative duties of the association — setting up a music library, publishing a monthly magazine, fees, and all other related matters — were entirely in the hands of the workingmen; anyone earning more than

five hundred pesetas a month could not belong. Through these efforts, Casals not only opened rich musical experience to the people of Barcelona and the neighboring towns, but also greatly encouraged native talent in the fields of composition and performance.

Pablo Casals left many vivid recollections from his earliest childhood of the Catalonian folk musicians, the influence they had upon his musical development, and his humble indebtedness to them. "In those days," [when he was only about six years of age], he later reminisced, "bands of itinerant musicians wandered from village to village, eking out a meager existence on whatever money the villagers could spare them. They played in streets and at village dances. They often dressed in bizarre costumes, and performed on a weird variety of instruments, often of their contriving. I always greeted their arrival with great excitement. One day a group of three such musicians came to Vendrell [the village where he was born]; they called themselves *Los Tres Bemoles*, or *The Three Flats*. I made my way to the front of the crowd that had gathered in the plaza to hear them, and I crouched there on the cobblestones completely enthralled, enchanted by the appearance of the players — they were dressed as clowns — and I listened spellbound to every note they played. I was especially fascinated by their instruments. They had mandolins, bells, guitars, and even instruments made out of kitchen utensils like teapots, cups and glasses. One man played on a broom-handle that was strung something like a cello though I had never seen or even heard of a cello at that time. For some reason — possibly I had some sort of prescience! — that broom-handle instrument fascinated me most of all."

Speaking of the *gralla*, a popular Catalonian folk instrument, with a distinctive penetrating sound, especially when performed by a group, Casals joyfully recalls: "these were unforgettable messengers of our festivities. In the morning people were awakened by the sound of these instruments, which announced a holiday. The *gralla* is an old instrument played with a reed, probably of Arab origin It resembles the oboe and has a very strident sound. It is very popular around Vendrell. It produces a diatonic scale and if the player is clever he can make it produce semi-tones. Once I met a *grallar* who had come to ask my father for some new dance tunes. As my father was absent, I asked him to play a scale as I wished to imitate it. He agreed, looking at me with a sceptical smile, but after I had tried to play the scale four or five times, I started playing all the tunes of his repertoire which I knew by heart." Pablo was then seven years old!

A few years later he joined one of these wandering musical groups to become more intimately acquainted with the folk style and its repertoire, as well as help bring in a few pesetas to the family. He left us a vivid picture of these early experiences: "In the summer months, when school was out, I joined traveling bands of musicians. We journeyed across the Catalan countryside — in horse-drawn buses along hot and dusty roads — from village to village, playing at fairs, dances and festivals. We played folk music and dances — waltzes, mazurkas, sardanas, pieces from America, everything. Often we started playing in

the early evening and continued into the morning hours. The peasants and fishermen were sturdy folk, and they could dance all night — and all the next day, for that matter! Those summer tours were strenuous and allowed little time for rest, but how I relished them! And I found special happiness in the wonderful camaraderie with the villagers for whom I played, in the communication between them and me when they danced and the look on their faces afterwards as they shouted and applauded. We conversed through the language of music, and in my performances ever since. Whether at small recitals or before large audiences in great concert halls, I have never lost the feeling I then came to have of intimate understanding between myself and those for whom I played.”

The most popular and most representative folk tune, or rather folk dance, in Catalonia is the *Sardana*. With its vivacious, bouncing six-eighth rhythm floating between the major and minor, it reflects the lively enthusiasm and inner poignancy of the Catalan people. Kurt Schindler, a profound student of Spanish folk music and friend of Casals, described the exuberant musical quality and the stirring national significance of the *Sardana* in these words: “To a Catalan, the *Sardana* is much more than a dance. It is national self-expression, optimism, joy of life, philosophy, moral elation, almost religion. The joined hands become a symbol of brotherhood, the gradually waxing animation seems to thrill with the encircling forces of nature, the eyes enchanted, as it were, are ‘fixed upon the infinite’.” These thoughts are eloquently summed up in the following quatrain by the eminent Catalan poet Angel Guimerà:

Oida! Quin goig! Fem la rodona
Sardanejant le dia i net,
Les mans unim homes i dones,
Els ulls clavats a l’infinit!

Thus, to the Catalans, and to Casals its representative voice, the *Sardana* is a passionate assertion of national character as well as a proud, exultant declaration of human communality. As Casals aptly put it: “It is the expression of the strength the people feel within themselves. When they dance the *Sardana*, they are conscious of their country, their families, their soil, and everything that is strong in life.” And no wonder Pablo Casals wrote many *Sardanas* and incorporated its lively rhythms in numerous compositions. The *Sardana* that has become known world-wide is the one that he composed in 1926, and first performed the following year in London’s Wigmore Hall by 32 cellists under the direction of John Barbirolli (himself a cellist). This work was characterized as a musical reminiscence of Casals’ childhood. On April 15, 1970 this work was performed by 100 cellists — coming from all over the world — at Philharmonic Hall, New York City, honoring the 93-year old cellist, teacher, musician, humanitarian and citizen of the world. It is worth noting that the occasion was also a benefit concert for the American Symphony Orchestra Free Concerts for Children of the United Nations International School.

The folk music of his native Catalonia, that had so strongly influenced

him from his earliest childhood and throughout his whole life, linked him closely to these people and made him acutely aware of their social and economic conditions. He was deeply affected when he realized the great hardships and abject poverty they endured. He was shocked and appalled at the squalor and injustice he encountered in Barcelona. "All about me," he declared, "I saw evidence of suffering, of poverty, of misery, of man's inhumanity to man. I became a witness to the oppression that simple people endured in their lives, and to harsh laws and repressive measures." It is no wonder that he fully supported the Spanish Republic. And when that democratic government was brutally crushed by the Franco forces, Casals vowed never to return to his beloved native land until the banner of freedom was raised again and the rights of man restored.

Like so many of his voluntary and involuntary exiled fellow countrymen, Casals continued his musical activities beyond the Pyrenees. Not for a moment did he ever compromise the highest standards of musical performance in spite of his deep involvement and unflinching support of the restoration of freedom in Spain. He could produly proclaim: "I am a man first, an artist second." Art for Casals was not a hobby or a pastime, or suspended in a nebulous 'l'art pour l'art,' but of deep human meaning that obliges the artist to take sides, where dignity, self respect and morality are involved. With profound sincerity and deep conviction he declared that his bow and baton were his only weapons — and "they are not much" — but that they would fight on the side of freedom. It was this all encompassing humanity, and the deepest awareness that no great art could survive amidst persecution, deprivation and despair, that prompted this sensitive man to say: "No music could justify for me hunger and death of one child."

This rigorous intellectual honesty and human integrity are clearly demonstrated in his comments upon his return to the American concert stage in 1962, after an absence of thirty-four years, having lived in self-imposed exile for twenty-three years from his native Spain, and refusing during these years to play publicly in any country recognizing the Franco regime. After conducting a performance of his oratorio, "El Pesebre," with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra on April 19, 1962, justifying this public appearance, he declared: "My decision to appear publicly as a conductor where I have chosen previously to maintain silence as a performing artist represents no change in my basic ideals . . . Yesterday's conflict among individuals, nations, and ideologies has become today's struggle for the survival of the whole human race . . . As a man, my first obligation is toward the welfare of my fellow men. I will endeavor to meet that obligation through music, the means which God has given me, since it transcends language, politics and national boundaries."

One personal experience that will always remain vivid and inspiring in my memory, was the good fortune I had hearing — and seeing — Pablo Casals conduct his "Hymn to the United Nations," set to a poem by W. H. Auden, at the United Nations in New York City on October 23, 1971. The work was commissioned by U Thant, Secretary General of

the U.N. Casals walked slowly and haltingly to the podium. But no sooner did he raise his arms, when his whole body seemed to become miraculously transformed into youthful, energetic vitality, the face luminous and assertive with intense animation, the lips moving with each syllable projecting to the performers every subtle nuance of the score. One could hardly believe all this agitation and inspiration being conveyed by a man of ninety-four!

After a repeat performance of the “Hymn,” and before sitting down at the piano, Casals said in a clear voice to this large and distinguished audience, “I will now play a short piece of Catalan folklore. This piece is called ‘The Song of the Birds,’ — ‘El Cant des Aucells.’ The birds in the sky, in space, cry out when they fly: ‘Peace, peace, peace!’ And the music is music that Bach and Beethoven and all the great would have loved, and it is the soul of my country, Catalonia.” It should be added that Casals concluded every concert program with this lovely folksong, a reminder of his roots and an admonition: “lest we forget!”

U Thant, in presenting the UN Peace Medal to Pablo Casals, simply and eloquently stated the essential meaning and the all-embracing life’s goal of this unique man: “Don Pablo, you have devoted your life to truth, to beauty and to peace.”

— C. H. —