***Chapter 11***

**As orchestra and chorus drifted, piecemeal, onto the stage of the Academy 4 musicians, veterans from the Marlboro, Prades and San Juan festivals were huddled in conference in a small rehearsal room in the wings. Together they were trying to come up with a common strategy for the speeches they were expected to give in honor of the departed master.**

**Long acquaintance made it possible for them to speak freely to one another without fear of giving offence. They’d all known Pablo Casals, though in different settings. Some had genuinely liked him, even considered him a friend. Others did not; Sylvia Greiner, a cellist, actually seemed to hate him, whether for his conservative opinions, his egomania, or his insulting treatment of students, notably women.**

**Pablo Casals had been one of those people who, combining a strong ego with an equally strong feeling for injustice, could be equally genial or insulting without realizing that he was being one or the other. Everyone there recognized his limitations as a human being, yet all, even Sylvia, had some reason for admiring him.**

**Their chairs were arranged in the four-square formation of a string quartet. To the left of the entrance sat the middle-aged Russian-Jewish violinist, Reuben Mandelbaum. Born in 1940 in Odessa, Russia, his family had somehow survived the Second World War. In the late 50’s they’d benefited from a thaw during which Khrushchev had permitted the emigration of some Jews to Israel. A close friend of Itzhak Perlman and Vladmiri Askenazi, Mandelbaum had studied in both Israel and the UK before becoming a naturalized British citizen in the late 60’s.**

**He’d come to know Casals through his participation in the Marlboro, Prades and San Juan music festivals. It was perhaps because he’d never had to deal with him directly, that he retained a good opinion of him and was prepared to say so on this occasion.**

**Mandelbaum was stocky rather than obese, an active, nervous man who did not enjoy sitting for too long. For him an orchestral career would have been out of the question. His rumpled tuxedo bespoke neither neglect nor hostility, but simply the state of mind of a man so obsessed with his art that it rarely occurred to him to look at himself in a mirror. Concert-goers adore studied neglect as much as they do fastidious grooming. Mandelbaum exemplified neither, but he did fall into the 3rd category which they are prepared to forgive, that of the generous and warm-hearted musician.**

**His broad, already elderly face was covered with wrinkles, the folds of which disappeared sagely into his clumpy black beard. Whether speaking or listening to others, the fingers of his left hand , and sometimes his right, gesticulated frequently in compulsive fiddle finger patterns. His forbidding presence of a stevedore or truck-driver contrasted mightily with the amazing gentleness of his violin technique.**

**The young pianist Martin Diamond, age 32, sat leaning against the back of an easy chair to Mandelbaum’s right. Face and body posture gave one the impression of a human being drained of all emotion, perhaps more fish than human, though even a fish, a salmon say, might have seemed more active. There was nothing in his appearance or behavior that gave any indication of his dazzling technique or brilliant performance at the keyboard. The vacancy of his vacant stare would have been more appropriate to someone of half his intelligence. One could well imagine that he’d discovered something deeply fascinating in the over-head lights which made him indifferent to the conversation, though in fact he was following everything closely and responding at the appropriate moments.**

**His pale blue suit contrasted strongly with a thick shock of slicked-down reddish-blond hair that dripped over his brow and around his ears. Although he managed to give the impression that he’d rather be at home in bed, perhaps with the sound of a recording of “Parsifal” at low volume in the background, he’d actually volunteered to participate in this event as a speaker. He’d known Pablo Casals, although the man meant nothing to him one way or the other, politics even less so, and Puerto Rico not at all, though he was a regular performer with the San Juan Orchestra at the Centro de Bellas Artes.**

**He’d signed on to speak on the basis of a warning from his agent that he suffered from a lack of public image. Age 32, he’d met Casals a few times up at Marlboro, and came carefully prepared to re-iterate the old clichés.**

**One could scarcely imagine a greater contrast between him and the cellist, Sylvia Greiner, age 42, seated so far on the edge of a bridge chair to his left that she threatened to tip over completely and fall into Mandelbaum’s lap! Her short, squat body was constantly in motion. Each posture was accompanied with its corresponding discomfort; it appeared that only when she played the cello could there be any repose in the repeated shifts in posture and lurches that afflicted her. Short, of pallid, even waxen skin, overweight for her size, she gave off an aroma of sweat without any accompanying odor. She wore a black dress with lace collar and short sleeves, as if she’d come prepared to play at a funeral.**

**Her dark hair, pulled tight around her ears, was bundled into a long queue descending to the left like a chord used for opening a velvet curtain. The flesh that frequently screwed up about her nose signaled a permanent bitterness. She had many grievances, frequently invoked . That some of them were genuine there could be no doubt. One thing was certain, she had been no friend to the late lamented Pablo Casals. She’d been persuaded to come by the sizable check, and because she was one of the few former students of Casals who was not performing somewhere else on Christmas Eve. Now she was re-considering her decision, and whether she might perhaps get away dropping a few acerbic criticisms on stage when her turn came to speak.**

**The fourth was the avuncular German violinist, Joachim Rodenbach. Wise and sad, the man radiated kindliness. Grey-skinned, his head shaved, body tall and over-sized. One can, I think, use the word “lanky” to describe him ; he certainly was that. He’s been a friend of Pablo Casals and his family, and a frequent visitor to their retreat in Fajardo in the northeast of Puerto Rico. Already in his 70’s, he was of the generation of European musicians in exile from World War II who, like Schneider, Rudolf Serkin, Stravinsky, Toscanini and others, dominated the American classical music scene in the 40’s and 50’s .**

**Rodenbach was somewhat fond of dropping well-meaning if tedious words of advice, combining worldly philosophy with well-intentioned re-assurance, something of a genial Polonius-in-residence. He was well-liked by everyone, although no-one took him very seriously. His role tonight was that of a mediator, guiding his fellow musicians into a common ground with respect to the “Casals Legacy”, the well-worn formula that arouses both pride and ridicule wherever it is enunciated in Puerto Rico.**

**Reuben Mandelbaum didn’t think there was a problem: “The newspapers, the agents, the recording companies have already invented all the stock phrases about the old guy. What we have to do is to select, say, a few dozen of them and pass them around.”**

**Martin Diamond, his legs stretched rigid before him down to the floor, his back slumped in his chair and hands folded on his stomach, in a voice between a sigh and a hum, began stringing some of them together: “…’greatest cellist in history’ …’world-renowned humanitarian’ … ‘devoted teacher’…’guardian of the classics’…”**

**“I’ve been listening to that clap-trap for over 20 years! ”, raged Sylvia Greiner , “I’m sick to death of it! Of course it’s all lies. What I remember of the ‘great humanitarian’ is the elderly chauvinist bully who used every occasion to humiliate me in his master class. He had less use for women than he did for Bartok! I don’t know how Martita was able to stand it all those years! That’s what I’m going to talk about.”**

**“No, Sylvia, I don’t think so.” Mandelbaum wryly shook his head,” You just wait and see. The moment you get up on that stage you’ll automatically start chiming in with the symphonic din of brain-dead adulation. It’s just like being in an orchestra; no-one can bear the embarrassment of playing out of tune!”**

**“Well”, Diamond went on , “he was a great man. We’re safe on that ground, certainly. Even if he was a bit deaf !” he chuckled .**

**Rodenbach laughed sympathetically “ He could hear well enough, provided the sounds were composed before 1900. That’s not a problem for the public. That’s precisely why it admires him! We might consider him a reactionary, but there are plenty of people out there who consider him a brazen radical.”**

**“You mean because of his politics?” Reuben asked.**

**“ Yes. Don’t forget that his musical tastes were a reflection of those of the general public. Let’s face it 20th century concert audiences hate 20th century music! Bad education, bad publicity , or , and I think this is true, millions of people hate having to live in the 20th century. They don’t like to be reminded of what the artists tell them about what the world really looks like.”**

**“Sure”, Reuben agreed, “Everybody loved him because he made Bach sound like Brahms. But when he was a young man, the cello wasn’t considered a suitable instrument for giving solo recitals. It was Casals who changed those attitudes. That was the real revolutionary. Unfortunately his audiences wanted to hear Brahms. So he gave them Bach that sounded like Brahms…”**

**Sylvia was not inclined to be so forgiving: “That may have been excusable when the ‘great master’ played for Teddy Roosevelt! ”, she snarled, “But Casals was the sworn enemy of any music written after 1914; he even said so in public. If you really want my opinion, I think he actually set the cello back half a century! His students all came out playing like he did; you won’t find a single one of them as soloists on the stages of the major concert halls. They’ve got nothing to say. It wasn’t easy either for composers of cello concertos to get commissions or performances. Governments, financiers and the general public swallowed whole the idea that no twentieth century composer knew how to write for his wonderful instrument. It’s all reinforcement: the public won’t listen, so the arts foundations won’t finance; therefore the composers won’t compose. It’s a vicious circle, and it was all the fault of one chauvinist megalomaniac!” Sylvia stopped, simultaneously out of breath and imaginative invective. She forced a smile :”Look at me. I was one of his students, and I can’t play worth a damn!” Everyone laughed**

**Mandelbaum had no option but to agree, if reluctantly: weighing the good with the bad he’d rather liked the old man.**

**“He laid a heavy hand on the Marlboro Music Festival” , he shook his head: “ Serkin, Schneider, Moyse, Horzowski, Casals: they strode the campus of Marlboro College like Olympian gods! One could have imagined one was still living in the 19th century. Well”, he sighed, “let’s hope those days are over. Take this Webern concerto for example. A beautiful piece. Casals would never have allowed it to be played at any of his festivals, Marlboro, Prades, San Juan….”**

**Rodenbach, as per usual, stepped into the role of mediator: “Don’t be too hasty in condemning old Pablo. A reactionary? Absolutely. But a musician down to the soles of his feet. Some of those early recordings still set me dancing! There will never be another trio like Cortot-Casals-Thibaud”**

**“Well, okay”, Sylvia nodded, “He did a lot for the cello when he was young; but I’m damn sick of putting him on a pedestal. I found him nasty and spiteful, at least to students! I can tell you what I’ve heard of the careers he ruined of people who got in his way. And what a woman-hater! ” Sylvia was fighting the sickening recognition that , once on stage, she too would be unable to deviate from the floods of acclaim and the pressure of omnipresent hero worship.**

**“ As far as I can see, it’s almost a law of nature that humanitarians aren’t likeable people.” Rodenbach added, laying sarcastic stress on the word ‘humanitarian’ “ Schweitzer, hah! Gandhi, hah! Ogres, all of them!” He’d managed to restore a measure of good feeling in the group: “We all agree he did do some good things. Aren’t all of us a mixture of good and bad?”, he finished, turning to the others as if seeking reassurance for a rationalization he found difficult to maintain. Rodenbach glanced at his watch: “Look, it’s time to go.” When an usher came by to bring them on stage , they all stood up and left.**

**As Mandelbaum had predicted, not a one of them deviated so much as the vibration of a cesium atom, from the nauseating crescendo of accolades, the *Laudamus Te* that lifted the legend of the blessed Pablo Casals to a yet higher level in the dizzying stratosphere of hot air.**

**Sylvia Greiner was unable to believe her own ears (and she was a trained professional musician!). As if another person were speaking her words for her, she found herself launched upon a veritable Passacaglia and Fugue on the themes of “inspired teacher”, “kindly mentor”, “a man generous with time and advice.”**

**Reuben Mandelbaum came up with the inspired phrase: “ A one-man democracy!”; while Joachim Rodenbach elaborated a veritable Theme and Variations on the phrase “deathless poet of the cello”. That they themselves had solid reputations as performers gave a special boost to the lightning and thunder of spontaneous applause that greeted them as they stepped off the podium. Some of the eulogies were so inane and obviously insincere that even Theodore Sokoloff, himself a cellist and a life-long admirer of Casals, turned to his friends and family and said: “I don’t remember ever having listened to so much rubbish about old Pablo in a single sitting!”**

**With the departure of Rodenbach, Anthony Curtis-Bok stepped out from the wings. At precisely 9:30 PM his baton teased out the gentle percussion and woodwinds opening to the two-hour oratorio, El Pessebre.**