***Chapter 6***

**Under normal circumstances there are rarely any problems involved in picking up a ticket for a Philadelphia Orchestra concert on the day of the performance. Given the exceptional billing of the Casals gala on Christmas Eve of 1981, all the seats had been sold, reserved or put aside for special guests a month in advance. What this meant was that in the preceding 10 days, the tickets for the 1981 Christmas Eve concert were being scalped at prices ranging from $50 to $200.**

**The rare event of a performance of El Pessebre would not by itself have generated much enthusiasm. Casals never claimed to have any standing as a composer; nor was the reactionary flavor of his musical language calculated to arose interest in the oratorio as an historical curiosity. It was the glittering lineup of celebrities from the worlds of politics and classical music that, since September and the onset of the winter season, had galvanized the arts circuits of Philadelphia.**

**Foremost in stature among the political figures was Senor Hernando Guzman, president of Puerto Rico, and his wife Carmina, herself something of a celebrity in Hispanic America as an actress. Three living relatives of Pablo Casals were being brought over from Catalonia for the event. Casals’ widow, Martita Istomin, director of the Kennedy Center in Washington and American ambassador to Spain would be there, together with her pianist husband, Eugene Istomin. She would be delivering the opening speech and the introductions. Afterwards she would be returning to the stage to accept,in the name of the Puerto Rico Conservatory in San Juan, 3 Old Italian Masters string instruments, (two Guarnerius violins and a Stradivarius cello) . A special grant from the Ford Foundation had been used by the Philadelphia Orchestra to purchase them for this occasion.**

 **The mayor of Philadelphia, though not known as a patron of music, was expected to say a few words. The mayors of Prades, the village in the Pyrenees where Casals had lived in exile during WW2, and of Barcelona had also been invited. A contingent from Prades did arrive, but the mayor of Barcelona was unable to attend but sent the city’s director of cultural affairs in his place. Hernando Guzman’s speech would come just before the opening of the musical part of the event.**

**A similar line-up was being planned for the celebrities from the world of music: after a short address delivered by the president of the Curtis Institute, a powerhouse of classical music luminaries would speak in turn : Peter Serkin, Daniel Barenboim, Vladimir Ashkenazi, David and Julius Levine, Ruth Laredo. Each of them came prepared to give a short reminiscence about Casals, as man, teacher and artist. In addition, the agents of several virtuosos with trademark names had bought their tickets early. Half price tickets had been set aside for students from the Curtis Institute 2 months in advance.**

 **The concert program would open with a set of 4 transcriptions of Preludes and Fugues from Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier , made by the Philadelphia Orchestra’s conductor, Anthony Curtis-Bok. In the standard mythology surrounding Pablo Casals, he always began his work days with an hour or so playing Bach’s Preludes and Fugues at the piano.**

**This would be followed (in bland arrangements by the Curtis Institute composer, Vincent Persichetti) with a selection from the songs collections of Frederico Garcia Lorca . The singer was Consuelo del Almeida, a student of Pilar Lorengar.**

**The showpiece of the first part of t he concert could be seen as a gesture of defiance to Casals’ legendary conservatism*: the recently discovered Webern Cello Concerto , performed by the Middle Eastern cellist Zaid ben-Akhmed!* The Webern concerto had been discovered less than a year before in a monastic library near Vienna. One of the composer’s longest known pieces, it lasts all of 10 minutes! It had already become something of a signature piece for ben-Akhmed. To it he owed both fame and notoriety: the former by the uniqueness of the concerto in Webern’s operae, the latter in the form of a *fatwa* from some lunatic Islamic sect. Only a year before, the *Defenders of the Faith* had announced that ben-Akhmed was deserving of death as an enemy of Islam because:**

**(1) He only performed European music**

**(2) He played too much degenerate modern music and**

 **(3) He played music by the student of that infamous Jewish composer, Arnold Schoenberg.**

**A few months earlier this sect had been decimated, in characteristically brutal fashion, by the Algerian Army. Despite this, Ben-Akhmed was not about to let down his guard; one could see his personal body guard seated in the orchestra pit, in a central position on the front row, next to ben-Akmed’s wife.**

**The intermission was scheduled to last 15 minutes. Following this there would be a few more short speeches by musicians, not in the limelight, but who had known Casals professionally or personally.**

**The performance of El Pessebre completed the line-up of events. All dignitaries and celebrities had been instructed to make their speeches brief. As this class of humanity has more than its fair share of wind-bags, the Philadelphia Orchestra had decided that:**

1. **There would be no second intermission**

 **(2)In order that the performance of El Pessebre begin promptly at 9:30 PM, the speakers would be cut off at 9:15.**

**A translation of the Catalan poem of Joao Alevedra was provided in the program notes. Catalan is not widely known or studied in the United States. The program notes stated that the Philadelphia Orchestra had searched far and wide for a voal coach who was also native speaker of Catalan. Unable, so went the claim, to find one locally, they’ve spent a large amount of money to bring over a choir director from Barcelona to assist them in the last 6 rehearsals. Thus Gilbert Fabre had been overlooked without ever having been given a chance to present his case.**

**It is standard policy at the Academy of Music that a few hundred seats in the Amphitheatre( also known as the ‘peanut gallery) are sold at low prices. They are normally sold from a special box office on Locust Street, at the far end of the right side of the building.For this special gala even these tickets were going at $20 apiece. One could always anticipate a line of hopeful customers forming in the late afternoon of the day of performance.**

**Using the customary media outlets, an announcement was made a week in advance that sales on December 24th would begin early, at 2 PM. However the first customers, staking out their territory on the steps of the back entrance, arrived at 11 PM on the previous night of December 23rd ! Pictures taken by reporters show that, by 1 in the morning the line of customers, huddled in streets covered with ice and snow together with their sleeping bags, piles of sandwiches, blankets, portable heaters, radios, books, extra clothing and other paraphernalia, had grown to form a solid composition along the Academy walls. As insensitive as penguins to the cold, the assembly of musical fanatics held on.**

**By 9 AM on December 24th the line writhed snake-like around the Academy from Locust Street as far down as Walnut; here it curved around the block, extending another hundred feet or so in the direction of 15th Street to the west. Police barricades had been set up to enclose the line. Those persons who stood at the far end of the knew that they had no chance of getting a ticket directly; yet there was always a chance that others standing in line might lose patience and drop out, or that someone unable to attend the concert would show up and try to sell their tickets at a reduced price.**

 **At 11 AM on December 24th a spokesman for the Academy announced that, owing to the *disruptive potential* of the crowd, tickets would go on sale at noon, two hours earlier than advertised. Half of the line immediately dropped out. It began moving promptly at noon , with all tickets sold by 1 and more than a hundred freezing, bad-tempered patrons turned away. Within minutes some of these tickets were being scalped for upwards of $100 each. By opening the box office ahead of schedule, the Academy had chosen the lesser of two evils.**

**Small groups continued to hang out on the sidewalk in front the Academy for the rest of the day. It was the last day for Christmas shopping, so crowds in great numbers were strolling all up and down the length of Broad Street. Similar scenes could be seen along Walnut, Chestnut and Market Streets, the 3 principal East-West commercial arteries of the downtown. Exiting the large department stores on Market , a steady stream of shoppers descended from City Hall, down Broad to the many restaurants, large and small, located on both sides of the boulevard. Buildings and lampposts were festooned with wreaths, posters and banners; a maddening goulash of Christmas carols, sung in high voices both unctuous and shrill, poured out of blaring loudspeakers. Nothing further , to the author’s knowledge, of any importance for society or the greater destinies of mankind, happened between 2 and 6:30 PM on Broad Street on this particular day.**

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