**El Pessebre**

***Roy Lisker***

***Part 2***

***Chapter 13***

**The charming town of Prades in French Catalonia is located in the foothills of the Pyrenees, close to the Spanish border. This is where Pablo Casals lived in his years of exile from Spain, from 1939 to 1956. The cantata “El Pessebre” was composed here.**

**I stayed there for a month myself, in the summer of 1970. The streets of this exceedingly picturesque settlement branch out on both sides of a long main street. A commanding view of Mount Canigou can be had from almost anywhere in Prades. I took many walks about the mountain while I was there, (it is hard to imagine anyone with the use of his legs not doing so) including visits to the monastery of St. Michel de Cuxa, a few miles to the south. Its 12th century cloister has been transplanted to New York where it harbors the garden of the Cloisters Museum in New York.**

**Pablo Casals first came to Prades as a refugee from the Spanish Civil War; a house was put at his disposal by a generous patron. From 1943 until the end of the war, he was obliged to live under the German occupation. An attempt to escape through Bordeaux was unsuccessful. Though not under house arrest, Casals was under constant supervision as a subversive. Despite this he never reduced the level of his activities on behalf of the refugees from the Civil War languishing in French detention camps in the region. German officers stopped by his house every now and then, and attempted to persuade him to go to Berlin and play for Hitler. His persistent refusals placed him in great danger. He was threatened but never molested.**

**He rarely practiced the cello; His performances were sporadic; in fact he rarely practiced the cello. Instead, for a combination of reasons tied to artistic and psychological survival Casals turned to composition. He had no reputation as a composer: Pablo Casals was known to the musical world primarily as a cellist, with a parallel career as conductor. Even before organizing and leading music festivals in France, Puerto Rico and the United States, he had been praised for his organization of popular orchestras in Barcelona. Casals may well have been reactionary, even monarchist, yet his populist socialism, as exemplified in his actions, was more than a veneer. The civic orchestras that he put together in Barcelona, financed largely out of his own pocket, have become a model for similar musical organizations around the world.**

**Casals composed music all throughout his active life as a musician. One finds this to be the case with a great many musicians who were educated in the grand conservatory tradition of the 19th century. Performers studied and practiced composition as thoroughly as the recipients of a classical education learned Latin and Greek. All the virtuosos composed, (and most of the composers were virtuosos) some of them rising to considerable eminence in this dual role: Paganini, Vieuxtemps, Chopin, Liszt, Wieniawski, Schnabel, Ysaye, Kreisler, Nyerigyhazi.**

**Although most composer/performers tended to concentrate on their chosen instruments, Casals went in for vocal music: songs, cantatas, oratorios. No doubt this came from his origins as the son of a church organist. In his autobiography, Casals states that his father failed to become a first class musician only because of the traditional handicaps of lack of education and poverty.**

**The initial inspiration for his oratorio ‘El Pessebre’ seems to have been Casals’ loneliness in exile, his acute alienation from a world turned barbarous and insane, his need to invent an artistic outlet from his daily efforts on behalf of his suffering countrymen.**

**The major source of inspiration for the poet, Joan Alavedra, who wrote the text of El Pessebre, was the Catalan Renaissance. By the 1930’s its embers, though scattered, were by no means extinguished. This climate of remarkable creativity produced figures of the stature of Picasso, Gaudi, Alavedra and Casals, along with many lesser figures. The roots of the Catalonian Renaissance can be traced to the nationalist fervour that swept over Europe in 1848, the year of revolutions. It would take half a century, to 1898, before this could be translated into a resurgence of culture.**

**1898 is the watershed year in modern Spanish history, the year of the catastrophe of the Spanish-American war, by which Spain lost the last remnants of the empire founded by Christopher Columbus in 1492.**

**The Catalan language, once the medium for the glowing poetic language of Raymond Lull, had fallen into neglect to such a extent, that it was accepted as an article of common knowledge that Catalan was unsuitable for poetry. No literature, music or painting worthy of note had come out of Catalonia for 4 centuries. There was little incentive for an artist to remain in a colonized province whose culture was suppressed and language proscribed, where poverty and lack of patronage would, in any case, make the pursuit of an artistic career impossible.**

**In many ways, both the poem and the oratorio “El Pessebre” may be seen as tributes to the Catalonian renaissance. The poem of Joan Alavedra is written in Catalan. Its’ content is a retelling of the story of “the crèche”, Christian metaphor for universal peace. Cojoined with this are traditional Catalonian legends. Both poem and oratorio were written under the twin scourges of exile from Spain and occupation by the Germans. They may be seen as cries of liberation in the darkest phase of the 20th century.**

**As to the intrinsic musical qualities of Casals “El Pessebre” oratorio: It was condescendingly panned by New York City’s media critics at the time of its American performance in 1957. It is hardly “great”, certainly not in the sense that Bach’s oratorios or Handel’s “Messiah” are great. In addition to being major composers, both Handel and Bach were virtuosos at the keyboard. By the 20th century the demands of the musical art have enormously increased. It really is not possible for a musician to pursue a twin career as composer and performer and expect to excel in both.**

**There is little that is surprising in El Pessebre; nor is it surprising to learn that it is the kind of music Casals was likely to write: solid, romantic, lush, antiquated. Not a single bar calls up any associations to the 20th century.**

**That it is not up to par with the great classics is not a criticism; that it was born a century too late, is. It is astonishing that Pablo Casals, so bold and independent in politics, in his technical innovations on the cello, and in his interpretations of those dearly loved classics, should have been so deaf to the music of his own time. His vociferously reiterated creed of “No music after 1900!” must have been irksome to his colleagues, without doing much harm, one way or another, to modern music itself. Yet in the context of the musical life of Puerto Rico, where he reigned uncontested as the cultural dictator for a quarter of a century, its power was devastating.**

**The impression one carries away after listening to a performance of El Pessebre, is of a comfortable, dilute solution of Brahms and Dvorcak, with a few references to Wagner. One is scarcely up to Bruckner, far, far away from Mahler and Richard Strauss, and utterly foreign to the world of Janacek and Bartok. The music is simple and heart-felt; and its composer reveals a sophisticated ear on every page. Yet this is not enough to save it. Although it is true that “simple, heart-felt” music is rarely associated with the 20th century, it certainly does exist: the choral music of Randall Thompson, the music of Samuel Barber, of Vaughan –Williams, and Aaron Copland, who, however, had a way of bringing advanced 20th century ideas into his nationalist blend. El Pessebre is not rescued by being placed among its 20th century peers.**

**Nor does it work when placed against the background of the 19th century. It wasn’t written in the 19th century. Its origins were in the Spanish Civil War, not the wars of 1848 or 1870. Were it not for the esteem in which the composer is held as a performer and political figure, it is not likely that it would ever be performed by a professional chorus and orchestra. It has more meaning as an artifact of history. In contrast, one does not need to know anything about the circumstances of the composition of Bach’s St Matthew’s Passion to appreciate it as music; one does not even need to know anything about Lutheranism!**

**In 1957 Pablo Casals tried to convert El Pessebre into a vehicle for world peace. The success of his efforts may be judged from the results. Still one should not dismiss lightly the authority of a man who resisted tyranny with such consistent courage and gave so much of himself in service to others. How is one to measure the amount of world peace that was created by the performances of El Pessebre at the UN? How is one to judge if Albert Einstein’s public statements on pacifism were instrumental in righting the balance of his signing a letter written to President Roosevelt explaining that it was possible to make an atomic bomb?**

**Even in the instance of a man like Mohandas Gandhi, whose entire life was dedicated to finding non-violent solutions to political conflicts, who, in the ordinary way of looking at the world, “got results”: can one say that the world, as a whole, is more peaceful than it would have been had he not developed all of his brilliant innovations in conflict resolution? A champion of world peace must be judged as one judges a creative artist: his “results” are in the hearts and minds of others, not in statistics.**

**Indeed there is something noble, if a wee bit egomaniac, in the spectacle of the aged yet still vigorous Pablo Casals hefting his cello up the steps of the UN to perform his Nativity Oratorio before delegates from everywhere, in a building surrounded by a city crammed with Newyoricans who’ve fled his adopted island paradise to seek bread. One doubts very much that Josef Malik, the delegate from Russia, was stirred to thoughts of brotherhood by learning that the camels that transported the Magi across the desert bowed down to pay homage to the Christ-child. I don’t believe that the strains of a tepid Brahms had much effect on the delegates from the Congo. Yet Don Pablo the man, the great musician who had made the dictators tremble: THAT was the message, THAT was unforgettable.**