***Chapter 2***

**The author now brings the reader to his first encounter with the protagonist of this drama, Gilbert Fabre[[1]](#footnote-1) . Convenience has arranged it to be on the evening of Saturday, September 12, 1981. Scanning the newspapers of the time, one learns that the Phillies were playing the Pittsburgh Pirates. About this the author can say nothing more as he has never had the least interest in developing the least interest in baseball. Other things were happening as well, which the author will report pursuant to the needs for local background.**

**Gilbert Fabre was born in Mont-Louis, France, 1940, in the Pyrenees close to Perpignan and the Spanish border. His family emigrated to Philadelphia when he was 10. We meet him seated behind the steering wheel of his outmoded Pontiac ( Our apologies once more: the author knows only a little more about cars than he does about baseball!) trundling down the East River Drive of the Schuylkill River, captivated by the glories of Fairmount Park in early autumn.**

**This very special evening had been marked months before, in June, by an oval slopped with a red felt marker onto the wall calendar of his office in City Hall. The trip had begun on the street outside his house in the upper reaches of Germantown Avenue , and was destined to end inside the stage entrance of Philadelphia’s justly famous Academy of Music. What could possibly have drawn him to the downtown center of Philadelphia (a locus to be defined in a moment) at a time at which he would be more concerned with getting away from it? Of course : *Fabre’s infatuation with great music*!**

**Now we are required to pause, and say a few words about the said downtown center of Philadelphia. Where is it, for example? What is it? Why is it? And questions of this and a similar cast. In the years when the author was living there and being impelled into adulthood, Philadelphia’s no-frills subway system (little had altered in that respect over 40 years) supplied its with an excellent free map of the city. This map reveals that the city of fraternal agape has the shape of a cruelly deformed hyperbola, a kind of tight corset, hammered away on its right side by the erosion of the Delaware River Basin, on the left by the zoning of the suburbs. Since its boundaries suggest a corset, the body must be that of a woman, wildly dancing, hair a-streak in all directions.**

**The center of town, you understand, is this woman’s navel! Here where Market and Broad streets cross, the location of City Hall and City Hall Plaza, is the weighted barycenter, the geographical, commercial and political nexus of this vast swath of territory, once honorably purchased then shamefully stolen from the Native American Indians.**

**In William Penn’s day it was also the mathematical center. Straddling the Bacchante’s belly button is the plaza of Philadelphia’s fabled City Hall, surmounted by the grand statue of founder William Penn himself; and, atop that, his legendary hat!**

**Gilbert Fabre, as industrious a civil servant as one is likely to find in these days, worked in this umbilicus. He’d been doing so for 17 years. His rise through the ranks was accomplished by virtue of a stoic, embarrassingly unimaginative loyalty to his office. By 1980 he’d become Assistant Director of Social Services and Supervisor of the Welfare department.**

**On this night in September, 1981, Gilbert Fabre could not have cared less about anyone else’s welfare.**

**To understand what brings him back through congested evening traffic to the downtown he’d left only a few hours before, one must make a flashback in time of about three months , to the morning of June 26th,when’d he read an announcement that had been published in all of Philadelphia’s major newspaper and entertainment guides. It read:**

**“*The management of the Philadelphia Orchestra announces that auditions will be held for positions in the Orchestra Chorus sometime in September. There are openings in every vocal register. Altogether, 30 vacancies need to be filled.***

***The chorus will participate in a gala event on Christmas Eve in honor of the great cellist and humanitarian, Pablo Casals. Tributes by notable figures in music and politics will be followed by a performance of Pablo Casals’ Christmas oratorio, “El Pessebre (The Creche)”.***

***Starting in January, chorus and orchestra will go on the road and give performances in several major cities. In recognition of Puerto Rico as Casals’ adopted home in the final quarter century of his life, the tour will conclude with a concert in Easter , 1982, in the Centro des Belles Artes, in San Juan.***

**After reading this announcement Fabre phoned the Philadelphia Orchestra over a dozen times. It was only in late August that he succeeded in getting through to have his name placed on the list of applicants. The bored voice at the other end indicated to him that he was speaking to a young woman, probably a recent college graduate, who had the *gall* (to Fabre’s way of thinking) to introduce herself as *the* Manager of Public Relations for the Philadelphia Orchestra!**

**Had she known of it she would have been mistaken to have taken his negative judgment towards her personally. As he approached his 40’s, Gilbert had observed a trend in many organizations and corporations, to fill responsible positions with green college graduates with few developed skills for dealing with the public, and little understanding of what needs their institutions were supposed to fulfill.**

**Although he’d realized that this *insolent* girl (for so he deemed her) would have no hand in the decision to accept or reject him as a member of the chorus, it rankled him to have to deal with her rather than directly with the conductor and coaches of the orchestra chorus. He suspected, with the acumen born of years of experience with the city’s bureaucracy, that the cost-cutting philosophy that had guided the Orchestra’s choice of a girl with a worthless degree in Arts Administration as its Public Relations Officer, would also influence their decision to reject him, because of age, or appearance, or other factors that had nothing to do with his abilities.**

***It made his blood boil!* Just the other day Fabre had written to his brother, a corporate lawyer living in Detroit, Michigan, on this very subject:**

***“They’re terrified by anyone who knows anything. They’re putting the 40-year-olds out to pasture in this country! It’s got nothing to do with our flexibility or stamina; we’re just as smart as the young kids , and we’ve got decades of experience over them. But, besides having to pay us more, they know that they can’t pull a fast-one over on us.***

***“You take these young, immature, cocky, ignorant college graduates.***

***The corporations can use them as pawns, it’s easy as hell manipulating them. And, there’s another reason too: humiliation!***

***“Imagine some competent, seasoned professional having to take orders and suffer the contempt of these young no-nothings! That’s our adolescent society in a nutshell! That’s what it’s really all about: not energy, idealism and youth, but money! Just money! And fear! Fear of experience or ability! Envy, hostility!!”***

**The rhetoric is typical of Gilbert Fabre’s way of venting another item stored in his bottomless well of grievances. Fabre was a frustrated and bitter man, one who in many ways had long given up on life. Though free with complaints he chaffed at criticism; it is not surprising that he’d found few friends willing to put up with his interminable carping over a wasted life.**

**His brother’s reply came a few weeks later. A humorless lawyer for the auto industry, Maurice Fabre could be depended upon to pass along some standard list of stale clichés, the stock in trade of an accustomed paternalism. To paraphrase, Maurice Fabre advised his brother that he should be content with the knowledge that he was “helping the unfortunate”, and not bother to try to fathom the ways of society, always a hopeless task.**

**Gilbert Fabre was shaken out of his reveries when he recognized that his ancient Pontiac had made the transition from the Parkway to Broad Street without his being conscious of it. Now he was now weaving through the wide boulevards around City Hall Plaza. It was the trajectory he’d followed on every work day over the last 17 years; he could have done it blindfolded.**

**His record of attendance at concerts at the Academy of Music had an even longer history. The Monday night concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra he’d missed over a quarter of a century averaged no more than 3 per season. This habit of faithful commitment to Philadelphia’s Temple of Musical Art had its roots initiate in high school, and become something of an obsession during his student days at the Philadelphia Musical Academy.**

**Few among his acquaintances would have be able to appreciate what this audition for the Orchestra Chorus meant to Fabre. It was general knowledge of course, that when it came to classical music, his was a devotion little short of fanaticism. Trashy popular music ( *a category which for him included the vast majority of all non-classical compositions* ) of the sort forced upon the public in restaurants, stores, doctors’ offices, shopping malls and other places of public access could drive him into a frenzy. No radio music was allowed in his offices in City Hall when he was present; wo secretaries had been fired because they had been tempted to violate this ban. Even in his own neighborhood in Germantown he’d gained a reputation for chasing away teen-agers in front of his house who happened to be listening to rock music. He had the intolerance of the professional amateur, of the failed yet still believing priest who’d flunked out of the seminary. More than ten years before, in the late 60’s, Fabre had sung the tenor role of the Evangelist in a performance of Bach’s St. Matthew’s Passion at the Trinity Church off Rittenhouse Square. This was his last active participation in the world of music.**

**Even within the standard canon of classical music Gilbert’s notions of what was acceptable were so narrow as to constitute a veritable pathology. He had no interest in familiarizing himself with any music written before 1608 [[2]](#footnote-2) or after 1920. Given his talent and training he did of course recognize the worth of music composed outside these temporal limits: he simply had no desire to listen to it. Gilbert’s auditory universe was closed off to almost everything “by- and post-“ Stravinsky, Bartok and Schoenberg. One might go so far as to say that he hated Bartok even more than he did the latest Tin Pan Alley drivel! With a small number of exceptions, he embodied the firm conviction that no serious music had (or would be) been composed in the 20th century.**

**Within these stern limits however (*which do, admittedly, encompass most of the great masterpieces of European art music* ) his passion was boundless, ferocious! As if to compensate for a sterile social life, his days and nights were filled with music, going to concerts, listening to recordings, singing while seated at the piano. As a vocalist he was naturally partial to opera and lieder, though he maintained considerable enthusiasm for symphonic and chamber music. Overhearing a single bar from a composition by Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Verdi or any of the other paradigms, he would automatically begin singing or humming the rest of it ; in most cases he could also tell you its title and opus number. Tapes and records maintained a running background when he was at home, or in his car when he was out doing field work in the city.**

**When there was some major performer he wanted to hear in New York City he took the train or even drove there. Sometimes he went as far as Boston or Washington. In one memorable month-long summer vacation in Europe he roamed from one music festival to the next between France, Germany, Spain and Holland. It is noteworthy that he hadn’t taken a day off to revisit the region of his birth.**

**On the Philadelphia scene there were concerts at the Art Museum, the two major universities, Penn and Temple, or at the small elite colleges around the city, Swarthmore, Haverford, Bryn Mawr , Beaver and others.**

**A major contributing factor to his divorce in the late 60’s had been this all-consuming, self-centered infatuation with music. More than 10 years had passed since then, and over 6 since he’d last seen his former wife, yet he often thought about her.**

**Perhaps, in a manner of speaking, he’d only begun to love her after she’d gone completely out of his life, like the heat in a room that’s taken for granted until it breaks down. The oppressive memories of this time could be revived by recalling the circumstances in which the car he was in, a Pontiac too big for a single person, had been purchased. He’d bought it a decade ago shortly before their final separation. He’d never considered trading it in for a more recent or superior model. He had as little use for Japanese cars as he did for Takemitsu!**

**He often found himself day-dreaming about how much he might enjoy having his wife and their two children sitting next to him or in the back seat, as they’d done in the past.**

**“Who knows?”, he mused, “there may be some attractive young ladies in the Orchestra Chorus.” Following the normally pessimistic trajectory of his thinking he went on : “No. It won’t happen. They don’t make them with brains anymore. Although, ” he mused “Another marriage is not out of the question. Some young thing who enjoys the company of old crabs and misfits…..,.”**

1. **. The author is not aware of any connection between Gilbert Fabre and the famed entomologist, Jean-Henri Fabre; of course he could invent one.** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **The performance year of Monteverdi’s “Orfeo”, the official inauguration date for the language of diatonic or classical music** [↑](#footnote-ref-2)