***Chapter 9***

 **It was par for the course that, apart from the Webern cello concerto ( Anthony Curtis-Bok had pushed for its inclusion); and despite the traumatic political confrontations before the steps of the Academy, one could comfortably expect that no surprises would be forthcoming from the format or content of the Casals memorial concert. Since the spine-tingling days of Leopold Stokowski the Philadelphia Orchestra had done little to shock the genteel nerves of its financial foundation, the oligarchy of families living on their inherited wealth out in the chain of towns to the northwest of Philadelphia known as the Main Line.**

 **The reputation of *The Philadelphia Orchestra* was based on dependability, not on taking chances. One has to credit Eugene Ormandy for finding, over his long reign, a judicious balance of the old and the new in designing the orchestra’s repertoire and style. As for that celebrated “Philadelphia sound”, it would never regain the daring and brilliance it had achieved in the Stokowski years. Philadelphia’s concert-goers never had to worry that they might be irritated, let alone terrified by alien reverberations from the 3-foot solid brick walls surrounding the warm velvet Academy horseshoe.**

 **The musical credo of Conductor Anthony Curtis-Bok was somewhat more revolutionary, although he was obliged in the long run to give the public what it wanted.**

**One of the problems confronting conductors like Anthony Curtis-Bok was that it was becoming increasingly difficult to find performers of the stature of Zaid ben-Akmed who would be content to play the Dvorchak cello concerto time and again, year in and year out. The choice of the Webern concerto had been admirably shrewd. Although one could imagine Casals raging in his grave at its performance at a concert in his honor, the truth of the matter was that Anton Webern (1883) had been born in roughly the same period as Pablo Casals (1876) , the concerto had been written more than half a century ago, and the composer himself safely tucked into his niche of immortality.**

 **What factors determined the musical program also governed the ceremonies: nobody among the thousands who’d paid top dollar to attend the gala concert had seriously expected that a tribute to Pablo Casals would contain anything, either positive or negative, that might contribute to a real understanding of Casals’ many roles, both positive and negative, in the cultural and political history of the 20th century. From the encomiums of the major speakers before the opening of the concert, to the final remarks of the politicians after the intermission, nothing emanating from the podium would be anything other that a succession of stereotyped accolades moving along like automobiles on a Detroit assembly line.**

**Even the presentation to Martita Istomin Casals of 3 priceless Cremona instruments (accompanied with much hand-shaking, embraces, kisses, hurling of programs over the vault of the Academy, and infernal applause); nor the reciprocating gift from Martita to the Curtis Institute, of a dozen crates of manuscripts from her deceased husband’s archives, were designed to interfere with the narcolepsy in the minds, hearts or bodies of the devoted crowd of musical pilgrims.**

 **One might perhaps have expected a few sparks of excitement from the oration of Hernando Guzman, governor of Puerto Rico. For those who were quite happy that little or nothing be said, he was not a disappointment.**

 **“Ladies and Gentlemen”, he began, “of Philadelphia, in America” – the rotund, slick machine politician was so distanced from the aspirations of his own country that he didn’t even bother to use the phrase “North America” to distinguish the US from two other sub-continents similarly named – “the Renaissance of Puerto Rican culture may be dated from that thrice-blessed and fortunate afternoon, when the beautiful and charming Martita Casals, (who now stands before me, just as beautiful and ever so charming, but then a sweet maidenly youth of twenty), entered his home, in the mountains, in Prades , France , the delightful little home in exile of the cello master of all cello masters, Don Pablo, for her first lesson …..**

 **“First as her loving teacher, then as her loving husband, Don Pablo Casals became the mainstay of the life of this wonderful woman as she moved to maturity. But our lovely, charming Martita did not only receive; she also gave, measure for measure, of that love and tenderness which is only to be found in the women of our sunny homeland….”**

 **Let us mercifully excise portions of his speech that never were intended to be perused a second time:**

 **“…and then she brought Don Pablo to Puerto Rico, to our own Puerto Rico, our homeland! From the moment his wise, sensitive musician’s eyes beheld the irresistible charm of our tropical paradise, his heart went out to us, and he knew that he would remain with us for the rest of his days on this earth…**

 **“ … I need not remind you again of all that Don Pablo Casals did for the culture of Puerto Rico. He created the Casals Music Festival. The world’s greatest musicians came to our doors, to our little Puerto Rico! He gave us international status, he gave us cosmopolitan charm! Our tiny city, San Juan became the equal of all the world’s capitals of music! ….**

 **“… Then with the patronage and blessings of our governor at that time, Luis Marin Muñoz, himself an accomplished musician, (*a pardonable poetic license: the musician was the next governor, Luis Ferre*) he created the San Juan Music Conservatory. Now we, too, in Puerto Rico, have our own world-class music conservatory! No longer does the world think of our music as mediocre Salsa! Music of the bawdy houses, of the slums, of ignorant farmers and illiterates! Today, even now, in our own conservatory, we are training great musicians to play great music!**

**“…He brought *excellence* to Puerto Rico! Now the first families of our little island send their sons and daughters to our very own conservatory! No longer will they be obliged to travel to the United States or Europe to learn their craft. They can become serious professionals without ever having to leave their homes! Right here in our San Juan! And this, and so much more, was the work of Don Pablo Casals!”**

 **The governor droned on, infatuated by his own banalities. At long last, perspiring heavily, he retired from the stage, sending kisses as far as the Amphitheatre, cradling bunches of flowers on his left arm while cheering on the fans and admirers with his right. So vociferous was the applause, that one could be excused for thinking that he was being chased off to make way for the music, rather than being praised for anything he had said.**

 **The first piece on the program was a series of four preludes and fugues from Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, very competently arranged for full orchestra by Anthony Curtis-Bok. This was both in fulfillment of a tradition inaugurated by Leopold Stokowski, and a tribute to Casals, who used to begin each day’s practice with an hour or more at the piano with the Well-Tempered Clavier.**

 **The Lorca songs followed. Neither impressive nor disappointing, there is little to be said about it, save that Consuelo de Almeida, beautiful and charming as always, did her job, picked up the check and went home.**

**Zaid ben-Akhmed’s performance of the rediscovered Webern cello concerto was, by all accounts, a triumph. Champions of the modern in music would have claimed that it was the only piece played that evening worth the cost of the ticket. As we will be learning something about this from an account of conversations during the intermission, the author will not say anything more about it at this point.**