**El Pessebre**

***Roy Lisker***

***Part 3***

***Chapter 18***

**The mythology surrounding music conservatories dictates that they be housed in buildings of a Victorian Gothic flavor, with murky interiors from which drab and gloomy corridors diverge; several floors and a basement for practice studios; stuffy portraits of administrators from a century ago, that never have and never will be cleaned; crabby receptionists, bullish security guards and menacing silence: all the things required to enhance the venerability of the beloved institution.**

**It is expected that casual visitors will be intimidated, yet also the student body, and to a certain extent even the faculty.**

**One must never be allowed to forget that Western Classical Music is a Sacred Art, of awesome dignity, its traditions as hoary as those of jazz are whorey. Many of its achievements are daunting when not dazzling, although some of its cultural accessories are pathological, evidenced by the politics of the two Richards, Wagner and Strauss, and several centuries of protection and support by despots, royal and sacerdotal, Bourbon, Habsburg and Hohenzollern monarchs, depraved Popes, the castrato industry, the idolatrous cult of virtuosity. Much criticism has also been leveled at the unbending rigidity of music’s “march of the paradigms”: Monteverdi, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Debussy, Schoenberg Bartok and a few others, goose-stepping their way through the Paradise of Immortality, their busts and sarcophagi all lined up in well regulated niches in the Pantheon of this noblest of all arts.**

**The very word, *conservatory*, bears a heavy lode of connotations of resistance to the new, of a hothouse for exotic plants, of Aldous Huxley’s Incubators for alphas, betas and gammas: no deltas or epsilons allowed! Thereby, the word *conservatory* has proven itself one of the most apt designations in the language, embodying as it does the bouquet of a unique institutional mentality, the characteristic resonance of its music, antique, delicate yet also invigorating, like the bells of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris.**

**The reverberations within this incubating echo chamber are liable to be both rich and ominous. Its educational methodology, with its basis in rote and indoctrination, is only as incestuous as one has every right to expect from any self-respecting academy that knows where its responsibilities lie. The craft of music must be ingrained before it can be imparted.**

**Yet it is also true that one will generally find a saving remnant, some inspired members of the faculty, a few gifted and mentally alert students, and small communities united by a common love of music. All the same, few can completely avoid the poisoning of their sensibilities and their inner ear through an aesthetic tradition of stereotypes and clichés that falsify ones notions of relevance, that impose arbitrary standards too lofty for the general run of mankind.**

**The exterior, at any rate, of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, is far more attractive than what has been portrayed here: as for the interior, it depends on whom one is likely to encounter. A building of Renaissance styling and simplicity, it stands across from the southeast corner of Rittenhouse Square, adjacent to the crusty Philadelphia Art Alliance on 19th Street, several blocks west of the Academy of Music on Locust Street. Art galleries, interesting to gaze at and dependably spaced, (like the paintings hanging in an art gallery), adorn Locust Street all the way down to the Academy of Music on Broad (14th), 4 blocks away.**

**And on Spruce Street, a few blocks to the south, one finds the row of reputable music schools that prepare its novices to enter Curtis.**

**Being a conservatory, Curtis is heir to many (certainly not all) of the endemic vices described in the preceding paragraphs. Above all, it is not welcoming; at least it was that way during the fictional 1980’s of this narrative; its conception and purpose forbid its being open to new ideas. How can one ever hope to train malleable, naïve, trusting young talents, minds, bodies and ears, in this, the most difficult and top heavy of all crafts, if one allows one’s doors to be flung open to every passing stranger, rumor, gossip, or new-fangled notion in a much too rapidly changing world?**

**Provided that the intruder shows due respect and the right credentials, provided he or she speaks slowly, without impatience, in words of few syllables, it is not always impossible that he, (or she) will be granted permission to visit the offices on the first floor.**

**It is assumed, as a matter of course, that visitors will expedite their business and get out; this is only reciprocal courtesy! If one’s purpose for being there is to interview students or faculty one has been sorely misled: strolling the corridors and way-laying persons at random is strictly off-limits. The proper strategy is to waylay them in the Park, then invite them to the soda counter of the Rittenhouse Pharmacy, up half a block on 19th Street.**

**In mid-January of 1981 a student placed a notice on a bulletin board at the Curtis Institute; faintly visible in the off-glare of 2-watt minuterie bulbs sunken into the moulding, it had been read by a teacher of solfeggio. He contacted a journalist, Jack Hines, that he knew at Newsweek; he thought that the notice could be the basis for an article. The popular news magazine was preparing a 4-page spread on the Academy of Music disaster for the final issue of January.**

**Naïve as greenhorns in a foreign land, Jack Hines and his team of assistants walked into Curtis one afternoon, intending to interview students for their opinions and insights. They were quickly expelled by the toughs stationed at the door; the unwashed rabble could not be allowed to disrupt the study of serious music. Hines called up the teacher of solfeggio; the news he got was not encouraging, though all was not lost. He explained to them that Curtis did not want itself mixed up in any way with the media coverage of the Academy tragedy. Even if they did allow for interviews of specific persons, arranged in advance, it certainly wasn’t going to allow pressmen to stake out the corridors and interrupt serious students, scurrying between their 12 hours of practicing and classes. He told Hines to call him back in a few days.**

**The note read:**

***Student of cello, interested in forming a chamber group to give concerts in the Philadelphia area to raise money for the victims of the terrorist acts at the Academy of Music.***

***Contact Wilfred Jansen, or leave a note on the Bulletin Board.***

**The group was assembled in a short time, and included Wilfred Jansen, cello; Nadja Sokoloff, piano; Mario DiStephano, violinist, and Moira Rosen, age 23, violist. Later the group would grow to include another violinist, a clarinetist and flute player.**

**The journalist from Newsweek was named Jack Hines. With him was a staff photographer, Mary Baffle. The teacher of solfege put them in touch with Hines, who arranged to meet him and his staff photograph, Mary Baffle early the next week. On a weekday afternoon in the 4th week of January they assembled in Rittenhouse Park. After standing for a group photograph in freezing weather, journalists and students waded through the snowdrifts and around the clusters of pigeons to the revolving glass doors of the Rittenhouse Pharmacy, and from there to its soda counter; drinks and ice cream courtesy of Newsweek.**

**This photograph, with several others taken that afternoon would appear on page 48 of Newspeak, with the cornball captions:**

**“Students Care”**

**“Counterpoint of Cash and Compassion”**

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**Like everything else in the store, the soda counter of the Rittenhouse Pharmacy had been installed as an afterthought. A most uncongenial environment! The floor space was more over-stuffed than a time capsule; the entire soda counter could have been removed without increasing the space available for maneuvering. This emporium, though provisioned for the relief of humans, itself engendered a host of species of nausea, many more varieties of sea-sickness and an irreducible sense of futility.**

**All antiseptic environments project a subtext of violence. “Dirt” is far less threatening than the “spotlessness” of the pharmacy or the hospital ward. Any ambience created through the application of many technologies for killing micro-organisms will impart its message of murder even to its human inhabitants. The Rittenhouse Pharmacy was tiny, but mere size could not mitigate the invading confusion of billions of pocket, palm and bite-sized medications, bottles of stomach pills, giant cartouches of toothpastes, economy-size boxes of Kotex, and other merchandise climbing to the sky like so many towers of Babel.**

**In vacant recesses around the nearly deserted soda counter a glare of fluorescent lights alternated with drab patches the color and texture of a subway tunnel. Through the partially slated windows one could idly gaze at the obese flesh mounds of the obscenely rich walking their spavined poodles to and fro around the doors of the Rittenhouse Claridge. Behind the medicine counters stood the familiar cast of automatons, while unfriendly and indolent waitresses stood or slouched behind the soda counter, having little to do.**

**Jack Hines, a career journalist in his mid-40’s, engaging, overweight, was known under the pseudonym of Carissimi as a music critic and columnist for several magazines. He’d wanted to be a pianist when he was young; when that didn’t pan out he discovered a gift for writing about music that, in his opinion, gave him a more interesting life. He wrote down the names of the students being interviewed in a steno tablet.**

**“Could you all t ell me something about yourselves. It doesn’t have to be more than a few sentences.”**

**“I’m Moira.”**

**“Moira, why did you take up the viola?”**

**“I have big biceps! Look, here!” She made a fist and stretched her right arm. “They say that students study the viola because they’re not good enough to play the violin. That’s not my experience.”**

**“Nadja? Your father’s on the faculty, isn’t he?”**

**“Yes.” She lowered her eyes and played with a strand of black hair “ I play the piano; it’s a bore, but what else is there?”**

**“Mario?”**

**“Well, actually, my father is a well known violin maker in South Philadelphia. I’ve never imagined I’d be doing anything else.”**

**“Does your group have a name?”**

**“Not yet” Wilfred Jansen was the spokesman for the group “It’s only a temporary association.”**

**“Many of the world’s finest musical organizations began that way” Hines, who wrote a music column for several magazines, noted, “Like the Budapest Quartet. Even the Philadelphia Orchestra was originally a collection of musicians getting together to make music.”**

**“I’ve suggested Purcell Consort”, Moira Rosen said.**

**Wilfred thought a bit before replying, “We may stay together; we may drift apart. Or we may run into each other again 10 years from now in Marlboro!” They all laughed, “ I’m leaving for New York at the end of the school year.”**

**Jack looked up, surprised:**

**“Are you dropping out of Curtis, then?”**

**Wifred laughed: “You could put it that way. Think of me as a kind of long-haired high-school dropout. It’s a mistake to assume that the education of a performing artist is finished after they leave school. Conservatories are fairly recent. Individual instruction was the norm in the period when the greatest music was written. And they, I mean people like Bach, Beethoven and the others, couldn’t afford to wait until they were almost 30 before participating in the business of music. They were out there with their parents and brothers, music making, just as soon as they could hold a tune in their heads: Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt … Schubert was different, but his father was an idiot.”**

**“Yes, I know something about that”, Jack added, “Salieri set up the Vienna Conservatory. He had the bureaucratic mentality.”**

**“Frankly, we’re all gypsies at heart. We want to be out there playing, and that’s not always a bad thing.”**

**The telephone closet to their right was a tall and slender closet of glass and steel jammed into a narrow space against the back wall near the brooms, buckets and mops. On the other side of the soda counter, near a bank of radiators, stood whirlable display rack just supporting an array of over-sized greeting cards with embarrassingly dumb messages. Wilfred reflected that the cultivation of banality is also an art: getting exactly that empty-headed tone that would appeal to a customer interested in sending a statement saying little or nothing, required skill.**

**To the back of the telephone booth, in less than a foot of clearance there was stationed one lone, empty booth upholstered in some kind of false leather dyed a savage brown umber.**

**The soda counter itself was shaped like the boomerang elbow of a rectangular hyperbola. Aged retirees bent over their stomach ulcers huddled over the micaceous counter on seats small as bottle-caps. They’d been forced into this posture by all the goods, racks, shelves, and display cases closing in on them.**

**Nadja added: “I feel the way Wilfred does. I don’t think I’m going to make a career of music.”**

**“Isn’t that a little unusual? You’re from such a musical family.”**

**“ Maybe that’s why I find it such a bore. It’s like an arranged marriage with an old husband! ” She laughed, “There must be something else in life!”**

**“ What do you want to do?”**

**“Oh, I don’t know. I may spend the rest of my life as a bimbo secretary. I’m not trained to do anything.” Then as an afterthought she added, raising her arms in a gesture of exasperation, “So what?”**

**“So young and so pessimistic!” Jack laughed, “Why don’t you try journalism? It doesn’t need either brains or talent. It’s for people who get a kick out of minding everybody else’s business!” Everyone laughed. Jack went on:**

**“Moira, what are your career plans? Anything?”**

**“ There aren’t many solo violists. I suppose if I worked hard I could play in a quartet. But I’m the gregarious type; I’d actually rather be in an orchestra. There’s no special reason for connecting this group with our future. Then again, as you’ve said, it may happen.”**

**“Can I take your picture? Just like that, Moira: elbows on the counter, chin propped up in your fists.. that’s good. Mary, have you got that? Thanks. Moira..” Hines consulted his notes before addressing the group as a whole:**

**“What inspired each of you to volunteer for this chamber group? There’s no money in it. Experience, perhaps? Exposure?:**

**“It’s much simpler than that”, Nadja commented, “Anne was a friend of ours.”**

**Close to the entrance of the pharmacy one finds, again, a tall rotary stand, gaunt as a Giacometti sculpture. It obstructs the bins holding newspapers and magazines. The stand is adorned with cards of hair curlers, bobbie pins, diaper pins, ear swabs, tongue depressors, cuticle scissors, nail files…**

**Yet another rotarium stands next to the sales counters. A customer browses it for its best-selling paperbacks and gaudy pulps: “The Fortran Gambit”; “Hollywood Babes”; Passion Unlimited”; Nothing in the least edifying. It jars with the neighborhood. Borders Books is less than a block up on Walnut Street; Curtis and the Art Alliance are less than a block away, and the Ethical Culture Society around the corner.**

**Yet nothing in the pharmacy’s bookracks, and precious little in its magazines, connects with anything having to do with music and art. The pharmacy’s managers consider the dullards at the Rittenhouse Claridge a more dependable clientele.**

**“What’s your feeling about this, Wilfred? Or is this a topic you’d rather avoid?”**

**“No I don’t mind. Sure. In fact I’d rather talk about it.” Wilfred looked around to see if anyone else was listening, then turned back: ”The Academy disaster affected lots of people; it goes far beyond myself. That’s why I’m going to New York, to do something about it.”**

**“Could you clarify that? Who else here was at the Academy on that night?”**

**Nadja raised her hand: ”It was so horrible I haven’t been able to face up to it yet. I just don’t want to think about it.” Something in her veneer cracked; Jack was certain she was holding back tears. Wilfred went on**

**“Well … okay: I’m not going to New York just to make money. I’m certain that the terrorists who planned this thing are up there somewhere in the big city. I want to be there to find out who did it.”**

**A pipe-smoking, squat and elderly representative of the Philadelphia oligarchy, walked past the window. On the leash he held in his right hand was a hideous boxer who snuffled and frequently gargled as if suffering from black lung. He entered the pharmacy and went to one of the medicine counters. A spiffy pharmacist sprang to life, face to face with his client, alchemized out of the overheated enclosure and sprang up, face to face with his new client. The oligarch grumbled about some disturbance in his lower colon. The wasteland of the pharmacist’s face lit up as from candlelight as a box of mushroom-tinted pills sprang miraculously into his outstretched hand. The customer grumbled a bit more, handed over some money and began a slow investigation of the books on the rotary rack.**

**Hines had gathered enough material for his column. He paid for all the drinks and thanked everyone for being so cooperative.**

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**Later in the week Theodore Sokoloff extended a dinner invitation to Wilfred; being in the impecunious state customary to student life, he was only too happy to accept. The Sokoloffs lived in a high-rise overlooking Rittenhouse Square. However squalid the downtowns of America’s cities may seem on the ground, there is always something magical about their skylines, notably when enjoyed at a height of 25 stories or so above the ground level.**

**Nadja was not present, so the participants were Wilfred, Theodore and his wife, Bella. She was also the cook. Her skill at preparing traditional Russian dishes was legendary, and the 3 of them lingered together at the dinner table for over two hours. Around 8:30 PM they went into the living-room.**

**Theodore sat on a velvet chair away from the large plate glass window partly shrouded by a thick curtain. Wilfred and Bella were seated at opposite ends of a couch.**

**“Wilfred, I’d rather you’d stayed another year or two at Curtis. Of course, that’s the kind of advice you expect to hear from people like me: I’m a teacher! To listen to us one can never get enough schooling. “He leaned back and laughed, pouring himself another shot-glass of Grenadine.**

**Wilfred had placed his brandy on the coffee table before him, and bent forward: “I’m basically in agreement with you, Mr. Sokoloff. It’s the old dilemma, isn’t it: the student who wants to get out into the world versus the teacher who counsels more schooling.”**

**Sokoloff laughed: “I dare say they’ve written more than one novel on that subject. No, it’s not your decision that worries me: at the stage you’ve reached concertizing is not a bad idea. But you can do that here, in Philadelphia, without dropping your studies.”**

**He stood up, walked to the curtains and drew them inside. From where he stood he could see as far as Penn Plaza, the dream of Louis Kahn whose failure that he’d not been given the chance to see fail. Snow had just begun to fall, transforming the park with a touch of magic; of moderate intensity, it would continue to past midnight. He turned back:**

**“No Wilfred, it’s not your decision I’m questioning, it’s your motives.” He returned to his chair.**

**“If I can risk sounding a bit trite”, Wilfred went on, “I’m going to New York to discover myself, not to avenge Anne’s death.”**

**“Wilfred, you should listen to my husband ”, Bella spoke up sharply, “He’s been teaching all his life. He knows what’s right.”**

**“But Wilfred: What can you do for her there that you can’t do here?”**

**“I advise you to forget Anne!”, Bella said with her annoying finalism and lack of tact: “There are lots of girls who’d love to have you!”**

**Wilfred knew Bella too well by now to take offence: “Bella, it’s not so simple.” He stood up and walked to the Steinway Grand, comfortably tucked into a corner with piles of sheet music stored on a shelf to its right. Sitting on the bench he gazed absently at the pages Brahms E-Minor cello sonata: responding no doubt to the Pavlovian conditioning to which musicians are subjected, he played through the first 12 bars of the piano part: “If in fact Anne was killed by Puerto Rican nationalists … that’s what it looks like to me… then there’s something criminal in the political realities of our culture, our society … as long as I stay in school here I’m never going to learn what they are. I’m totally ignorant, Mr. Sokoloff! And you know? I find that ignorance intolerable! There’s some monstrous nightmare out there that ended her life and my hopes of marriage!!”**

**Sokoloff leaned forward and extended a hand: “Now, now my boy .We both know how much you’ve suffered. Come, sit down on the couch again. Let me pour you another brandy…”**

**They all sat silently for awhile; Bella went into the kitchen to put up the coffee and tea. Wilfred went on in a softer, more controlled voice:**

**“Since I was 10 all I’ve done is study music: cello, piano, some violin, harmony, counterpoint, ear-training. I’ve done as much as anyone my age, save perhaps some genius prodigy like Paganini … sometimes I feel as if I’ve been brought up in total ignorance!”**

**“Don’t underestimate yourself, Wilfred” Sokoloff said, “ you’ve got a major talent.”**

**“Sure, Dr. Sokoloff. I know I’m good. Thanks. Let me show you what I mean.” Wilfred picked up a copy of the previous days Evening Bulletin Sunday magazine that was sitting on the coffee table:**

**“The magazine carries a music review about some avant-garde music festival in Teheran, Iran which took place last autumn. At one of these concerts a piano overturned; two musicians crawled underneath and produced unusual acoustic effects by banging on its soundboard and plucking its strings…” He smiled, “It must have been interesting, musically, I don’t deny it. At another concert a violinist held a high e, the one right the end of the fingerboard, for 15 minutes.”**

**“Sounds harmless enough. Silly, if you ask me.”**

**“Yes: but it appears that, in the same week some prominent Iranian journalist of theirs was tortured to death in the Shah’s dungeons. All of the musicians were Europeans or Americans; they didn’t have the slightest idea of what was going on in Iran.**

**“ In the middle of one of those concerts of harmless, silly pieces, a student demonstration invaded the concert hall.. The students stopped the concert and lectured the audience…”**

**Sokoloff nodded:**

**“So; the police took them away and the concert resumed.”**

**“Exactly”**

**“And the musicians felt more annoyed than concerned?”**

**“I can’t speak for all of them but for most of them, I’m sure, yes.”**

**“Judging from the attitudes of most career classical musicians, you’re right. The fact that they’d accepted an invitation from the Shah already shows their level of indifference. No, I take that back: their innocence; I’m sure that, personally, they were as horrified as the rest of us.**

**“As we know, Casals was exceptional in refusing to play in Spain, or even to visit as long as Franco was in power.”**

**“I know; he was almost as famous for that as he was for his playing.”**

**“Like so many other people, Wilfred, you’ve missed the point. He was famous *in spite of that*! Most musicians are terrified that their careers will be damaged if they turn down any invitation to play somewhere, anywhere! They don’t allow politics to interfere with their careers. Casals’ reputation was so well established that he could do what he liked. Had he been a younger man, rejecting invitations from dictators might have ruined his career.”**

**“Thanks, Mr. Sokoloff. I look at it this way: that group calls itself “avant-garde”. Who knows what that means, but I do know that one of the things it’s supposed to me is that they’re advanced, progressive, both artistically and politically. They’re the first to cry out against censorship, to ally themselves with left-wing slogans and causes, to hold benefits for the victims of this and that: and here they are, performing in Teheran at the invitation of the Shah of Iran!**

**“I’m not going to allow myself to be manipulated in that way! Anne’s death; well, I’ll never get over it. I’ve had my face pushed in by life!”, Wilfred could despite his maturity in most respects, speak like the adolescent he still was, “there’s no way I’m going to be able to return to blessed ignorance!”**

**“Okay, Wilfred. Good. I don’t disapprove, you know. Perhaps it is the right time to begin setting yourself up in New York. Most students at the Institute hang on longer than is good for them.”**

**Bella’s predictable over-reaction to uncomfortable ideas was not long in coming: “Theodore; how can you say that? Curtis has given us everything! You’ve been a respected member of the faculty for 25 years!”**

**“That means Bella, doesn’t it, that I should know a thing or two about what I’m talking about? Taken in large doses, a conservatory like Curtis can stunt any musician’s growth and development. No, I’ll go further: its dependable products are technically over-developed babies! Not that I’ve ever thought you were in any such danger, Wilfred. The truth be told, you’ve outgrown us: it’s time to move on, though I might suggest better places than New York to start with. Do you have a job lined up?”**

**“Friends are looking out for me; there are a dozen openings they “Right. That’s okay then. But don’t forget your schooling.” Even though he would be working in New York, Wilfred would continue to commute to Philadelphia twice a month:**

**”You’ve still got a lot to learn. That is, to reach *your own* standards. Mine don’t count anymore. ”**

**“Mr. Sokoloff? Could you elaborate further on what you meant by saying that Casals was famous in spite of his political decisions? ”**

**“The ‘great maestro’ Casals (he really was damn good, you know) never really thought in terms of politics. He had no well thought out political ideas. Even his tastes indicated that he was something of a monarchist!**

**He related to people, and refused to commit himself to any party line. Even that cantata of his, El Pessebre, doesn’t make any political point. “Peace on earth, good will to men, Merry Christmas” –that’s about it! No how, or why, or for whom – that’s the kind of person he was. No time for political posturing, yet at the time same deeply concerned.”**

**Wilfred shook his head:**

**“Yet you’ve just told me that musicians can’t or won’t bother to take the time to worry about –oh, minor subtleties – like the fact that the people outside the doors of the concert hall may be starving to death!”**

**“Come now, Wilfred! You know as well as I do that most musicians are totally wrapped up in themselves! If they’re not running to a rehearsal, they’re practicing; or they’re going to someone else’s concert. They never stop complaining of being overworked, but in fact they love every minute of it.**

**“I will never forget what happened on the afternoon of the day that JF Kennedy was assassinated. I was playing in the cello section at a rehearsal with the Curtis chamber orchestra, when someone came running into the room with the news. The conductor – I won’t mention his name, he’s an established composer – pleaded with us to finish the rehearsal; rescheduling would mean that he would have to take time away from composing.**

**“We all walked out, of course. I can assure you, that this composer was every bit as upset as we were about the death of JF Kennedy. The problem was that his time was over-committed down to the minute: teaching, rehearsing, composing, performing, administration. He had a family, his mother was in a hospital, his 10-year old son was waiting to be picked up from school. That’s how most of us live..”**

**Wilfred left around 9. Another 3 hours of practicing lay before him before going to bed, preparation for a lesson to attend the following morning.**