

BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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Pablo Casals and the Bach Renaissance

By Lorin Wilkerson—Bass

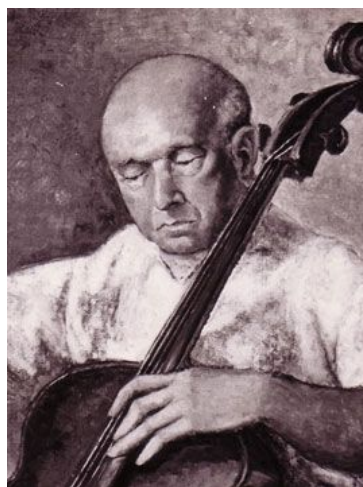
The history of the 20th-century renaissance of baroque music, and that of Johann Sebastian Bach in particular, is curiously entwined with the life of a precocious young musician from the obscure Catalan village of El Vendrell, about 40 miles south of Barcelona.

Pau Casals i Defilló (1876-1973) was better known by his professional name Pablo Casals, and was already a quite accomplished violinist and pianist by the time he first discovered the cello—at age 11. He was playing organ at church services when he was 5, and was sufficiently skilled on violin to begin concertizing on that instrument at age 6. He was a young musician of insatiable appetite—he was in love, for instance, with the folk tunes and instruments he heard all around him, and learned to play popular tunes on a makeshift cello made from a gourd, string and broom handle! When he first heard a traditional cello and begged his parents for one, he set about almost immediately playing professionally three hours a night, seven nights a week at an extremely popular café. Through his contacts there he was able to hear Sarasate and Richard Strauss (under whose baton he would later play at Carnegie Hall), and Albéniz was so impressed with the then-12-year old's ability that he wrote a letter to Maria Cristina, Queen-Regent of

Spain, in which he introduced Pau (the Catalan form of the name that he preferred), and from there his career really began to soar.

Pau's intersection with the music of Bach when he was just 13 was, like many great twists of fate, a curious happenstance. "One memorable day, rummaging in a second-hand shop near the harbor, he came across the Beethoven sonatas and then, to his astonishment, on a dusty shelf *Six Suites for Cello Solo* by Bach. "I did not even know of their existence, and no one had ever mentioned them to me. It was the great revelation of my life. I immediately felt that this was something of exceptional importance, and hugged my treasures all the way home. I started playing them in a state of indescribable excitement." Casals goes on to state that after practicing them every day for 12 years, finally at the age of 25 he felt confident enough to play them in public. "In those days these compositions were thought of as cold and academic works. How could anyone think of Bach as 'cold,' when these Suites seem to shine with the most glittering kind of poetry?"¹

Casals spent a long life as one of the premier cello virtuosos of his day, and also turned his hand toward composition. His *La Sardana* for cello ensemble is perhaps his most famous original work. He also composed vocal music, including an oratorio *El Pessebre* and a haunting, somber setting of the medieval text *O vos omnes*.² He was also a noted Spanish patriot, and following the victory of



Pablo Casals by Luis Quintanilla

Franco's fascist forces in the brutal Spanish Civil War in 1939 he left Spain and vowed never to return until the Spanish Republic had been restored. He lived in Europe, then in Puerto Rico from the 1950s until his death. During that time he helped found a number of orchestras including the Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra and the Conservatory of Music of Puerto Rico. Throughout his life he was a fiery and impassioned activist, and in 1971 he was awarded the U.N.'s Peace Medal at the age of 95 in honor of his lifelong contribution to peace and democracy. He died in Puerto Rico at the age of 96 in 1973, a mere two years before Franco's death and the transition to democracy in Pau's beloved native land. While he did not live to see Spain's freedom from tyranny he did eventually return; his remains were repatriated to El Vendrell in 1979.

While Casals spent a lifetime playing, conducting, teaching and tirelessly organizing music festivals (in addition to his activism), he is now principally regarded as the greatest cellist of the first half of the 20th century and one of the greatest of all time. His recordings include some of the earliest of Brahms' *Double Concerto for Violin and Cello* (which he performed live with Fritz Kreisler in 1911) and later the Beethoven cello sonatas, among many, many others. However, it is principally for his recording of the Bach cello suites between 1936 and 1939 that he will remain immortal. His own feeling toward these supposedly 'cold' works shines through with brilliant sincerity, and the 'glittering poetry' that he heard therein and revealed so intensely was to form part of the beginning of the true re-birth and widespread popularity of baroque music in the last century. ♪

¹ Liner notes to Emi Classics--Great Recordings of the Century: J.S. Bach: *Suites for Cello* by Pablo Casals. Notes ©1988 by Lionel Salter. [Biographical information adapted from these notes, Wikipedia, and the NPR *Listener's Encyclopedia of Classical Music* (©2006 by Ted Libbey, Workman Publishing Co., Inc.)]

² The BCC will sing Casals' *O vos omnes* (tr: 'O all you [who walk by]') at the March 18th concert.

Meet & Greet after the March 18th Concert

The Bach Cantata Choir would like to cordially invite you to stay for a little while after the March 18th concert for an informal chat. In an effort to both get to know our audience members better, as well as hear your feedback on how the BCC is fulfilling its mission, the choir will have a 'meet-and-greet' immediately following the concert.

If you have not yet had a chance to meet BCC choristers, soloists, board members or players from the BCC Chamber Orchestra, Sunday the 18th will be a great opportunity for you to do so. And beyond the chance to say 'hi' and get to know one another better, you will have a real opportunity for your voice to be heard in terms of the future direction of the BCC in a number of important areas.

What is it that you specifically like about the way we do things, and in what areas do you think we could use improvement? Or a complete overhaul? We will have a number of specific questions, such as: Would you like to hear more instrumental music incorporated in our season? What do you think about our Christmas concert—is the two-year cycle of the Christmas Oratorio something you would like to see continue or would opening our Yuletide celebration to a wider format be more appealing? How important is the 'free' concert format to you? These are just a few of the questions we would like to pose, and we genuinely look forward to your feedback.



BACH CANTATA CHOIR
3570 NE MATHISON PLACE
PORTLAND OR 97212

Lenten Concert

Sunday, March 18, 2012 at 2:00 p.m.
Rose City Park Presbyterian Church

Featuring works by Arvo Pärt (b. 1935),
Pablo Casals (1876-1973), Heinrich Schütz
(1585-1672), and of course J.S. Bach.