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Visiting the Pablo Casals Museums

Parts I & II

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Visiting the Pablo Casals Museum Part I

(Puerto Rico)

Jayne I. Hanlin

In the song *America* from Leonard Bernstein's musical *West Side Story*, Rosalia, who is homesick, sings, "I like the city of San Juan."

Anita, the girlfriend of Bernardo, leader of the Sharks, quickly responds, "I know a boat you can get on."

So do I—Holland America's Eurodam, which has an Eastern Caribbean cruise that stops in San Juan.

Recently, Judy (another SAI cellist) and I specifically chose this cruise because we wanted to visit the Pablo Casals Museum there honoring the world-renowned Spanish cellist. Born in 1876, Casals lived in Puerto Rico from 1956 until his death in 1973.

After disembarking, we crossed a street and boarded a free trolley, which stopped near the small museum, housed in an 18th-century building. Facing San José Plaza with its bronze sculpture of Ponce de León, the museum (when we were there) was open from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. but closed on Sundays and Mondays. For current information, dial 1-787-723-9185—not an international call. Puerto Rico is part of the United States.

According to pre-trip Internet research, we thought the adult admission would be \$1. Instead it was fifty cents each plus four cents tax. To us, that was a priceless bargain.

Casals was not only a cellist but a composer, orchestral conductor, and humanist. The museum's collection includes his memorabilia—music manuscripts, medals, and photographs—as well as his Hamilton piano at which he composed a hymn to the words of W. H. Auden for the 25th anniversary of the United Nations.

Nearby, his cello case stands empty. Being restored is his Jean Baptiste Vuillaume cello. In the future, this 1843 French instrument will be displayed in a protected exhibit case.

There is also a unique straight-back mahogany chair with the carved cello and Catalan flag. In 1962, Sociedad Pro-Arte of Santo Domingo gave him this gift after he conducted a concert there to celebrate the return of democracy in the Dominican Republic.

There are two large portraits. In the first, an oil canvas by Hungarian Lajos Markos, Casals—head down and eyes closed—is playing his cello. In the second, which Alvarez Des (a Spaniard who lived in Puerto Rico) painted on wood, Pablo sits in a cushioned chair and holds a pipe in his left hand. He is staring out, and I felt as if he was gazing at visitors, his warm smile welcoming each of us.

Greeting my friend and me in person was Sugeily, an attractive young woman and expert guide. She is available to answer questions about the life and work of Casals and give tours on the spot or with advanced booking.

Upstairs, visitors can choose to watch any of the 90 VHS tapes from the 500 live recordings of the Casals Festivals between 1961-1973. Two framed sets of colorful flyers hang on the wall.

In one glass case, I spied an old typewritten document listing festival orchestra personnel, all invited by Casals. One cellist was Yuan Tung who played in the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra and gave me several cello lessons.

Judy and I were in San Juan in January, too early to attend the concerts from mid-February through mid-March. At the small gift shop, I purchased a poster-size flyer with a bird motif reminiscent of *Song of the Birds*, the Catalan folk song that Casals played at the end of every concert after his exile protesting Spanish oppression.

A supporter of the defeated Spanish Revolution, he vowed not to return to his native country until the restoration of democracy. But that didn't happen in his lifetime. The dictator Francisco Franco survived Casals by two years.

Casals also vowed not to perform in any country recognizing Franco's government. However, he once broke this promise because of his respect for President John F. Kennedy. In 1961, accepting an invitation from him and his wife, Casals gave a concert at the White House where he had performed for President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904.

To pay tribute to the concert there a half century ago, Yo-Yo Ma (along with Emanuel Ax and the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio) performed the same program at the Kennedy Center on January 25, 2011.

During my visit to the museum, I recalled buying *Joys and Sorrows: Reflections by Pablo Casals* as told to Albert E. Kahn in 1970. Reading this \$7.95 volume had a profound and lasting effect on me, especially the words of Casals that I shared with parents every year thereafter during my elementary school teaching career at Meet Your Child's Teacher Night:

“And what do we teach our children in school? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all of the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you. And look at your body—what a wonder it is! Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a

In 1948, he received a special gift, two volumes of the complete works of J. S. Bach, from Alexander Schneider and a group of musicians whose names read like a *Who's Who of musicians*. On facing pages of the manuscript, I recognized and gaped at signatures that included conductors Dmitri Metropolis, Bruno Walter, Arturo Toscanini, and Serge Koussevitzky; violinists Efrem Zimbalist, Joseph Szigeti, and Jascha Heifetz; pianists Rudolf Serkin and Arthur Schnabel; composers Paul Hindemith and Ernest Bloch; cellists Gregor Piatigorsky, Gabor Rejto, Raya Garbousova, and Bernard Greenhouse. As I deciphered each recognizable name, I kept repeating, "Oh, my goodness!" because just about every well-known musician from that generation had his or her John Hancock on the page. To me, this confirmed the esteem in which each held Casals.

Pablo's father instilled a love of music in his son at an early age. The youngster began composing in 1883. Although a remarkably gifted cellist, Casals thought the greatest instrument of all was the orchestra. In a room near the museum's exit, I watched a video recording of Casals conducting the special concert at the United Nations on October 24, 1971. Wearing red robes, the chorus sang the commissioned piece Casals composed.

On this occasion, he received the U. N. Peace Medal. Then standing at the podium with his arm held by Secretary General U Thant, Casals delivered his message to the assembly. Then he played *The Song of the Birds*. Why? In his words, "Birds sing when they are in the sky, they sing: 'Peace, Peace, Peace' Projected on the museum's video screen during his performance of this Catalan folk melody were images of Casals—including the familiar one of him wearing a hat and holding an umbrella, walking barefoot, and making footprints in the sand.