

A NOTE FROM *Johnstone-Music*

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SPECIAL FEATURE on 'ORQUESTRA PAU CASALS'

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The Pau Casals Orchestra (in Catalan and officially, Orquestra Pau Casals) was a symphony orchestra based in the city of Barcelona, founded in 1919 and conducted by the composer and cellist Pau Casals, which operated in Barcelona between 1920 and 1936. It was one of the best orchestras of the moment and contributed to publicize many works of the classical repertoire in Barcelona. He gave his concerts at the Palau de la Música Catalana.

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In 1919, Pau Casals had the idea of creating an orchestra in Barcelona, with the main objective that the city could count on a quality orchestra that would spread the great musical repertoire: not only the repertoire works (many of which had not yet been heard in Barcelona), but also works by contemporary composers. In addition, it was hoped it could attract the world's best soloists to come to the city. Casals was inspired by patriotic ideals that "coaxed" him to further the musical life of his country, and to improve the musical situation up to top 'European' standards.

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Casals hired 88 musicians, paying them himself, which was very difficult at first due to a (mild) heart attack that Casals suffered, thus delaying the start of the project. In a short while however, he began with a rigorous rehearsal programme, working on aspects such as meticulous intonation and the musical intentions of phrases ('shaping the melodies'), which were so not common in most orchestras at the time. Casals, as conductor-director, managed to create a climate of fervour that made the musicians perform to the maximum and feel responsible for a work that went beyond pure and simple interpretation. The aim was to perform about twenty concerts per season: ten in the autumn and ten in the spring.

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On October 13, 1920, the first concert of the Pau Casals Orchestra was held at the Catalan Music Palace. Shortly after the orchestra was presented in public, a board of trustees was set up with the aim of helping to finance the orchestra, which did not receive any type of public subsidy or aid from the Administration. This financing, to a large extent, was in charge of Casals himself, who dedicated a significant part of his earnings as a concert player (he was at one point - before World

War I - the highest paid classical performer in the world!) and yet never charged for his work in the orchestra.

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At first, the musical world of Barcelona did not pay much attention or show support. However, in a short time the orchestra consolidated and duly reached a high level of artistic quality. Casals' fame made numerous soloists of international prestige want to collaborate with the orchestra. Among them: Gaspar Cassadó (since 1921, several times), Wanda Landowska (1921), Alfred Cortot (1922, 1927, 1929, 1933), Alfredo Casella at the piano (1922), Mieczysław Horszowski, Elisabeth Schumann (1923), Blanche Selva (1926), Jacques Thibaud (1927, 1929), Eugène Ysaÿe (in his last solo performance, performing Beethoven's concert), Horace Britt, Harold Bauer (1927), Donald Francis Tovey (1927 and 1928), Charles Panzera, Ildebrando Pizzetti, Baltasar Samper, Robert Gerhard (1931), Joan Manén, Arnold Schönberg (1932), Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Pierre Fournier (1934) ... However, one of his main soloists for great oratorios and outstanding works, such as the Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was Conxita Badia, who performed with Casals and his orchestra on more than thirty occasions.

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Various recordings of the Orquestra Pau Casals are preserved. One of these recordings corresponds to the concert offered in Barcelona in June 1929. Pau Casals, cello, and Jacques Thibaud, violin, perform the Double Concert by Johannes Brahms, conducted by Alfred Cortot.

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During the Republic years, there was talk of the intention of the Generalitat of Catalonia to convert the Orquestra Pau Casals into a 'national' Catalan orchestra with the name of Orquestra de Catalunya. The outbreak of civil war prevented it from being done. What actually happened is that the Orchestra was to open the Barcelona Popular Olympiad, 1936, with a concert at the Greek Theatre performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony - but during rehearsals at the Palacio de la Música, it was reported that the military revolt of July 18 had taken place. Casals narrates how the orchestra, the soloist Conxita Badia and the Orfeón Graciense performed, without an audience, the last movement as a song to peace, but as such a public concert was never made. The musicians went home. So sadly the events of the war and the subsequent repression prevented the orchestra from ever coming together again. Its public history can therefore be documented as terminated on 18th July, 1936.



'documenting the cello'

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