

Casals and the Bach Suites

By MAURICE EISENBERG

Pablo Casals was the first artist to play an entire unaccompanied Bach suite in public. In doing so he not only revealed to the musical world the extraordinary beauty of these masterpieces of monadic writing and polyphonic structure, but opened new horizons for all string virtuosi. Before the advent of Casals the 'cello suites were considered more in the nature of musical exercises than of musical interest to the public. After Casals, thanks to his interpretive genius and utter comprehension of their inner depth and meaning, these works today are to the 'cello what the Goldberg Variations are to the harpsichord.

Casals brought the glimmer of light to the real Bach and influenced the whole course of contemporary playing in all mediums as far as this composer is concerned. Where all had been pomposity, he brought simplicity; where there had been deadness and pallor, he brought the breath of life and quickening of beauty and color.

Casals realized the immense musical value of the 'cello suites at a very early age and spent years in the profound study of these works. Their rich, wonderful polyphony had remained lost to the world simply because no 'cellist before him had been gifted with the startling imagination, sensitivity and amazing technical command of his instrument to encompass all their difficulties of performance and conception. One cannot imagine, for instance, that a conscientious musician like Schumann would have been blinded into thinking them monodically conceived just because they were monodically penned, had there been a 'cellist around to give living denial. As things were, Schumann thought he was performing a service to music by ostensibly completing them with his piano accompaniments.

Schumann should not be blamed overmuch, for up to our own time two of my early 'cello teachers, Professors Hugo Becker of Berlin and Julius Klengel of Leipzig, who were considered the outstanding 'cellists of the day, still played the Bach suites like the most uninteresting Czerny exercises. When I discussed Casals' new approach with them they argued that he was a genius and his kind of performance was peculiar only to him because of his extraordinary 'cellistical achievements.

Casals' 'cellistical achievements were certainly extraordinary, but his interpretations were even more so. Coming at a time when the post romantic era of bad taste was at its height and artists thought more of projecting their own "styles" than that of the composer's, Casals' approach was like a gust of fresh air admitted into an overheated and stuffy room. He penetrated into the inner style and meaning of each composer, of Boccherini no less than Bach, with a sincerity and depth that was revealing. A phrase under his hands was no longer merely a phrase, but a breathing, pulsing thought with infinite meaning. With Casals the mechanics of his art was secondary; the thought was uppermost. He never played a thing twice the same way. Yet each time the character, message and dynamics were absolutely perfect. His mastery of rubato is one of the seven wonders of the world in my mind, free yet still within the original dimensions and scope.

I shall never forget the time Casals tried to show a young 'cellist how to begin the Boccherini concerto. After he had played the passage, the student blurted out with some perplexity, "But, master, that's not how you play it in your own recording." "No," replied Casals, "that may be so, but this time this is the right way to play it."

If the young 'cellist remained bewildered, it is just as well; for there are some things which simply cannot be taught. Once, also in Paris, an amusing thing happened. A certain noted French 'cellist came to hear Casals at work day after day. While the master played he took down the bowings and fingering of a Bach suite four separate times and each time they were all different. Finally the poor man gave up in disgust. When I asked Casals about this incident, he replied jestingly, "I have three different fingerings; one for myself, one for my pupils and one for my colleagues."

The art and mastery which Casals achieved with the 'cello is even more astonishing when one considers the physical handicaps of the instrument. Unlike the violin, where chords and double stoppings make possible harmonic as well as polyphonic structure and performance, the 'cello, for reasons such as the dimensions, spacing of strings, etc., is reduced to only monodic treatment and playing. To do more, i. e., to bring out the complex structure, line and color of a Bach suite, the 'cellist can but rely on his art of suggestion, which he achieves by means of accentuation, vibrating and holding of certain notes, coloring dynamics and, above all, pure intonation.

Of the six suites, the last, in D, is 'cellistically the most interesting and difficult. It is not for these reasons that I have chosen to play it at my coming recital at Town Hall, but because it is so seldom heard. It was not originally written for the 'cello, but for a five-string instrument called the viola pomposa, which some authorities claim to have been invented by Bach himself. Played like a violin, it looked like a viola and was tuned like a violoncello with an E string added. High and rapid passages were much easier to play on it.

It was for this obsolete instrument that Bach wrote what is probably one of his greatest works for strings. Though all the other suites, like numerous of Bach's works, were left without any indication of dynamics whatsoever, the Sixth suite, peculiarly enough, wasn't. In the opening bars of the prelude Bach indicated at once fortissimo and pianissimo imitation. This always made Casals think of Bach coming out of Thomaskirche on Sunday mornings and stopping to listen to the church bells and the echoes in the distance.

In its development, the opening prelude is a free improvisation similar to the great organ preludes. The Sarabande, which is played on two, three and four strings simultaneously, is one of the most inspiring and amazing polyphonic pieces ever written for unaccompanied instrument. The second of the two gavottes, with its bagpipe effect, is a wonderful instance of delightful invention. The concluding gigue and its suggestion of fanfares has few rivals, even in Bach, for power and vital lilt and exuberance.

When Casals was invited to record the whole set of suites, he was very reluctant to do so. He was fearful of the results and it took several years of persuasion before he was convinced. He especially hated that "steel monster," as he called the microphone, which picked up noises and scratches he was not even aware of. In the midst of recording, he would stop very often and refuse to go on. He didn't believe he could do them justice. Only the begging of friends made him continue. Today we have them on permanent disks for all to hear and marvel. We can only hope that this great artist, who has not been heard of in more than a year, will in the near future soon have the occasion once more to thrill and inspire us with his inimitable art.