

Don Pablo and His Magic Cello



IT IS SOMETIMES embarrassing to become a living legend. Some months ago a dignified, courteous Puerto Rican appeared at the home of Pablo Casals and asked whether he could see the master. He would not give his name or explain his mission, but Señor Casals, who does not like to stand on ceremony, said he would see him. The man entered the living room, bowed, declared, "I am honored," accepted a seat and remained in it without uttering a word for half an hour. Then he arose, thanked Señor Casals gravely and departed.

Not all Puerto Ricans have felt the need to pay a personal tribute this way. But most of the people on this island, whether high-placed or in humble circumstances, regard Señor Casals not only as an honored visitor but also as a friend. They speak of him affectionately as Don Pablo. Before he was stricken some time ago he would take a morning stroll, shading himself from the sun with a black umbrella. Every Puerto Rican would have a "buenos dias, Don Pablo" for him.

Señor Casals, who is world-famous as the greatest cellist of his time and as a symbol of protest against dictatorship because of his self-imposed exile from Franco-dominated Spain, went to Puerto Rico last year out of respect for the memory of his mother, who was born in Mayaguez. He has found there a second home and a host of relatives. His mother's maiden name was Defillo. Puerto Rico is full of Defillos and many claimed a relationship to Señor Casals, which has delighted him.

THE FESTIVAL arranged in his honor has been in his thoughts for months. Several days after he had suffered a coronary thrombosis, he listened with a smile to a report of how the musicians were carrying on in his absence. Then he murmured to his physician, "I would like to play at least on the last day of the festival."

Señor Casals has always packed an enormous amount of determination, energy and resilience in a short, stocky frame. Although he was 80 years old last December 29, he had not ceased his regular practice, and his technical command of the cello continued to be the envy and despair of musicians fifty years his junior.

Señor Casals owes his eminence not merely to his dominant position as a cellist and

his forthright stand for Spanish democracy, although these would be enough for any career. He is something more, a musician of incomparable imagination and discernment. Performers feel privileged to work with him, and young musicians have traveled thousands of miles just to sit at his feet.

He has the gift for teaching and inspiring. As a musician he does not lay down the law; he suggests fresh possibilities, he encourages his associates to seek out new insights, he is not hidebound by tradition.

He loves the masters such as Bach, Mozart and Schubert, who happen to be the subject of the festival in Puerto Rico, and he immerses himself in their scores. But he believes in the prompting of the heart. A student working on a passage in Bach once said, "I think it goes like this."

"Don't think," Señor Casals replied, "It is better to feel."

His capacity for feeling is boundless. Some months ago he told a friend, "I have always been emotional, but as I get older my emotions grow four times as strong as they used to be." But there is not a trace of sentimentality. Anyone who has heard him play a sarabande from an unaccompanied Bach suite knows that this is emotion stripped of impurities.

IT IS HARD to think of him as anything other than the illustrious figure, no matter how simple he remains in his manner and style of living. But the essential simplicity of the man is the key to his personality.

In 1939, after the collapse of the Spanish Loyalist cause that he had supported, Señor Casals was in Lucerne, Switzerland, to play at a festival. He stayed at a modest pension, and when one visited him at twilight he sat under a masked bulb tapping his ever-present pipe and studying a score. He was earning a good deal, but he wanted to save money to aid his needy compatriots in exile at Prades in southern France where he made his home from 1939.

Music has been Señor Casals' passion since his earliest memories. His father was parish organist in the little town of Vendrell, not far from Barcelona. Pablo was born there, and learned to play the piano, organ and violin before he was 10. A year later, he saw a make-shift cello played by a traveling musician and was entranced with it. He begged his father for one and a homemade affair was fashioned out of a stick, strings and a gourd.

Soon he got an honest cello

and he went to Barcelona to study. He made revisions in technique and they were logical enough to stand up. He discovered Bach, whom he venerates above all other composers, and did more than any musician to establish his noble work for unaccompanied cello in the repertory.

For years Señor Casals made it a habit to start the day, even before taking his constitutional, by playing at the piano preludes and fugues from Bach's "well-tempered Clavier." The maid in his home in San Salvador, Spain, went about her work humming preludes and fugues the way a servant in New York might hum a calypso number.

Señor Casals is a man of wide cultivation. He speaks half a dozen languages well, including English. He reads extensively in fields other than music. He is also a humanist of far-ranging vision. Best of all, he has the purity of heart of an unspoiled child.

When he moved into a house on the edge of the sea in Puerto Rico some months ago, he stood looking at the view and his eyes became moist.

"It is like my San Salvador," he whispered. "It is home."

