

### A sportsman named Pau Casals

by Dr. R. Balius Juli

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*Anaves dammunt l'herba de la prada  
i volava ton braç adolescent.  
i pel filat de la raqueta alçada  
travessava la llum del sol ponent*      *Josep Carner*  
(fragmento de "Joc de tennis").

We would not like the meaning of these words to be interpreted as being disrespectful of someone who has been considered as "music personified" for almost a century, and who was probably the best known Catalan who ever lived.

We intend to use them to demonstrate the fact that art, artists and sport are compatible and that the latter may even become a significant complement of artistic activity. Pau Casals, as we shall see, was a versatile sportsman. He himself admitted he had exceptional strength coupled with the ability to completely relax every part of his body which provided him with perfect muscular and nervous balance. This balance, which had probably been influenced by the playing of sport was a fundamental element of the longevity of his artistic interpretation both as an instrumentalist and as a director

Casals' first memories were set against the background of Sant Salvador beach, located at a short distance from his birthplace, the village of El Vendrell. It was there that he learnt to swim when he was so young that "he doesn't even remember it" as he confessed to Jose M<sup>a</sup> Corredor, the author of his biography. According to his brother Enrique, he was an excellent swimmer and, before the Spanish Civil War, he would swim three or four kilometres every morning.



"Another sport I used to do was horse-riding". Every day at sunset in Sant Salvador, he used to ride on the beach or through the countryside on his black horse "Floiran", a "good friend" he had to leave behind when he went into exile.

Casals loved the mountains and he took advantage of every opportunity to go hiking there. His ascent of Mount Tamalpais with a group of young people during his first tour of the United States ended in an accident. As he was going down a rocky wall, a loose rock which he was not able to avoid crushed one of his hands causing a serious injury which threatened his activities as a violoncellist. In Zermatt, where he gave several courses on the interpretation of Bach, Casals made friends with the mountain guides whom he admired for the "natural way in which they risked their lives in order to save others". The guides named him "First Honorary Guide of Zermatt" and presented him with an ice-axe and some climbing-ropes, as a symbolic gift to "a person who has reached the highest peaks of art".

We do not know if he knew how to ride a bicycle but his first toy was a velocipede built by "Avi" (Grandpa) Matines (a picturesque character of El Vendrell, inventor, sculptor, and pyrotechnist, who was capable of jumping off the roof of his house, using wings he had designed himself). The first time Pau used this machine with its wooden wheels and iron tyres it was to ride down the village's steepest street. His vehicle hit a stone and he fell and cut his head. Nevertheless, "I got back on my velocipede and started all over again, successfully this time". His whole life long he had a passion for travelling the world and a will to achieve the most difficult feats.

## Art and Sport

When he was about seven, he learnt to play billiards in a cafe in the centre of El Vendrell, and never stopped practising. For the story line, he was the first teacher of Isidro Ribas



(the son of the owner of the establishment) who later became world champion. Ribas often took pleasure in recalling this fact.

However, Pau Casals' favourite sport was tennis. We do not know when or how he learnt to play but the places he lived in ever since he was a child - royal courts and aristocratic mansions - made it easier for him to learn. Thus we met him in the autumn of 1909, arriving at Rudhurt Lodge, the house of Speyer, founder of the London Classical Concert Society, wearing a white flannel suit with a racket under his arm, saying : "I'll play

six sets first, and then two of Brahms' sextets". In the summer of 1915, the Barcelona daily "La Veu de Catalunya" wrote that Pau Casals had registered as a participant in the "L'Espluga de Francoli" tennis tournament, a competition which enjoyed great prestige at that time. The "mestre" (maestro)'s performance was remarkable. He managed to reach the semifinals of the singles and of the mixed doubles as well as the finals of - the handicapped singles tournament. For the latter performance he was awarded a silver medal by the Catalonian Lawn-Tennis Association ("Asociacio de Lawn-Tennis de Catalunya").

Casals had flawless tennis outfits which frequently included a colourful tie. A white hat protected his head because he could never bear the glare of the sun. According to newspaper articles he always played fast, and powerfully, especially when he was serving. His calmness allowed him to return balls which others would not have been able to reach.

His love of tennis led him to have a full-size court built next to the country house he owned from 1912 on Sant Salvador beach. The court was inaugurated in September 1915 with a party which included tennis games, a banquet and an improvised violoncello concert. After playing tennis for three or four hours his steady hand allowed him to grab the bow with confidence and precision, whereas the hands of the other tennis players trembled because of the intensity of play and the weight of the rackets. He used to play nearly every afternoon and often did so with the champions of those days (Flaquer, Juanico, the Subirana sisters, etc...) who used to go to Sant Salvador because of the attraction of the quality of the court and the personality of its owner.

Pau Casals would often be seen among the spectators at important international tournaments. Two anecdotes from Roland-Garros illustrate his behaviour which could never be separated from the influence of music, his only permanent passion. During a match in which Tilden was playing, as Joan Alabedra described. "Casals was withdrawn, worried. All of a sudden he exclaimed: "I've got it" - What ? - "Some fingering I was trying to work out". From that moment onwards Casals followed the match intently. On another occa-

sion, as he watched the 1938 finals, he was encouraging his friend, the North American player Donald Budge, and promised that if he won he would play a special concert for him. That same evening he fulfilled his promise.

Casals was a tireless walker who felt the need to take a long walk every day. Summer and winter, not only in Sant Salvador but also in Prada and Puerto Rico, he was frequently seen taking an early morning walk before beginning his daily music practice. In Prada, he also used to play "petanque" ; on one occasion, the village paid him a simple, heartfelt tribute, by organising a church service in the morning and a "petanque" competition in the afternoon. When the sides were drawn, it happened that the town priest and mayor were Pau's team-members ; according to rumour, they won this memorable match thanks to Casals' never-failing steadiness of hand and accuracy.

On the night of the 18th July 1936, eve of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, Casals was directing the last rehearsal of Beethoven's IXth Symphony with his orchestra and the "Orfeo Graciano" in Barcelona. The concert was to take place the next day at the Montjuic Greek Theatre, in the context of the People's Olympiad. A messenger warned them of the danger of a possible military uprising and of the need to evacuate the hall quickly, and the concert was therefore cancelled. The director, musicians and singers agreed to perform the whole symphony before taking leave of each other. They never met again, as the war deeply uprooted their lives.

The memory of that night always obsessed Pau Casals. In 1958, when the United Nations invited him to give a speech for peace, and to participate in a concert commemorating the Xth Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, he said the following words in his address which was broadcast in more than 50 countries : "The IXth Symphony's Ode to Joy has become a symbol of love. I suggest that all cities with an orchestra and choir perform this hymn on the same day and at the same time, and that television and radio broadcast it to the remotest areas of the five continents. We would like this hymn to be performed as an appeal for the peace we all want and hope for." As Casals was a patriot above all else, it



*Pau Casals*

would be wonderful if his suggestion could become reality in the context of a world sports festival, perhaps during Olympic Games held in Catalonia... It would be the best tribute that could be paid to a sportsman who was, as UThant, the United Nations Secretary General, would say: "one of this century's music greats, and the Champion of Peace and Human Rights".

*R. B. J.*

