John Sant'Ambrogio

The Day I Almost Destroyed the Boston Symphony and Other Stories

CHAPTER

11

DEE DA DEEDLE DA DA

During my third year with the Saint Louis Symphony, I had an opportunity to view, first-hand, a truly remarkable display of control by a conductor over one orchestra musician. The conductor was the venerable ninety-six-year-old solo cellist, Pablo Casals, an idol of mine as long as I could remember. I was the orchestra musician under his control.

In mid-season I had been invited to play first cello with the prestigious Casals Festival Orchestra in Puerto Rico, and the Saint Louis Symphony obligingly allowed me to leave for one week to accept the honor. As I flew into San Juan with my family and my cello, I could hardly contain my excitement. What an opportunity! I was going to work in an outstanding orchestra made up of great musicians from all over the world and, during my time off, walk through Old San Juan or sunbathe on the island's beautiful beaches. Once again, I was getting paid to enjoy myself. The biggest thrill, though, was the fact that the greatest cellist of all time, Pablo Casals, whom I'd never seen in person, was to conduct a piece at one of the concerts. Casals, at the time, was probably the most respected living musician in the world (as Yo Yo Ma is now), and for the first time in my life, I would have the opportunity to play first cello right under his nose.

As often happens, we forget the lessons painfully learned in the past. Forgetting how my desire to impress once "blew up" the BSO, my imagination started down that dangerous egotistic path once more.

"If Casals is impressed with my work as his first cellist, I'll be set." My train of thought moved ever deeper into absurdity. "Casals endorses Sant'Ambrogio" was next. I could see the management back in St. Louis begging me to accept thousands of dollars more if only I'd show up occasionally. Of course, I kept telling myself not to get too carried away with such nutty fantasies. But with an opportunity like I was getting with Casals, it wasn't easy to stay rational.

On the day of the first and only rehearsal of the music Casals was conducting, I arrived early, along with the rest of the musicians, to warm up on Mendelssohn's Fingal's Cave Overture, the music the maestro was to conduct. All of a sudden there was a respectful silence and everyone stopped their practicing. A moment later Casals came through the stage door and walked very slowly out to the podium. As he raised his baton to begin, we raised our instruments and looked up into that marvelous face, which we had studied in photos for years.

I had another thing going for me, I thought, in my quest to impress Casals. This overture started with a six-note motif for the cellos alone. There was no way Casals could avoid noticing my extraordinary leadership qualities as his first cellist.

"De-da-deedle-da-da" sang out from our cello section, music to my ears, but unfortunately, not to his. He stopped us, and I wondered why.

"No, no, not good," he reproached us. "You must make the first note longer, Deeeeee-da-deedle-da-da. Play again!"

We stretched that first eighth note, and again, it sounded all right to me, but Casals would have none of it. He scolded us, "It must be more like the ocean, the waves in the ocean, see the water in your minds. Play again-not too loud.

No. No. No!"

Those wonderful endorsements I had imagined began to fade. "Too bright. Your sound is too bright and too loud." I quickly turned to my forlorn section and told them to play the passage on a lower string, which would produce a darker sound.

For a moment, I had hope because I thought that I saw his eyes begin to show approval, but not for long.

"No!" he said. "I must see the grass blowing in the wind. No-play again!" I couldn't see the grass or the waves, but I could see my Saint Louis Symphony raise going out the window and my reputation as a first cellist dropping fast.

After a half-hour of this torture, the attention of the rest of the orchestra began to drift. Hearing those six notes over and over again fascinated only Casals. Some players began reading whatever material they could reach from their chairs. Others appeared to be sleeping. A few actually seemed to enjoy our agony and were wagering on how long Casals was going to do this to us. I could see, out of the corner of my eye, poor Sasha Schneider, Casals's assistant and former second violinist in the famous Budapest Quartet. He was squirming in his seat, looking embarrassed, perhaps because it was he who had been responsible for my invitation to that festival.

We had played that six-note motif at least forty times by now, but our trial was not yet over. Casals was making his point: "You don't impress me, Mr. First Cello, whoever you are. Now you are going to learn what music is really about." Casals was in control and kept us on those six notes for, believe it or not, close to one hour. Then he suddenly abandoned the waves and grass routine and played through the entire overture without a pause. Then he slowly left the stage without saying another word, leaving me and my section dumbfounded.

That night, before the concert, I heard through the grapevine that it would not be unusual for Casals to stop right in the middle of the performance if we didn't play those first six notes to his liking. I was hoping that they were pulling my leg, but I didn't laugh. I just kept my fingers crossed. We must have played those six notes to his liking; mercifully he didn't stop us again. Once we were past those infamous first few bars in the overture, we all played our hearts out for that great man. Some of the inspired playing we did that evening was due to the relief we felt at being free at last, but I suspect drilling us so much on those few notes had made us look deeper into the music. Casals had also drilled those six notes into my brain so deeply that I knew I would never forget them. For the rest of the week, when walking through the old city or swimming in the ocean, I could not escape "Dee-da-deedle-da-da."

After the last concert of the festival and just before I was to return to St. Louis, I had a private audience with the maestro and one of his favorite cello students, Bonnie Hampton. He was very warm and kind and never mentioned "Dee-da-deedle-da-da" or my playing of it. This great artist, one of the most important humanitarians of the twentieth century, passed away one year later. I'm sure that the first thing St. Peter said to him as he entered those heavenly gates was, "Pablo, it was great the way you taught that young cellist to stop trying to impress people and to think more about the music."

Dee-da-deedle-da-da.