

 <http://nyti.ms/25eIQ3k>

INTERNATIONAL ARTS | FRONT ROW CENTER

Amit Peled, Cellist, Walks in the Footsteps of Pablo Casals

By J. Y. LEE MAY 24, 2016

During a career that spanned 80 years and two continents, the Catalan cellist Pablo Casals played for Queen Victoria and John F. Kennedy. Three decades after his death in 1982, Casals' widow entrusted his 1733 Matteo Goffriller to the Israeli-American cellist Amit Peled. A former kibbutznik, now professor at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University, Mr. Peled last year celebrated the centennial of Casals' 1915 performance at Peabody with the same repertoire of Handel, Bach, and Fauré on the same cello. In August, Mr. Peled will take the cello he calls "a wild horse ready to run" on a road trip across America. He spoke recently about the trip and what it means to him to follow, literally, in Casals' footsteps.

Q. Where did the idea for the tour originate?

A. About a year ago, I was invited to do a tour in the Midwest in places like Devils Lake, North Dakota. We had 20 recitals in 21 days, and at around 15 of those places, there was someone who had heard Casals in person, who remembered seeing him play. I was shown a program of Casals' 1917 performance in Duluth, Minnesota. I left the tour thinking, "Oh my God, Casals played in all these places!"

I decided that maybe part of the legacy I have to revive with Casals is not only to be selfish and get concerts at the Kennedy Center, but also to bring classical music to where it belongs, to people. So I'm just going to go with my family, and have my daughter manage a Twitter account and investigate what our next stop should be.

We'll stop at every place we can, and put out chairs. People can follow us to the camping site.

Q. Casals' tours included San Francisco, where a falling rock injured his hand for four months, and a Texas town where he "played dice" with cowboys. What is your itinerary?

A. The plan is to leave on Aug. 20. We're starting in Oregon, and we will end the first weekend in September at my house in Baltimore, because Sept. 5 is when I start to teach. Basically, every day we will drive, stop, and play.

Q. What are you planning on performing on the road?

A. Casals' programs, which I'm basically copying, were exciting events. His program was like a good meal. He always started with an apéritif — a Handel sonata, to warm up the stomach. Then he would put a steak — a Bach suite, and it was also common those days to play a concerto. And after that, what do you need? Dessert! He did show pieces. Gabriel Fauré was his good friend, so in one of his concerts he played the elegy.

Q. What will you use for a stage?

A. There is a truck used by rock bands that can be opened up on one side and it becomes a stage. At this point, we don't have money for it. So we'll rent a big S.U.V. and carry a movable wooden stage with lights. One thing I ask the stage crew is to put the lights on the public. It drives me crazy when I can't see the people I'm playing for.

Q. Do you think your audience in smaller towns will be familiar with classical music?

A. There will be many people who have never seen a cello before. I always ask, "What is your feeling when you hear a cello?" and everyone says, "Mellow." So I call the program "Mellow Cello." I like to talk to people in concerts, and the review of Casals' concert in Duluth also mentions that the great maestro stayed for an hour and a half after the show and talked to people.

Q. Speaking of Casals, does the legacy of having his cello ever weigh down on you?

Yes. During the first month I tried to copy his playing, and that was a mistake. It started as a burden, but through playing his programs and creating this buzz about having this cello, I found my voice. And now, a few years later, I realize that my voice also has to be linked to what Casals did away from the cello. There's a video of him playing the aria in Prague in front of the refugees. Somebody is holding the music, and that's the idea of how I want this tour to be: sitting outside, windy, somebody holding the music, an upright piano, and a lot of people coming around.

Q. Casals wrote, "I was fascinated by drops of dew on a wildflower." How does nature inspire you?

A. As you know, I have to do my scales every morning. So I picture myself in Yellowstone, sitting outside, having coffee and doing my études. But I don't want to play only for the moose and the bear, so we will use social media to get the vibe out.

Q. How would you characterize your style of playing, as different from Casals'?

A. Casals was a pioneer in establishing the cello as a virtuosic solo and communicative instrument for the masses. I have to find my own voice in a world where there are many great instrumentalists who can play the pieces of the past, but maybe can't find a way to excite and engage the public.

Q. Is the cello repertoire a barrier for engaging the public?

A. No, not at all, because there are so many show pieces we don't play anymore, such as David Popper and Camille Saint-Saëns. In the 19th century, the whole second half was dessert. You could play a famous aria on the cello because everybody could whistle it. Then you would have a singer friend come sing a piece with you. What prima donna today would share a recital?

Q. Aren't you breaking the formal aspects of classical music?

A. There are no recitals today, because it's boring. I found a review of the Berlin Philharmonic from the end of the 19th century, and the reviewer is complaining that the Philharmonic stopped allowing people to drink beers during concerts. I'm 42. What is my stamp on the music world? It's to play concerts and to teach, but also be a small part in bringing back what classical music was: entertainment. I can't go more than 10 minutes without checking my phone, so let's take a two-minute break between movements. I want to let the public breathe.

A version of this article appears in print on May 25, 2016, in The International New York Times.

© 2016 The New York Times Company