



## YOUNG PABLO CASALS

by Mara Rockliff

**P**ablo Casals stood like a statue on the busy sidewalk. People jostled past, shoving the slight young man from side to side. Casals barely noticed. He was too busy soaking in the sights and sounds of the great city.

A double-decker bus lumbered down the boulevard, pulled by three giant horses. Carriages of all shapes and sizes clattered over the worn stones. A fellow in a fashionable suit whizzed past on one of those strange-looking contraptions called "bicycles," almost causing a traffic pile-up.

Steam rose from the cart of a chestnut vendor. Casals sniffed. Roasted chestnuts, yes—and another, less delicious, odor, having to do with the many horses in the street. But something else was in the air. Energy, perhaps. Creativity. Success.

Ah, Paris!

Not only musicians like Casals, but every young artist dreamed of Paris. Culturally, Paris at this time, at the dawn of the twentieth century, was the center of the world. For musicians, writers, painters, and artists of all kinds, all roads seemed to lead to Paris.

As Casals daydreamed while standing on the busy sidewalk, he imagined himself playing chess in a café with the Impressionist painter Edgar Degas. Or sitting in a

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jostled: pushed  
lumbered: moved clumsily  
contraptions: machines; gadgets

darkened theater, feeling the sudden hush as the celebrated actress, Sarah Bernhardt, took the stage.

But his fondest dreams had to do with music, for music was life for this young cellist. Perhaps the brilliant French composer Maurice Ravel would create a piece inspired by Casals and his cello...

“Oof!”

A weight slammed into Casals, nearly knocking him off his feet. Startled, he looked up to see a broad mustachioed face glowering at him. Even if Casals could not understand all of the man’s French words, he understood his vigorous gestures: it was time to move on.

As he hurried away, he felt his pocket. A reassuring crinkle told him that the letter from the Count of Morphy was still there. He patted it and smiled.

That letter was his ticket to success in Paris. That letter—and his own extraordinary musical talent, of course.

Casals thought of the last time he had come to Paris, in the fall of 1894. He was still a teenager then, eager to leave his home country of Spain and make his way as a musician in the larger world. His mother and two small brothers, Enrique and Luis, came too.

Casals’ parents were devoted to his career. His father, a church organist, taught him music from a very early age. By the time he was four, he could already play piano, violin, and flute. At ten, he took up the cello, which proved to be the

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celebrated: famous

fondest: most-loved

cellist: someone who plays the cello

glowering: staring angrily

vigorous: energetic, forceful

instrument he was destined to play as no one had ever played before. Soon, his parents realized that he was ready for more advanced training than his father could provide.

Señora de Casals took her eleven-year-old son from their village of Vendrell to the city of Barcelona and enrolled him in a music school. After three years, he played the cello better than his teacher. So she took him to Madrid to enter him at the conservatory. There he also met the Count of Morphy, a powerful nobleman who became his great friend.

After that, Casals and his mother moved on to France. With no means of support beyond the small sums that Señor de Casals was able to send, they found lodgings in the slums of Paris. Casals and his mother searched for work. His mother brought sewing home, but still they barely had enough to eat.

One day Casals met a violin student who told him of a job opening for a cellist. The job was in the orchestra of a second-rate music hall on the boulevard in Paris called the Champs-Élysées. The orchestra played popular music for traveling vaudeville acts and can-can dancers.

All those years studying at the music schools in Barcelona

and Madrid, learning the glorious suites of Bach and the bold sonatas of Beethoven—all that training and practice, just to play dance-hall music! Casals needed the money. He took the tram. Tram fare to the music hall was fifteen centimes, enough

Señora: Spanish for "Mrs."

conservatory: a school of music

slums: crowded areas of the city where the poor live

vaudeville acts: entertainment that includes skits, singers, dancers, acrobats, and comedians

can-can: a kind of dancing with very high kicks

suites: pieces of music that include dances

tram: a streetcar

centimes: small units of French money

to buy a bit of bread. So Casals made the long walk every day, round trip, carrying his cello. He was barely five feet tall. The cello was nearly his own size.

Winter came, and Paris turned bitterly cold. Casals became too sick to play. The concert season in Paris had

It was no small gift. Lamoureux's Sunday concerts were all the rage among Paris society. A chance to play with his orchestra could open the door to international success.

When he arrived, a boy showed Casals into the conductor's office. Lamoureux sat at a table, hunched over some papers. He was completely absorbed in his work. For

some minutes, Casals waited quietly but Lamoureux didn't

even look up. The young man began to feel quite

embarrassed. At last he said, "I am sorry, sir, to intrude upon your

work. I only wish to give you a letter from the Count de

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Casals began to play the cello part of a concerto. The first notes had hardly left his cello when Lamoureux put down his pen. A moment later, to the young man's astonishment, the conductor pushed himself to his feet. He stood leaning forward until Casals finished playing. Then he came forward and threw his arms around Casals. Tears glistened in the conductor's eyes.

"My dear boy," he said. "You will play in my first concert next month."

A few weeks later, Casals made his Paris debut with the Lamoureux orchestra—as a soloist. He played the same concerto he had played for the conductor in his office.

Casals was an overnight sensation. Invitations piled up to play at concerts and recitals across Paris. "Suddenly, all doors were open to me," he wrote years later. He would go on to worldwide fame and many years of musical accomplishment. Other cellists strove to copy his technique. Eventually, he became a conductor and led his own orchestra.

But he did not forget the family and friends who had helped make his success possible. "I had worked hard, it is true, but I had been greatly fortunate," he wrote. "Whatever I was, each of them was a part of me, and without any one of them I would have been that much less.... That is why gratitude and the knowledge of my debt have never left me." *—Casals*

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concerto: a musical piece in which, usually, a soloist plays a main part accompanied by an orchestra

astonishment: great surprise

glistened: sparkled (usually said of something moist or wet)