

Casals's Cello Gets a New Life

BY SCOTT CALVERT

AMIT PELED heard his first cello recording at age 10 while living on an Israeli kibbutz, not long after he took up the instrument to impress a girl. One day, he popped a tape he'd been given into his boom box and listened in wonder to Pablo Casals.

Now a 40-year-old cellist, Mr. Peled is practicing and performing on the very instrument that dazzled him in late 1983—an unlikely circumstance that has made him believe in destiny.

That cello, which Mr. Casals played more than any other, recently had its first thorough restoration in decades at the urging of Mr. Peled. On Nov. 7, he will take it on a Midwest tour, performing 19 cello-and-piano recitals. On Dec. 17 he plays at Rockefeller University in New York.

For Mr. Peled, the tour offers audiences the chance to hear his playing as well as the rejuvenated sound of the Casals cello, which he calls "Pablo." But it is also an opportunity to burnish the legacy of Mr. Casals, who was admired as much for his verve as his virtuosity.

"The whole thing about Casals is how to make a [musical] phrase alive," said Mr. Peled, who teaches at Johns Hopkins University's Peabody Institute. He doesn't try to imitate Mr. Casals but rather tap into the essence of his style: "It's spontaneous, it's sincere, it's honest, it's taking risks."

Mr. Casals inspired Mr. Peled to take some risks. At 22, Mr. Peled left Yale University, where he had a full scholarship to a three-year music program, after just one year. He left to move to Cape Cod and study under Casals's pupil Bernard Greenhouse. Mr. Peled, who eventually got his bachelor's degree from the New England Conservatory in Boston, spent three years learning from

Mr. Greenhouse. He fondly recalls days spent practicing, walking on the beach and sipping afternoon Manhattans with his octogenarian teacher as Casals LPs spun on the record player.

He never imagined that he would one day be responsible for his hero's famous instrument.

The decision to entrust the cello to Mr. Peled and to have it restored fell largely to Marta Casals Istomin, Mr. Casals's 78-year-old widow and onetime student. She married him in 1957 when he was 80 and she was 20. Mr. Casals, who came from the Catalonia region of Spain, died in 1973 at age 96.

Mrs. Casals Istomin has musical bona fides of her own. In the 1980s she was artistic director of the Kennedy Center and she served as president of the Manhattan School of Music for 13 years.

She first heard Mr. Peled in 2012, when a mutual friend arranged a meeting at her Washington apartment. She found him to be talented and sensitive. So she invited him to play again, this time on the cello that belonged to her husband, whom she sometimes refers to as "the maestro." Again Mr. Peled impressed her. "He was trying to find his way and make friends with the instrument," she said.

A few weeks later she decided the pair should get better acquainted and agreed to lend him the Casals cello for a couple of years, an offer she has made to other young musicians in whom she saw promise. The Casals Foundation in Barcelona will get the instrument after her death, she says, and continue the practice of lending it out for a year or two at a time.

Soon after receiving the Casals cello, Mr. Peled realized the instrument couldn't produce a big enough sound to fill a concert hall and in fact seemed "muted." Months later, he nervously asked Mrs. Casals Istomin about having it worked on. To his relief she agreed, even af-



ter it was clear a major overhaul was needed.

The cello, made in 1733 by Venetian luthier Matteo Goffriller, has been Mrs. Casals Istomin's companion off and on since the 1950s. To her it is almost a person. It is also a link to Mr. Casals, who in his final interview called the cello "my oldest and dearest friend."

"It was a huge leap of faith for them to bring it to us," said Julie Reed-Yeboah, who took on the task of restoring the cello at her midtown

Manhattan shop, Reed Yeboah Fine Violins, LLC.

The most evident problem was that the cello's neck had, over time, sunk four-tenths of an inch toward the instrument's base, Mr. Peled said. But Ms. Reed-Yeboah felt the cello needed more than a new neck; the instrument itself had to be stabilized.

So she and her small team opened it up with a tool similar to a large butter knife. They replaced several old wood patches inside the instrument with new patches, using the most aged wood they could find. The patches reinforce the cello's structure and cover tiny cracks. A new sound post and bass bar were installed.

The restorers also worked out subtle deformities in the cello's overall shape. They took plaster cast negatives of the front and the back and modified the casts. The front and back then were placed into the casts to be gently reshaped with warm sand bags, a process that required months.

All told, the repair took about a year. Mrs. Casals Istomin declined to disclose the cost, which she said was mostly covered by the instrument's \$4 million insurance policy. The goal was to restore the power of the cello's rich sound while strengthening the instrument for the future.

In August, Mr. Peled played for Mrs. Casals Istomin at an emotional reunion. He has since given several concerts on the cello and says listeners tell him it reminds them of Casals recordings. The instrument retains its character, he said, but projects an "amazing" new sound.

At Peabody in February, he will reprise a concert Mr. Casals gave there exactly 100 years earlier, beginning with a Handel sonata and moving on to a Bach suite. Same place, same program, same cello.

"It's like a wild horse ready to run," he said of the instrument. It is his to ride until Mrs. Casals Istomin asks for it back.