

Talk about improbable...

By Lila Meeks

Over the last 45 years as I have listened to USCB Chamber Music concerts, I have been mesmerized by a number of performances. Sometimes I have attempted to describe a particularly moving one or tried to write articles about why one might want to listen to classical music. Generally, I felt that my efforts were abysmal failures, but that has never stopped my trying. Early last February my thirteen-year-old granddaughter visited me, and I was still so blown away by the January 28th concert where we had the 2 Strads that I just couldn't stop myself from proselytizing even though this is the Swiftie with the iPhone prosthesis who had recently returned from the grand LA finale of the year-long tour and was already working on her dad to head up to Toronto for the Olivia Rodrigo concert over spring break. But I suspect the well-spring of hope never runs dry when it comes to grandchildren, so I broached the concert topic by explaining how rare it was to have even one 300-year-old instrument made by the Italian instrument maker Antonio Stradivari on stage and how amazing it was that we had a cello and a violin. I continued by relating the interesting story our cellist told us to open the concert: written between 1715 and 1720, Bach's cello suites were lost for some 200 years until a young Pablo Casals found them in a music store. Then I told her about how extraordinary the first notes of the Bach Prelude to the Suites were when they rose from Jan Vogler's 1707 cello, how moving the entire suites were, how enthusiastic our sell-out audience was from then until the concert's conclusion, and how buoyed all of us in the audience were as we rose to our feet, wildly clapping and bravoing before departing.

Fortunately, we had a few minutes before heading out to dinner, I had the concert video on my phone, thus I did not have to rely only on my words. She put her phone aside, and we sat together in the dark before the tv and watched and listened to Bach's Prelude to the cello Suite in G Major. I was so pleased to have shared with another generation what I felt were truly remarkable highlights in a memorable season of music, and she delighted her old granny by seeming truly engaged with the music and pleased that I had shared my enthusiasm for it.

Fast forward to March when I read that my favorite living author was coming out with a new book. I was able to preorder Amor Towles' *A Table For Two* and received it on April 4. Reading around other activities, including houseguests from Denmark, I finally sank down into my favorite rocker, started with a short novella, and then proceeded to the short stories. By the conclusion of the last short story, "The Bootlegger," I was sitting straight up in amazement. Like many of us who never studied music seriously, Towles' narrator has had only a few brief brushes with classical music played by brilliant artists. Lucky for her, like Towles, she lives in NYC; her husband has a six-figure salary, and they are desperate to find escape spots once a week after their second child arrives. Her husband selects the Virtuoso series at the convenient Carnegie Hall, and they get soloists playing different instruments each week in April.

For her first two concerts, she is delighted to discover that "Say what you will about classical music, one thing it has going for it is that it lets your mind wonder. Rock bands, blues bands—and yes, salsa bands too—they're all intent on securing your undivided attention.... But classical musicians seem more willing to let you settle down, settle in, and follow your thoughts wheresoever they might lead you.... It's a little like the wardrobe in that children's book...where the girl passes through the coats and finds herself in a whole new world. One moment you are in Carnegie Hall...and the next thing you know you're wandering in a forest where the snow's beginning to fall..."

Our narrator listens in the dark and follows her imagination for the first 2 ½ performances, but then the third artist, cellist Steven Isserlis with his 1745 Guadagnini, decides to give the audience a 2 ½-minute bonus piece at the end of the program's first half: "Before beginning, the cellist gave a brief history of the suites, noting that for hundreds of years they were all but forgotten until they were rediscovered... by a thirteen-year-old prodigy named Pablo Casals. ...Casals had happened into an old music shop... and found the suites buried under a stack of musical scores, crumpled and discolored with age. Years later, as a world-class cellist, Casals championed the suites at every opportunity, bringing them the attention they so rightly deserved. Or, so concluded Isserlis.... Once again, the cellist laid his bow across his cello,

closed his eyes, and began to play. How to describe it? ...once Isserlis was playing, within a matter of seconds, you could tell you were in the presence of some form of perfection. For not only was the music uplifting, each individual phrase seemed to follow so naturally, so inevitably upon the last that a slumbering spirit deep within you, suddenly awakened, was saying: Of course, of course, of course...

"And as the music washed over the audience, Isserlis somehow conveyed the improbability of it all through his playing. For surely, it was all so improbable. To begin with you have the fact that some crumpled old sheet of music, which could have been torn or tossed or set on fire a thousand times over, had survived long enough to be discovered by a boy in an old music shop---in a harbor in Barcelona, no less. The very cello Isserlis was playing had survived two and a half centuries despite the fact that its entire essence seemed to depend upon the fragility of its construction. But the greatest improbability, the near impossibility, was that somewhere in Germany back in seventeen something something Bach had taken his deep and personal appreciation of beauty and translated it so effectively into music that here in New York, hundreds of years later and thousands of miles away, thanks to the uncanny skill of this cellist, that appreciation of beauty could be felt by every one of us."

"About a minute and a half into the piece, after a series of low and almost somber notes, there was a slight pause, a near cessation, as if Bach having made an initial point was taking a breath before attempting to tell us what he had really come to say. Then from the low point, the music began to climb. The word climb isn't quite right. It wasn't a matter of reaching one hand over the other and pulling oneself up... Rather than climbing, it was...it was...it was the opposite of cascading—a fluid and effortless tumbling upward. An ascension."

"Yes, the music was ascending and we were ascending with it. First slowly, almost patiently, but then with greater speed and urgency, imagining now for one instant, and now for another, that we have reached the plateau, only for the music to take us higher still, beyond the realm in which climbing can occur...beyond hope and aspiration into the realm of joy where all that is possible lies open before us. And then it was over. O, how we applauded. First in our chairs, and then on our feet. For we were not simply applauding this virtuoso, or the composition, or Bach. We were applauding one another. Applauding the joy which we had shared and which had become the fuller through the sharing."

Hallelujah for Bach et al, for great Italian instrument makers, for brilliant artists, for Towles who listened in Carnegie (surely he did) and then put it all into meaningful words that would resonate with us, for Mary Whisonant who against all odds envisioned that the world's great musicians would cross Whale Branch repeatedly, for Charles, Ed, and Andy who never short changed us with composers or artists, and for all of us—those present and those gone—who have sat in the snow in the darkened old Beaufort Elementary auditorium and then given ourselves up to the beauty of the music, sharing our joy and ourselves with each other just as if we were sitting in Carnegie Hall.

Talk about the really greatest improbability...

PS Google says Isserlis now plays a Strad.