

## *AS IMPROBABLE AS IT IS...*

"TALK ABOUT IMPROBABLE..." From last season's program... Now has an addendum...

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 Eras Tour and was already working on her dad to head up to Toronto for Olivia Rodrigo 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 went missing 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 in G Major. I was so pleased to have shared with another generation what I felt was a truly remarkable highlight 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, I finally sank 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. He 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 classical musicians allow you to relax and allow your mind to wander rather like Lewis's wardrobe that opens into a whole new world where it is snowing. "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: He then tells the story of thirteen-year-old Casals finding Bach's cello suites and begins to play the Prelude, which Towles calls a kind of perfection with each phrase following inevitably on the preceding. "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 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."

Towles goes on to describe the ascension of the music taking the entire audience to a new plateau of perfection and joy. Lastly he describes the wild, enthusiastic response of the audience and their joy which was 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 school auditorium and 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

## Talk about Improbable...Addendum

Amor Towles spoke in Charleston this spring; during the Q&A I asked him if he had in fact gone to Carnegie and heard Isserlis play Bach's Prelude before writing the beautiful description in "The Bootlegger." His answer went something like this: This short story is the most personal tale I have ever published. Years ago, my young family and I were living in New York when I saw that the famous pianist Evgeny Kissin was coming to Carnegie. I suggested to my wife that we go; she agreed. I called the box office and had a long, complicated, and costly conversation with the agent that ended in my having to purchase series subscriptions to attend the concert. (My wife observed we could have had our night out in Paris for the same amount.) We attended the by-all-accounts brilliant concert; I missed it entirely because I was so distracted by the elderly fellow sitting to my left, illegally recording it. As fiction writers are wont to do, several years later after forming a friendship with cellist Steven Isserlis at a Chicago concert and coming to the conclusion that Bach's cello suites are everything Casals has claimed and more, I blended my experience with my imagination and wrote "The Bootlegger." I sent a draft to Steven for him to okay its authenticity, and he responded that he would never wear a watch when playing his million-dollar Guadagnini for fear of damaging it, so I revised my fictional account by having him pull a watch from his pocket. That was the only change required.

If you admire Towles' talent only minimally, now that you know he based the Ivy League jackass Tommy on himself (although he never confronted or embarrassed the real bootlegger), please reread the article and/or his story before Ed Arron and his very fine cello arrive on March 1; you will so appreciate Towles' sense of humor and honesty in holding himself up to such ridicule in front of 500 SC fans, but what I hope you will focus on is the accuracy of his descriptions of Bach's brilliant music and the power of brilliant music, played brilliantly, to transcend humans' usual state of complacency and unite them in ascending together with that talent, that power, and that beauty to a higher consciousness, to a vision of perfection as our community has been doing five times a year for 46 years.

PS If you would like to view the bootlegged video of Towles' response, go to [click here](#)... but please keep it on the downlow.