

## Those were the days

BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN



Last week at the Kennedy Center, Marta Casals Istomin presided over a Pablo Casals tribute concert. The concert was given by the most recognized classical musician of today, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, re-creating the recital given by Pablo Casals on Nov. 13, 1961 at the White House. The

Casals recital was given at a state dinner hosted by President John F. Kennedy and his wife in honor of Gov. Luis Muñoz Marín, his wife *doña* Inés Mendoza and the people of Puerto Rico.

Kennedy's inauguration that year turned a generational tide in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Among those filled with hope for the future by the young president's election were the young people of those days, who were inspired into public service, and the artists, writers and classical musicians who welcomed his words about the importance of the arts to the life of the country. In a contrast to the Soviet Union of the Cold War, Kennedy had said that "in a free society art is not a weapon and it does not belong to the spheres of polemic and ideology."

Time magazine gave the following account of the affair at the White House in honor of Muñoz, his wife and the people of Puerto Rico.

"After-dinner musicals in the East Room of the White House have been rather distressing in recent years. During the Eisenhower occupancy, there were the schmalzy tunes of Hildegard and Lawrence Welk. Before that, Oscar Levant played for company, but in the family circle, there [was] the shaky soprano of Margaret Truman and her father's ricki-tick piano. Going back to the FDR years, there was Kate Smith. Last week, the Kennedys changed all that, with an evening of chamber music that sent shards of rapture through the world of serious music.

"The evening was right out of the 18th century: It might almost have been a concert led by Haydn at the court of the Esterhazys or a command performance by C.P.E. Bach for Frederick the Great. The assemblage of 153 guests was celebrated and varied. Not a single blue-ribbon [U.S.] American composer of serious music, from Aaron Copland to Alan Hovhaness, was missing from the guest list. The nation's leading conductors—Bernstein, Ormandy, Stokowski—were represented in white tie and tails, and all the major music critics of New York and Washington were eagerly present. Said one: "The composers acted and talked like poor country cousins who had at last been let in the front door."

"Also among the guests were some of the nation's leading patrons of music: Anthony A. Bliss, president of the Metropolitan Opera

Association; Henry Ford II, an angel of the Detroit Symphony; IBM's Thomas J. Watson Jr.; and Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg, who solved the Met's union contract impasse (Time, Sept. 8). The grandes dames were out in force—Rose Kennedy, the president's mother; the Castoria heiress Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss; and the indomitable Alice Roosevelt Longworth—along with such assorted guests from other fields as pundit Walter Lippmann, Labor chief George Meany, oilman Edwin Pauley, and New York's Mayor Robert Wagner (who played the fiddle as a boy)."

Among Puerto Rican guests were Felisa Rincón,

and your efforts on behalf the cause to which we are all committed..."

Those were the days of Camelot and the "Showcase of Democracy," as Puerto Rico was referred to in the U.S. in those days. The people of Puerto Rico—who were being honored along with Muñoz—had risen from extreme poverty and underdevelopment by the strength of their votes and had ended a colonial relationship through a compact and a constitution that provided us a relationship with the U.S. that was unique in American history; a relationship that U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren had



*Pablo Casals performs at the White House Dinner for Governor and Mrs. Muñoz-Marín of Puerto Rico, alongside President Kennedy on November 13, 1961.*

then-mayor of San Juan; Teodoro Moscoso, director of the Alliance for Progress, created by Kennedy; Arturo Morales Carrión, deputy assistant secretary of State for Latin America; and Puerto Rican composer Rafael Hernández. At the concert, Rafael Hernández was assigned a seat next to Leonard Bernstein, whose musical "West Side Story" recently had become a major success on Broadway. When Rafael walked in through the receiving line, President Kennedy greeted him by saying, "Hello, Mr. Cumbanchero."

At the end of the dinner, Kennedy spoke as follows:

"Ladies and Gentlemen:

I want to welcome you all to the White House on this occasion. The dinner tonight is in honor of our distinguished guest, Gov. Muñoz Marín, and his wife, and the people of Puerto Rico.

Pablo Casals has honored all of us by consenting to come here and play.

I think[...]all of us feel a special pride in what the governor has done, the lessons he has taught us, the link[...]he has established between us and the most important countries to the south, and for his own efforts to improve the life of his people.

Therefore, governor, in your coming [here] tonight, we want to pay special tribute to you

described as perhaps the most important political experiment of the century.

Those were days of respect. It was the respect the people of Puerto Rico had gained by the transformation of this island under the democratic leadership of Luis Muñoz Marín. It was the respect we had gained through our artists such as Rafael Hernández and José Ferrer.

It was a respect we have lost on account of those decrying our pride in our accomplishments, those who pursue statehood or independence by bashing institutions like the Commonwealth, which was created by the U.S. and Puerto Rico under the leadership of a president of the stature of Truman and a governor of the stature of Luis Muñoz Marín. They are the institutions through which present generations must rely on for our progress and prosperity. They are the institutions that established the threshold of whatever status future generations may enjoy. ■

*Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-76 and 1985-92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-67) and Senate president (1969-72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at [caribbeanbusinesspr.com](http://caribbeanbusinesspr.com). Go to **Sign in** link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to [column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com](mailto:column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com).*