**Alfredo Casella**

Peter Roderick

Alfredo Casella (b. 1883, d. 1947) was an Italian composer, the leading member of the *generazione dell’ottanta* who were all born in the 1880s and who turned away from Italy’s operatic tradition in favour of new musical directions.

Casella’s musical life consisted of a number of phases. Born into a Torinese musical family and surrounded by orchestral musicians in his early years, a move to Paris at the age of 12 broadened his horizons considerably, and offered him the chance to study with Fauré and absorb the heady musical life of that city. He lived there for various periods during the subsequent 20 years, and the music and acquaintance of Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky and Manuel de Falla ensured that Casella formed an entry point into Italy for much of Europe’s most innovative musical modernism. Sachs writes that ‘he was polyglot, cosmopolitan, and ardently interested in European musical developments’ (134); added to this, he was a prodigious essayist and letter writer. Many works from this time are stylistically adventurous: *Notte di Maggio* of 1913 is comparable to Debussy’s *Jeux*, whilst the *Pagine di Guerra* (1918) for two pianos are a harsh and dissonant reflection on the horrors of war, using cinematic images of trench warfare as their inspiration.

On his return to Italy, Casella to all intents and purposes abandoned these radical musical explorations in a search for a *‘maniera Italiana’*, and increasingly became fascinated with neo-classical renovations of earlier Italian music –the pastoral symphonic suite *La Giara* (1924) and the chamber work *Scarlattiana* (1926) being the most obvious examples of this style. However, his role as a musical ambassador did not falter with this change of style, and continued through the establishment with Gabriele d’Annunzio and Gian Francesco Malipiero of the *Corporazione delle Nuove Musiche*. This society’s relationship with the International Society for Contemporary Music flourished into the 30s, and Italy hosted its international festival of chamber music at Venice in 1925, a full festival in 1928 at Siena, and a particularly successful festival at Florence in 1934. At home, the *Corporazione* organised the 1924 tour of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* across the country (attended by a dying Puccini and a young Luigi Dallapiccola) and hosted Stravinsky conducting *Les Noces* in 1928.

The values of this society, as Casella’s brainchild, aptly demonstrates many of the conflicting facets of the composer’s musical personality: a fearsome commitment to spreading European art music and developing Italian modernist composition was married to a rhetoric of triumphalism and sacralisation of art deeply rooted in fascist culture. Accordingly, *Il Deserto Tentato* (1937) – one of Casella’s few operas – is widely considered to be a veneration of Mussolini’s Abyssinian campaign. In 1944, as the end of the Second World War approached, Casella penned what was to be his last work: the *Missa Solemnis* *‘Pro Pace’* Op. 71, whose *Crucifixus* includes a twelve note row, the first rumblings of an embryonic serial technique. Standing as it does in the gap between one era and the next, in the broader picture of Italian twentieth-century music this work, and Casella himself, acts as a prolepsis – a prophecy of the future, and a giving up of the past.

*Select List of Works*

Italia, Rapsodia per Orchestra, op. 11 (1909)

Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 12 (1908-9)

Concerto per Archi, Op. 40 (1923-4)

La Giara, Suite Sinfonica, Op. 41 (1924)

Concerto per Orchestra, Op. 61 (1937)

Symphony No. 3, Op. 63 (1939–40)

Paganiniana: Divertimento per Orchestra, Op. 65 (1942)

Partita for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 42 (1924-5)

Scarlattiana, for Piano and Small Orchestra, Op. 44 (1926)

Violin Concerto, Op. 48 (1928)

Concerto for Piano, Strings, Timpani, and Percussion, Op. 69 (1943)

Pagine di Guerra, Op. 25 (1915)

Concerto per Quartetto d’Archi, Op. 40 (1923-4)

Serenata per Cinque Instrumenti, Op. 46 (1927)

Notte di Maggio, for Voice and Orchestra, Op. 20 (1913)

Missa Solemnis Pro Pace, Op. 71 (1944)

La Giara, Op. 41 (1924) Ballet

La Donna Serpente, Op. 50 (1928–31) Opera,

La Favola d’Orfeo, Op. 51 (1932) Chamber Opera

Il Deserto Tentato, Op. 60 (1937), Opera.

Select Bibliography

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Stable URL for a photo of Casella: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo\_Casella

Stable Spotify link for selected works by Casella: [Alfredo Casella](http://open.spotify.com/artist/4H4WcIy2H9hlLQpVlJcSMI)