

ALFREDO CASELLA

Born 25 July 1883 in Turin; died 5 March 1947 in Rome.

Symphonic Fragments from *La Donna Serpente* (“*The Snake Woman*”), Opus 50 (1928-1931)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Rome, 17 March 1932; Teatro Reale dell’Opera; Alfred Casella, conductor

THESE PERFORMANCES MARK THE PSO PREMIERE

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 25 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta and strings.

Alfredo Casella, one of the outstanding figures in early-20th-century Italian music, was born into a musical family in Turin in 1883 and showed such prodigious talent that he was sent at age thirteen to the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied piano with Louis Diémer and composition with Gabriel Fauré. By the time he graduated in 1915 with prizes in both composition and piano, he had already established a successful career as a pianist, composer and conductor. Though Casella came into contact with Debussy, Ravel and Enesco during his nineteen years in Paris, his early compositions show the post-Romantic influence of Mahler and Strauss. As he became absorbed with such *avant-garde* trends in visual art as cubism and futurism and the iconoclasm of Bartók, Stravinsky and Schoenberg, however, his music turned more adventurous. In 1915, he returned to Italy to take up a position as piano instructor at the Santa Cecilia Academy in Rome, after which he introduced much music by the day’s most progressive composers to his home country and founded the Società Nazionale di Musica with a group of like-minded young musicians to give concerts of recent works and publish a journal titled *Ars Nova* (“*New Art*”). Though it functioned for only two years, the Società strongly influenced Italian musicians to participate in European musical developments.

After World War I, Casella traveled widely in the triple capacities of composer, pianist and conductor; he made his American debut in 1921 leading the Philadelphia Orchestra and conducted the Boston Pops from 1927 to 1929, immediately preceding Arthur Fiedler’s fifty-year tenure with that orchestra. He continued to be a catalyst for the performance and creation of new music, serving in several international organizations to promote the work of contemporary composers. (He organized the first Italian performances of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, in 1924, and arranged for the composer to conduct them.) In the early 1920s, Casella’s musical style was again transformed, leaving behind the complexities and dissonances of the works of the war years for the clear textures and refined language of Stravinsky’s neo-classicism while seeking inspiration from such earlier Italian masters as Scarlatti and Paganini. His studies in older music also resulted in a scholarly treatise on the development of harmonic theory, editions of Beethoven’s piano sonatas, Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the piano music of Mozart, and the founding of the Accademia Chigiana in Siena for the study of early music. Despite personal difficulties during World War II (his wife was a French Jew and his health became increasingly fragile), he continued to compose until 1944 and was active as a conductor until just a few weeks before his death, in Rome in 1947.

“For years,” Casella wrote in his 1941 autobiography, “I was strongly attracted by one of the most beautiful of *fiabe* [*fairy tales*] by Carlo Gozzi [1720-1806], the one that furnished the plot for Wagner’s youthful opera *Die Feen* (*The Fairies*): *La Donna Serpente* — ‘*The Snake-Woman*.’ The way the fantastical story switched constantly between tragic and comic I found totally fascinating. I first thought of setting it as a ballet with chorus back in 1918.” By the time Casella undertook *La Donna Serpente* in 1928, however, it had become an opera with a libretto by playwright and translator Cesare Lodovici (the first to translate all of Shakespeare’s plays into Italian singlehandedly) based on Gozzi’s 1762 play. (Gozzi’s works also inspired the *Turandots* of Puccini and Busoni and Prokofiev’s zany *The Love for Three Oranges*.) British musicologist John C.G. Waterhouse, an authority on modern Italian music, summarized the opera’s plot in *The Viking Opera Guide*: “Altidor, King of Tiflis, marries the fairy princess Miranda against her father’s will. Unable to stop the marriage, her father imposes stringent conditions: for the first nine years and one day after the wedding she must conceal her true identity, and after that she must put Altidor’s devotion through a series of atrocious tests. If at the end of these tribulations the king has still not cursed her, then she can go on living with him as a mortal; otherwise he will lose her — she will turn into a snake for 200 years and eventually return to the fairy world. Unfortunately Miranda’s tests — which include having their children burnt to death and appearing to lead an army of Tartars against his

kingdom — prove too strong for Altidor: he curses her and she turns into a snake. However, the supernatural forces in favor of the marriage win in the end, after the king has boldly defied fire and three monsters among the high peaks of the Caucasus. Miranda is restored to human shape, the spouses are reunited, their children are brought back to life, and all ends happily.”

La Donna Serpente was premiered in Rome on March 17, 1932 under the composer’s direction, but its staging challenges have greatly limited its subsequent productions — it did not reach England until 1966 and has apparently never been professionally produced in America — so its music is known largely from the two sets of orchestral excerpts Casella extracted from the luminous score at the time of its first performance. The first series was dedicated to Fritz Reiner, who had been performing Casella’s compositions in America since the mid-1920s (he gave the first American performance of this music in Rochester in 1936), the second to Bernardo Molinari, long-time conductor of Rome’s Augusteo Orchestra.

The *Sinfonia*, the opera’s overture, exudes the mood of an *opera buffa*, giving little premonition of the trials in the tale that follows. The somber *Prelude* precedes Act III, when the plight of Altidor and Miranda still seems hopeless, a situation that is resolved by the dramatic and ultimately joyful music of the concluding *Battle and Finale*.

The *Music of Altidor’s Dream*, in the gently rocking style of the *berceuse*, a French lullaby, occurs in Act I before the king realizes his wife’s true nature and undergoes her tests. The *Interlude*, with its low, ominous strains and veiled fanfares, leads without pause into the *War March* that accompanies the invasion of the Tartars against Altidor’s kingdom.