

The Compositional Styles of Alfredo Casella:

An Examination of Four Vocal Works

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper and its accompanying recital examine three solo vocal works by Italian composer Alfredo Casella (1883-1947): "Larmes" from *Cinq Mélodies* (Op. 2); "Mort, ta servante est à ma porte" from *L'adieu à la vie: Quatre lyriques funèbres extraites du "Gitanjali" de Rabindranath Tagore* (Op. 26); and "Amante sono, vaghiccias, di voi" from *Tre canzoni trecentesche* (Op. 36). Each of these songs is discussed as representative of Casella's three compositional periods. A fourth song, "Ecce odor filii mei" from *Tre canti sacri per baritono et organo* (Op. 66), is also examined, as an end-of-life composition. Some of the more important solo vocal works composed in each period are mentioned to show where the four selected songs fit into Casella's compositional output and to suggest music for further study or repertoire.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND CHILDHOOD

Alfredo Casella was born in Piedmont, a suburb of Torino, on July 25, 1883. Music was an important part of his family long before his name became famous in Italy. His mother taught piano lessons most of her life, a means of income that provided for Casella throughout his youth. She gave him instruction on the piano beginning at the age of four. His father was an extremely successful cellist and professor at the Liceo Musicale in Torino. He also taught his instrument to Casella, but his mother was his primary teacher in both music and academics.¹

Casella's love of chamber music influenced his earliest compositions. His father performed private concerts as a member of a string quartet, which gave Casella an early acquaintance with the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, among others. His mother's piano instruction was somewhat unorthodox, as she skipped theory and solfeggio, which set back Casella's educational progress significantly when he reached the Paris Conservatory several years later. Nevertheless, he learned quickly enough that he eventually left his mother's studio to study with local teachers.

Casella claims also to have inherited his parents' disposition towards all things new. In his autobiography, he makes a special point that his father defended Wagner's music when it first came to Italy and his mother was one of the first Italian supporters of Wagner. He speaks very highly of his mother, describing how she taught herself English in order to read Shakespeare in the original language. Throughout his autobiography, he has nothing but high praise for her:

Such was the woman to whom I owe my best qualities of character, an exceptional example of intelligence, willpower, and seriousness in work and religious faith. This example not only illuminated and guided my childhood, but also remains living in me today, and will accompany me to the end in every action of my life.²

Early in his life, Casella struggled with the choice to pursue music or his interests in electrical engineering and chemistry. His parents supported both, but it was not until he received

¹ Alfredo Casella, *Alfredo Casella*, Miniature Essays, London: Chester, 1923, 3.

² Alfredo Casella, *Music in My Time; the Memoirs of Alfredo Casella*, edited by [I segreti della giara]. Translated by Spencer Norton, edited by Spencer Norton. English ed Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955, 13.

the support of his next teacher, Giuseppe Martucci (1856-1909), that Casella and his family decided he would continue his studies in music.³

When Casella was five years old, his father suffered from a paralyzing illness. This illness was a significant financial drain on his family and would eventually claim his father's life when Casella was only 13. The death of his father was an important factor in his mother's decision to emigrate to Paris with him so that he could study at the Paris Conservatory. His mother came from a family of moderate wealth, but the financial strain of his father's illness had taken much of that, and she sold most of their belongings to facilitate the move.⁴

³ Casella, *Alfredo Casella*, 3.

⁴ Casella, *Music in My Time*, 13.

CHAPTER 2

FIRST STYLE

Casella's musical career began in Paris, where he was exposed to the music he would spend his life promoting. He attended the Conservatory during the explosive early career of Igor Stravinsky, experiencing firsthand the influence of such new music as *Pétrouchka* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*.⁵ At the Conservatory, Casella studied composition with Louis-Joseph Diémer and later Gabriel Fauré. In addition, Casella made contact with Claude Debussy, Arnold Schoenberg, and Stravinsky, all of whom influenced him both musically and personally.

Due to his lack of training in music theory, he was forced to audit Fauré's harmony class twice before he was able to officially enroll in the class. It was in this class that he met Maurice Ravel, who became his close friend and was an important influence on Casella's musical language. Much of Ravel's advice would follow him throughout his compositional career.⁶

Casella's early style of composition resembles the great works of many of these influential composers. His earliest compositions did not reveal an individual style, but rather were a reflection of the works of the composers whom he admired. Musicologist John C. G. Waterhouse has suggested: "A true *prima maniera* [first style] of Casella does not exist; only a preparatory period exists, eclectic and full of echoes of other composers but with clear anticipations now and then of the so-called *terza maniera* as well as of the ...*seconda maniera*...."⁷ Casella's music in this period closely resembles that of Henri Duparc, Ernest Chausson, Fauré, and other French Romantics. This mode of composition is present only in Casella's early period; he departed from it sharply even before he left Paris.⁸

⁵ Giovanni Morelli, *Alfredo Casella Negli Anni Di Apprendistato a Parigi*, Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1994, 4.

⁶ Casella, *Music in My Time*, 61.

⁷ Raymond Fearn, "Alfredo Casella Negli Anni Di Apprendistato a Parigi: Atti Del Convegno Internazionale Di Studi, Venezia, 13-15 Maggio 1992 by Giovanni Morelli." *Music & Letters* 77, no 2 (1996), 289-291.

⁸ M. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, "Alfredo Casella e il suo "Terzo Stile" *Il Pianoforte* vi, (1925), 242-3.

"Larmes" was published in 1902 by Mathot Publishing, which specialized in publishing the works of young composers. Mathot published Casella's first composition when Casella was 19, and continued publishing his works in the early years of his compositional output.

Casella's song cycle *Cinq Mélodies*, composed during this preparatory period, is distinctly Romantic and draws heavily from the works of other Parisian composers. "Larmes," the first song in this cycle, is a setting of a poem by Jean Richepin, a popular French playwright from the turn of 20th century. The poem is from Richepin's set of poems *La Mer*, published in 1886, and has also been set by several other composers, including Fauré.⁹ The text is dark and tragic, progressing poetically from tears to sea to earth:

Pleurons nos chagrins, chacun le nôtre.
Une larme tombe, puis une autre.
Toi, qu pleures-tu? Ton doux pays,
Tes parents lointains, ta fiancée.
Moi, mon existence dépensée
En vœux trahis.

We mourn our sorrows, each his own.
A grave tear, then another.
You, why do you weep? Your dear country,
Your distant relatives, your fiancée?
Me, my existence is spent
In betrayed vows.

Pleurons nos chagrins, chacun le nôtre.
Une larme tombe, Puis une autre.
Semons dans la mer ces pâles fleurs.
A notre sanglot qui se lamente
Elle répondra par la tourmente
Des flots hurleurs.

We mourn our sorrows, each his own.
A grave tear, then another.
We sow in the sea these pale flowers.
To our lamenting sobs
She will answer by the torment
Of the howling waves.

Pleurons nos chagrins, chacun le nôtre.
Une larme tombe, puis une autre.
Peut-être toi-même, ô triste mer,
Mer au goût de larme âcre et salée,
Es-tu de la terre inconsolée
Le pleur amer.

We mourn our sorrows, each his own.
A grave tear, then another.
Perhaps even you, oh sad sea,
Sea that tastes of acrid and salty tears,
You are the inconsolable earth
Weeping bitterly.¹⁰

The musical tone of the song matches the text. The setting is in C minor, with dark, brooding harmonies. The piano accompaniment consists largely of thick chords that stretch into the lower registers of the instrument. The piano opens with a slow, dirge-like melody moving chromatically in alternating half and quarter notes with offbeat chords that create a gentle sway (Example 1). This figure returns multiple times and gives the music the feeling of a funeral march.

⁹ Howard Sutton, *The Life and Work of Jean Richepin*, Genève, E. Droz, 1961, 317.

¹⁰ Translation by Stefan Gordon.

Example 1: "Larmes," mm. 1-4.

The image shows a musical score for piano, labeled "PIANO" on the left. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The tempo is marked "Lent" and the performance style is "expressif". The dynamics are marked "mf" (mezzo-forte) at the beginning and "p" (piano) at the end. The score features a melodic line in the right hand and a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. A French instruction at the bottom reads: "Le chant très en dehors, les parties intermédiaires p".

Each stanza of the poem begins with the same two lines: "We mourn our sorrows, each his own. A grave tear, then another." Casella treats these lines as a musical refrain, first in mm. 13-21 after the piano introduction, and then in two subsequent returns. The voice divides into short, two-measure utterances, as though the narrator is deep in contemplation. The ever-present refrain and the piano's opening figure create a feeling of obsession. The refrain also serves as a unifier between three very different musical stanzas. The refrain remains somber and reserved, while the stanzas burst out into sudden animation.

After the completion of the refrain, the first stanza is set in mm. 23-37. The poem suddenly shifts into second person, as the narrator directly addresses the reader and questions the cause for tears. This sudden shift of voice is supported by an accelerated tempo in the accompaniment that contrasts with the slow movement of the refrain. The speaker's inner turmoil is expressed not just in the faster tempo, but also in a rhythmic acceleration in the piano (Example 2). The slow movement in the right hand is replaced by triplet motives that fight against the even duple figure in the left hand.

Example 2: Beginning of the first stanza, "Larmes," mm. 21-24.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the first stanza, "Larmes," measures 21-24. The score is in 3/4 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Toi, que pleures-tu?" and is marked "poco più mosso". The piano accompaniment includes a "dim." marking and a "p" dynamic marking. The score is written on three staves: a vocal staff and two piano staves.

The vocal line also accelerates through the stanza until measure 33, where the narration again turns inward. The opening piano motive returns for a shortened four measures, followed by a slightly altered iteration of the refrain, transposed down a third (Example 3). The general shape of the refrain is still recognizable, but the effect is a darker, more somber presentation. This change creates a greater contrast with the upcoming second stanza, mm. 47-60, making it feel more animated.

Example 3: First return of the refrain, "Larmes," mm. 38-45.

The image shows a musical score for the first return of the refrain "Larmes" (mm. 38-45). The score is in 4/4 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Pleurons nos cha-" and continues with "-grins, chacun le nô - tre. U. ne larme tom - be,". The piano accompaniment is lush and features large chords and tremolos. The score includes dynamic markings such as "f" and "meno f".

A strong instance of text painting is in the climax of the song, located at the end of the second stanza. The tempo again accelerates, and the narrator exclaims that his sobs are answered "by the torment of the howling waves "of the sea of tears. "Howling" (*hurleurs*) takes the singer into the uppermost part of the voice on a *fortissimo*. The climax is continued in the piano, which erupts into a flurry of *fff* tremolos in a vivid musical expression of the howling sea (Example 4). This piano interlude calms and continues as a retransition to the last return of the refrain. Such dependence on the piano for dramatic material, along with the lush texture, large chords, and overall difficulty of the accompaniment, reflect Casella's background as a pianist. The role of the piano is bigger and contains more virtuoso material than is typical in a reflective art song.

Example 4: Tremolos, piano interlude, "Larmes," mm. 71-73.

The musical score for Example 4 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a series of chords, each marked with a fermata and a triangle symbol above it. The lower staff is in bass clef and features a continuous tremolo pattern of eighth notes. The tempo marking *Allegro sempre* is written above the first measure.

The final statement of the refrain is exactly as it appeared in its first presentation. It is followed by a *Lento quasi recitativo* closing, with only sustained chords accompanying the final musings of the singer (Example 5). This suddenly open texture corresponds with the change of mood of the narrator to a more philosophical tone, as he reflects that perhaps the tears of this sea are those of the inconsolable earth. The piano ends the song with a return to the opening funeral dirge motive. The ending chords are deep, fading into the low parts of the piano.

Example 5: Final stanza, "Larmes," mm. 90-93.

The musical score for Example 5 features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef and includes the lyrics: "Peut-ê - tre toi - mê - me, ô tris - te mer,". The tempo and mood marking *Lento quasi recitativo* is placed above the first measure, and *expressif* is placed above the second measure. The piano accompaniment is in bass clef and consists of sustained chords, with the instruction *pp* (pianissimo) and *sans arpegger* (without arpeggiating) written below the first measure.

In some ways, this song is indicative of Casella's musical inexperience. The low, thick piano texture against the relatively low vocal tessitura can make it difficult for the singer's voice to

be heard over the accompaniment. The refrain sits predominantly in the lower fifth of a male voice, between C and G. As Casella's music matured, such problems of balance diminished, probably because he became employed as an accompanist to a local basso-buffo, a job that allowed him financial independence as well as more experience with the human voice.¹¹

This first song is highly indicative of the compositional style of Casella's first period. The influence of his French study in Paris is evident in his text choices, vocal style, and tonal language. These French elements reflect the respect Casella had for his teachers in Paris and the influence they and his surroundings had on him.

¹¹ Fearn, "Alfredo Casella Negli Anni Di Apprendistato a Parigi by Giovanni Morelli, 289-291.

CHAPTER 3

SECOND STYLE

As Casella progressed with his studies, he took a more modernist approach and his music veered away from the traditional elements that had so strongly marked his early style. Casella's music in this second period was influenced by the music of Stravinsky. He began to explore advanced chromaticism and complex rhythmic gestures. Italian music critic Guido Gatti describes the music in this period, saying that *Notte di maggio*, one of Casella's two great works from this time in his life, first shows the true personality of Casella. It contains traditional harmonies and melody, but also has a "mysterious and indefinable tonality which is neither major nor minor nor anything else."¹²

"Mort, ta servante est à ma porte" is the second song in Casella's *L'adieu à la vie: Quatre lyriques funèbres extraites du "Gitanjali" de Rabindranath Tagore*, Op. 26. This set of four songs was published in 1915, and it stands with *Notte di Maggio* as the two most important works of Casella's second style. The same set, now orchestrated, was published later, in 1926, with the title *Quattro Liriche Funebri per Soprano ed Orchestra da Camera dal 'Gitanjali' di R. Tagore*.

The texts are translations by André Gide (1869-1951) of the Bengali poems from *Gitanjali* by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).¹³ In "Mort, ta servante," the narrator opens the door to discover that Death is there. Death takes someone from the narrator, described only as "the treasure of my heart." The loss of this treasure leaves the narrator alone and forlorn in his home.

¹² Guido M. Gatti, "Some Italian Composers of to-Day. VI. Alfredo Casella (Continued)." *The Musical Times* 62, no. 941 (1921), 470.

¹³ Art Song Database. http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/assemble_texts.html?SongCycleId=2398 (accessed 19 February 2014).

Mort, ta servante est à ma porte.
Elle a franchi la mer inconnue:
Elle m'apporte ton appel.
Le nuit est sombre et mon coeur est hereux;
Pourtant, je saisirai la lampe;
J'ouvrirai les vantaux et j'inclinerai mon accueil car,
C'est ta messgère qui se tient denvant ma porte.
Mains jointes je l'honorerai de mes larmes
Je répondrai le trésor de mon coeur à tes pieds.
Et elle s'en retournera, son message accompli
Laissant sur mon matin son ombre sombre
Et dans la maison désolée rien ne restera plus,
Mon Seigneur, que moi-même à t'offrir un suprême don.

Death, thy servant, is at my door.
He has crossed the unknown sea
And brought thy call to my home.
The night is dark and my heart is fearful --
Yet I will take up the lamp,
Open my gates and bow to him my welcome.
It is thy messenger who stands at my door.
I will worship him
Placing at his feet the treasure of my heart.
He will go back with his errand done,
Leaving a dark shadow on my morning;
And in my desolate home only my forlorn self
Will remain as my last offering to thee.¹⁴

The song opens with a steady eighth-note figure that begins a largely chromatic, *pianissimo* line, doubled at the octave. This constant rhythm represents death's steady march to the narrator's door. Beginning in m. 11, the figure expands into five- and six-note chords, which crescendo and accelerate as Death comes nearer (Example 6). The eighths suddenly stop in m. 15; a beat of silence is followed by a *sf* chord, sustained: Death has arrived at the door, and he knocks loudly.

¹⁴ Translation by Ferdinando Albeggiani, Art Song Database, http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/assemble_texts.html?SongCycleId=2398 (accessed 19 February 2014).

Example 6: Arrival of Death, "Mort, ta servante," mm 14-19.

The vocal line in this song consists primarily of speech-like rhythms and is used to tell the story. The true melody of the song, according to Gatti, is in the linear succession of chords. This is a technique called *harmonic counterpoint* by the French, which is horizontal streaming of chords to create multiple melodic lines moving simultaneously in constantly changing vertical sonorities.¹⁵ This device has been identified as a primary characteristic of Casella's most well-known compositions of the second period and is used throughout the piano in this song.¹⁶ The succession of quartal chords in mm. 14-15 (example 6, above) is an instance of such multiple melodies.

¹⁵ Gatti, "Some Italian Composers of to-Day," 470.

¹⁶ Gatti, "Some Italian Composers of to-Day," 470.

Beginning with the entrance of the voice, Casella begins to paint musically the mystery of this encounter with Death. *Pianissimo* chords marked *misterioso* descend as the narrator describes Death's journey over the "unknown sea." The dense, slowly-moving chords framing speech-rhythms capture the narrator's initial reaction. The accompaniment becomes richer in mm 23-27, adding a low rumbling of eighth notes to create the image of the dark night and the narrator's fearful heart.

That Casella was a virtuoso pianist is evident in this song, much of which is notated on four staves (Example 7). This notation clarifies some of the chromatics and voice leading, while giving the pianist a better idea how to divide the complex texture between the hands.

Example 7: Double-staved piano lines, "Mort, ta servante," mm 23-24.

Example 7 is also an excellent demonstration of the influence Ravel continued to hold over Casella. This figure bears a strong resemblance to the "le Gibet," the second movement of Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, a piano work composed in 1908.

The following measures, 28-30, bring a return to a steady eighth-note rhythm in the left hand of the piano, but with quarter notes in the right hand, all in the lower registers. While this passage is marked *sotto voce*, it is also marked "grave and heavy," and the richness of the harmonies and the sound of the piano in this register create a dark feeling of foreboding.

After a short silence, there is a chord that consists of open fifths, creating a feeling of emptiness in the listener. Over this hollow sonority, the speaker says that he will "worship him by his tears," placing at his feet the treasure of my heart." The anguish of this moment is conveyed with an increase of dynamics, a *poco animando* with a return of eighth-note rhythm, and the voice's rise to its peak in this song.

This moment of passion calms and fades back into a return in m. 44 of the opening music. The octaves seem empty and monotonous in contrast to the energy of the earlier musical climax. Death is again traveling, going back "with his errand done." With the decrescendo in the piano and slowing of the rhythmic pace, Casella paints the musical image of Death's departure (Example 8). After another elongated rest (m. 57), Death is gone and the narrator is left alone.

Example 8: Death departing, "Mort, ta servante," mm 51-59.

The image shows a musical score for Example 8, consisting of vocal and piano parts. The vocal line is in French and includes the lyrics: "som - bre;" and "et dans la mai - son dé - so - leé". The piano accompaniment features a complex harmonic structure with a prominent ninth chord built on G. Performance instructions include *perendosi*, *pp morendo*, *con intensità e passione*, *poco rall.*, and *sf (non troppo)*. The score is written in a key signature of three flats and a 3/4 time signature.

After the silence, mm 57-58 begin the closing of the song with a ninth chord built on G, a tertian harmony that stands distinct from the complex chords in the rest of the song. This chord

paints the picture of the desolate, empty house in which the narrator is left. The narrator describes his loneliness, and the harmonies increase in dissonance with each new chord until the final expression of anguish that the speaker has only his own life left to offer as a final gift. The postlude is short, only three measures. It begins with a passionate *marcato* gesture, followed by a *ppp* chord of resignation, before a final chord in the lower registers of the piano.

Casella's own views of his second period are expressed in his autobiography. He felt that his expanded tonal language helped lead him to his ultimate compositional goals:

Today, when I look back objectively on that period of 1914–18, I cannot deplore it. Those experiences, from which I was later to draw my conclusions and retain what I could use, were extremely helpful to me. Paradoxical as it may appear to some, they contributed to the definitive formation of my present style of naturalness and simplicity.¹⁷

It was about this time that Casella began to consider leaving Paris and returning to Italy. His mother missed their homeland, and he believed it would be difficult to obtain employment in Paris. Fauré eventually offered him a position on the piano faculty at the Conservatory, but he turned it down. His inclination toward Italy contributed to his composition of *Nozze di Figaro*, the most important work of his second period, inspired by his Italian roots.¹⁸

Casella began to reach out to his Italian heritage in other ways. At this point in his life he began in earnest his work as a musical organizer, arranging concerts in Paris of music by contemporary Italian composers. He also began making frequent trips to Italy to organize and play recitals in his home country. In 1915, he received his appointment as a teacher in the Liceo di Santa Cecilia and left for Rome to fill that position. He had spent a total of 19 years in Paris.¹⁹

¹⁷ Casella. *Music in My Time*, 137.

¹⁸ Casella. *Music in My Time*, 104.

¹⁹ Casella, *Alfredo Casella*, 3.

CHAPTER 4

THIRD STYLE

In Italy, Casella began to work toward instigating what he called a "musical revival." He created the *Società Nazionale di Musica*, later renamed *Società Italiana di Musica Moderna* (SIMM), of which Arturo Toscanini was named an honorary president. The aim of the organization was to promote Italian music, both new and old. SIMM was successful in gathering together progressive Italian composers and premiering their works at sometimes controversial concerts.²⁰

At this time, Casella also founded the subversive journal *Ars Nova* for the same purpose. The society and the journal were deemed subversive because of their promotion of experimental and often unpopular modern music. Both were dissolved after three years because of Casella's travels abroad, but Casella had only begun his career as a musical organizer.²¹ SIMM was not the only new music group Casella established. In 1923 he worked with others to create *Corporazione delle Nuove Musiche* (CDNM) or the "New Music Corporation." The CDNM continued Casella's mission of bringing new music to Italy. Most notably, it featured a tour of eight performances of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* across Italy, which he personally organized and conducted.²²

Through these organizations, Casella is credited with the important task of introducing such composers as Schoenberg and Stravinsky to Italy. Also, many Italian composers were heard for the first time in France, Italy, and elsewhere because of Casella's success as a musical organizer and promoter.²³ Gatti described the methods Casella used for promoting new music:

²⁰ J. C. G. Waterhouse, "Puccini's Debt to Casella." xiii, no. 6 (1964-5): 18-19, 44-58.

²¹ John C. G. Waterhouse and Virgilio Bernardoni, "Casella, Alfredo." In *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/05080> (accessed August 20, 2012).

²² Gottfried Boehm, Ulrich Mosch, Katharina Schmidt, and Paul Sacher Stiftung, *Canto d'Amore: Classicism in Modern Art and Music, 1914-1935*, Basel: Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel/Kunstmuseum: Paul Sacher Foundation in association with Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1996.

²³ Guido M. Gatti and Fredrick H. Martens, "Alfredo Casella." *The Musical Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1920): 181.

Casella conducts in person his campaign for modern music filling his concert programmes almost entirely with modern examples, founding societies of modern musicians, editing, reviewing, and collaborating with kindred spirits, always with the sole purpose of making known whatever good thing is found in Italian musical soil, for so many years barren of true musical art.²⁴

Despite his interest in bringing foreign works into his homeland, like so many people in Italy at this time, Casella was swept up in the growing movement of nationalism. Casella was a loyal follower of Mussolini and a supporter of Fascism.²⁵ Even the anti-Semitic tenets of Fascism were espoused by the composer and can be seen throughout his autobiography, though much of this has been edited out of the English translation as distasteful to modern readers.

Casella was not the only composer to be seduced by Fascism; many Italian composers embraced it at this time, and he was praised for the way he portrayed Italian nationalism in his third-period music.²⁶ His motivations seem to align with those of such cultural nationalists as Margherita Sarfatti, Mario Sironi, and Giuseppe Terragni, who looked simultaneously to Italy's past and to a wider European culture to bring new energy to Italy's artistic scene.²⁷ Gatti further clarifies that Casella's mature music is highly individual and independent of the influence of other composers:

By a process of elimination we can easily see that Casella's genius is purely Italian. It has no affinity with any other prevailing at the present day. It is as far removed and as different from Debussy as it is from Stravinsky or Schoenberg: from French Impressionism as from the barbaric primitiveness of 'Petrouchka': and from Stravinsky's pieces for clarinet solo as from the cold science of the Austrian composer.²⁸

Casella was criticized for his decision to be a composer with an "Italian style." In "F. B."s review of Cortese's book on Casella, the question was posed whether one can choose to have a national or international style. He asks, "Is Beethoven less German because he lived in an age

²⁴ Gatti, "Some Italian Composers of to-Day, 469.

²⁵ Nicolas Slonimsky, "Music in My Time; the Memoirs of Alfredo Casella by Spencer Norton; Alfredo Casella." *Notes, Second Series* 12, no. 4 (1955): 588.

²⁶ Slonimsky "Music in My Time," 588.

²⁷ Catherine Paul, "Ezra Pound, Alfredo Casella, and the Fascist Cultural Nationalism of the Vivaldi Revival," *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona* (2008): 93.

²⁸ Gatti, "Some Italian Composers of to-Day," 469.

that had not heard of nationalism and internationalism? Is Verdi essentially Italian because he meant to be so or because he could not be different?"²⁹

By the time of his 1938 autobiography, Casella expressed some growing distaste for nationalism in music. He agreed that the idea that musical composition needs to have a national character in addition to its aesthetic values is strange, and he went on to say that this idea was unknown before the 19th century, when people believed that art, like the human spirit, had no frontiers. He claims that music should have no "customs barriers," and he notes that the rise of artistic nationalism parallels the rise of political nationalism.³⁰

In any case, it is clear that nationalism played a large role in Casella's third compositional style. In 1920, Casella's style changed abruptly; he began to explore his interest in traditional forms, tonality, and harmony. The music is less complicated and he abandons the dense chords and textures of his second style.³¹ His deep interests in his homeland inspired him to explore Italian folk melody and even set Italian dialect to music. This musical change to a more accessible, streamlined sound is described by Waterhouse: "...tense, involuted chromaticism gave place to crisply dissonant diatonicism with incidental chromatic excursions; harmonic experiment gave place to linear textures, underpinned by driving motor rhythms...."³²

Music critic Gianfranco Vinay notes that Casella's vision of modernism cuts a "third way," between a "conservative, traditionalist and provincial tendency towards melodrama" and "international avant-garde modernism," as advanced by Schoenberg. According to Catherine Paul, author of an essay about this period of Casella's life, the "third way," conjoined tradition (ancient, or at least pre-romantic) with modernism (Italian, and therefore tempered).³³ His music of this period does not shy away from heavy dissonance, but throughout, Casella maintains traditional elements, including dominant-tonic relationships. He also maintains structured

²⁹ F. B., "Alfredo Casella by Louis Cortese," *Music & Letters* 18, no. 2 (1937): 214.

³⁰ Casella. *Music in My Time*, 227-8.

³¹ Alberto Ghislanzoni, "Alfredo Casella Nel Venticinquesimo Della Morte," *Il Mondo Della Musica* x, no. 1 (1972): 28.

³² Waterhouse "Casella, Alfredo."

³³ Paul, "Ezra Pound, Alfredo Casella, and the Fascist Cultural Nationalism of the Vivaldi Revival," 94.

melodies and simplified accompaniments, so that the texture is thinner and the music remains simpler and easier to grasp, despite the sometimes eclectic harmony. This lighter texture, combined with his folk-like melodies, makes the music more accessible. He extracted from the techniques of Stravinsky and Schoenberg during the Second Period, but did not give in to these techniques entirely; rather, he used them as he wanted in creating his own neoclassical style.³⁴

This third period is where Casella stands out most distinctly as having his own individual style. Due to this dramatic change, he is compared by some to Paul Hindemith, Arthur Honegger, and Walter Piston, all of whom made dramatic turns away from modernist music in their later lives in favor of strongly neoclassical styles.³⁵

This transition occurred only five years after Casella left Paris for a musically more conservative Italy. While it is impossible to know how much a role the musical tastes of his native country played in his return to a simpler style, it is clear that Casella wished to disassociate himself from the Second Viennese School and French Impressionism in the name of creating something that could be truly *Italian*.³⁶

These changes are instantly clear in the two major collections of vocal works from this period, *Tre canzoni trecentesche*, and *Quattro Favole di Trilussa*, which are strikingly similar. Casella's mature style was already in full swing by 1923 when *Tre canzoni trecentesche* was composed. These songs are settings of two anonymous poems from the 13th century and one poem by Cino da Pistoia, an Italian poet from the same period.³⁷ The song to be examined here is the third of the set, "Amante sono, vaghiccias, di voi." The text is a playful appeal from a fieldworker to a girl he hopes to attract:

³⁴ Slonimsky, "Music in My Time," 588.

³⁵ "Alfredo Casella (1883-1947) Sinfonia (Symphony no. 3), Op. 63; Elegia Eroica," http://www.naxos.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/mainsite/blurbs_reviews.asp?item_code=8.572415&catNum=572415&filetype>About%20this%20Recording&language=English. (accessed August 7, 2012).

³⁶ Gottfried Boehm, *Canto d'Amore*, 198.

³⁷ M. Carnelli, et al, *Liriche del novecento Italiano: per voce acuta e pianoforte, Italian art songs of the 20th century: for high voice and piano*. Milano: Ricordi, 2005.

Amante sono, vaghiccias, di voi;
 Quando vi veggio tutto mi divoro.
 Esco del campo, quando io lavoro,
 E come un pazzo vo gridando oi... oi...
 Poi corro corro, e ò digiunto i buoi;
 E vo pensando di voi, chè non lavoro.

I love you, dear girl;
 I'm on fire when I see you.
 I leave the fields during work,
 And like a madman cry out
 Then I run and run, and I release the oxen
 And I think only of you, ignoring my work.

Voi siete piú luciente che l'oro.
 E siete piú bella ch'un fior di ginestra,
 E siete piú dolce che no è 'l cerconcello

You're more luminous than gold.
 And more pretty than broom in blossom,
 And you're sweeter than a liqueur.

Dè, fatevi un poco alla finestra;
 Ch'io vi prometto ch'al vostro porcello
 Drò delle ghiande una piena canestra,
 E anche vi dico che al vostro vitello
 Drò della paglia una piena canestra.
 E a voi madonna contanto dolciata,
 Vi darò, Vi darò un ... un cesto d'insalata.

Come on, show yourself at the window;
 And I promise that by your pigsty
 I'll leave a basketful of acorns,
 And I tell you I'll also give your calf
 A whole basketful of straw.
 And to you, my dear sweet lady,
 I'll give you... a basketful of lettuce.³⁸

"Amante sono" is perfect example of the "third way" mentioned earlier by Vinay. The opening is diatonic, and its 6/8 lilt supports the pastoral scene of the text. After its short introduction the piano spends the next measures repeating a one-measure vamp consisting of diatonic triads that return to a C-Major chord on every downbeat (Example 9). The vocal line also reinforces C Major by repeatedly moving from G to C and back.

Example 9: Bass vamp with G - C melody, "Amante sono," mm. 9-11.³⁹

The image shows a musical score for the song "Amante sono". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The time signature is 3/4. The vocal line starts with the lyrics "so.no, vaghiccias, di voi; Quando vi veg - gio tut.to mi di -". The piano accompaniment features a bass vamp with a G-C melody, consisting of diatonic triads that return to a C-Major chord on every downbeat.

³⁸ Carnelli, *Liriche del novecento Italiano*.

³⁹ By request of publisher: Alfredo Casella - Amante sono, vaghiccias, di voi, (da Tre canzoni trecentesche) for piano and high voice. Copyright 1923 by courtesy of Casa Ricordi Srl.

The vamp changes in m. 11, creating a half cadence in measure 12. The voice's short bursts separated by rests make the narrator sound excited and breathless. These bursts work upward and peak with "oi, oi," the narrator's cries of insanity (Example 10). With these cries, the piano changes from triads to dissonant but still diatonic added-tone chords (Example 10, m. 17).
 Example 10: First melodic & harmonic shift, "Amante sono," mm 15-17.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Amante sono" from measures 15 to 17. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single staff with lyrics: "E co.me paz - zo vo gridan - do oi". The piano accompaniment is written in two staves (treble and bass clef). The score includes time signature changes: 3/4, 2/2, and 5/4. There are triplets in both the vocal and piano parts. A "molto f" marking is present in the piano part. The score is numbered 15 at the beginning.

This change begins a musical intensification in which the piano's figures become denser and the triplets get closer together. This increased activity supports the rising excitement of the text, in which the narrator describes running from the fields, unable to work anymore because of his preoccupation with his love. The piano stops abruptly with an empty measure, leaving the singer alone to complete "I think only of you, ignoring my work."

At a slower tempo, the narrator begins to describe how wonderful his lover is and all of the gifts he will give to her and her livestock. The piano abandons its diatonicism and its sustained chords become complex, as though a parody of recitative accompaniment (Example 11).

Example 11: Abrupt change in musical texture, "Amante sono," mm. 23-24.

Musical score for Example 11, showing a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The score is in 4/4 time, marked *Assai più lento* ($\text{♩} = \text{circa } \text{♩} \text{ prec.}$) *mp appassionato ed insinuante*. The tempo changes abruptly to 3/4 time. The lyrics are: "Voi sie - te più lu - cien - te che l'o - ro." The piano accompaniment is marked *mp ma sonoro*.

The song continues this crazed mock recitative until the final two measures of the song, when the narrator presumably has made up his mind to approach his lover with a gift of lettuce (Example 12). This decision jars both the singer and the pianist. The voice slides down a C-Major scale while the piano quickly closes on a C-Major triad

Example 12: Return of opening texture, "Amante sono," mm. 43-45.

Musical score for Example 12, showing a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The score is in 2/2 time, marked *a tempo* *f deciso, a piena voce*. The tempo changes abruptly to *Tempo del principio (Vivace assai)* ($\text{♩} = \text{circa } \text{♩} \text{ prec.}$). The lyrics are: "un ce - sto d'in - sa - la - ta." The piano accompaniment is marked *sf* and *ff*.

CHAPTER 5

POSSIBLE FOURTH STYLE

In 1942 Casella suffered his first bout with the disease that would take his life. His unnamed disease did little to slow his compositional output, and many of his important compositions were written during 1942 and 1943. After Casella's illness, his musical style took another turn, which some have suggested could be the beginning of his development towards a fourth style.⁴⁰ Previously, Casella spent a good portion of his life denying the influence of Schoenberg and the twelve-tone system. He remained forever intrigued with it, however, as he said in his autobiography:

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of Schoenberg caused me serious waverings for several years.... There was a period during which my conviction that the 12 tone system was the supreme goal of modern evolution tended to increase.... Dodecaphony remained for me a subject of strong admiration, but as a musical principle it was forever extraneous to my art as a composer.⁴¹

Both *Tre canti sacri per baritono et organo* (Op. 66, published in 1943) and the *Missa solennis* (Op. 71, published in 1944) contain quasi-serial chromaticism.⁴² Taking Casella's own writing into account, it is likely that these two "Fourth Period" vocal works were experimental, undertaken when he saw his life was coming to a close, rather than an actual fourth style. They gave Casella the opportunity to explore a style that had entranced him his entire life, but which he had avoided until then. Gatti supports this idea, describing the sudden change as a return to "the first pages" of tension, brought on by desire for exploration and conquest reintroduced into his life by his illness.⁴³

The other new turn Casella made with these two pieces was a change to a more religious tone. Both *Tre canti sacri per baritono et organo* and the *Missa solennis* are settings of religious texts, something not previously explored in Casella's music.⁴⁴ *Tre canti sacri* was composed in 1942 in response to what Ghislanzoni describes as a "profound change of heart," which brought

⁴⁰ Waterhouse, "Casella, Alfredo."

⁴¹ Casella, *Music in My Time*, 106.

⁴² Waterhouse, "Casella, Alfredo."

⁴³ Guido M. Gatti and Abram Loft, "In Memory of Alfredo Casella (1887-1947)," *The Musical Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1947): 407.

⁴⁴ Fedele D'Amico and Guido M. Gatti, *Alfredo Casella*, Milano: Ricordi, 1958, 24.

Casella closer to religion.⁴⁵ This turn towards religious thought is not uncommon at the end of a composer's life. All of this is described in short by Gatti and Fedele d'Amico:

Casella refused to give in to the sickness and immobility of the body, continuing to play, compose, and read until he couldn't any longer... From there was born *Tre canti sacri*, the first of his pages of religious content....⁴⁶

The first song in *Tre canti sacri per baritono et organo* is "Ecce odor filii mei." It is a setting of a text from the Vulgate, St. Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible. The opening line is from Genesis 27:27-28; the text then jumps to Genesis 28:3. Casella somewhat abbreviates these verses, which appear in the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate as:

Behold the smell of my son is as the smell of a plentiful field, which the Lord hath blessed. God give thee the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, abundance of corn and wine.... And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee to increase, and multiply thee: that thou mayst be a multitude of people.⁴⁷

This text, while strange to most modern readers, draws on metaphors common to an ancient Hebrew audience. The Biblical Hebrews burnt offerings to raise a pleasant smell to the Lord, representing prayers rising to God.

In the text, Isaac is blessing his son Jacob, who is pretending to be his older brother Esau in order to secure the blessing of the firstborn. Isaac smells Jacob's garment and smells the field in which he works. This is also a metaphor for judgment, in which it is believed God will bless those who have worked in his metaphorical field here on earth. It is not hard to understand Casella's setting a song about judgment and blessings on Jacob's progeny after the composer's sudden confrontation with his own mortality.

At the beginning of "Ecce odor" Casella depicts the image of rising smoke. The organ introduction presents a six-tone, quasi-serial subject in imitation that grows into dense polyphony (Example 13).

⁴⁵ Ghislanzoni, "Alfredo Casella Nel Venticinquesimo Della Morte," 38.

⁴⁶ D'Amico, *Alfredo Casella*, 24.

⁴⁷ Gen. 27:27-28, Gen. 28:3.

Example 13: Six note subject, "Ecce odor filii mei," mm. 1-2.⁴⁸



Each new subject joins in at the height of the previous one, shaping the music into a rising contour. Once it reaches the peak in m. 6 the passage descends until m. 11, where the pedal seems to get stuck on a repeated half step for the next five measures (Example 14). There is one more ascent, from m. 10 to m.16, before the treble line joins the bass with its own repeating motive. These repeating figures slow the pace, and the polyphony gives way to slow chords.

Example 14: Rising and falling from the introduction, *Ecce odor filii mei*, mm. 5-14.



The independence of the musical lines and the broad range suggest orchestration, and in that same year Casella did publish an orchestral version, *Tre canti sacri per baritono e piccola orchestra* (Op. 67). The primary melodic instruments he uses are clarinets and a bassoon, and

⁴⁸ Copyright by Sugarmusic S.p.A. – Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, Milan, Italy.

the half steps of the pedal are played by the timpani. Even though Casella assigned an earlier opus number to the organ version, it is apparent that his conception of the work was orchestral.

The voice when it enters is chant-like, frequently returning to A. The chromatic polyphony in the organ is immediately replaced by diatonic chords that support the voice's modal melody. There are no further hints of serialism in this song, although Casella continues to introduce serialism into the other songs of the set.

The chromatic opening, followed by the diatonic vocal line, could be a musical expression of the deception Jacob is playing on his father by pretending to be Esau to steal the birthright. The convoluted opening gives way to the chant-like words of blessing by the patriarch, who seems to be unaware of the deception and gives his holy blessing in simplicity.

In the remainder of "Ecce odor filii mei" the voice sings three more chant-like phrases, each suggesting a different church mode. The organ fills in between these phrases with interludes (Example 15, mm. 25 and 29).

Example 15: Modal voice phrase with chordal accompaniment and organ interludes, "Ecce odor filii mei," mm. 25-29.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Ecce odor filii mei" (mm. 25-29). It consists of three staves: a vocal line at the top, a piano accompaniment in the middle, and an organ interlude at the bottom. The vocal line begins with a chromatic opening and then moves to a diatonic melody. The organ accompaniment consists of chordal textures. The lyrics are: "crescere te fa - ciat De.us me.us si.cut a - re - nam ma.ris; et". The organ interludes are marked "piu dolce".

The third vocal phrase returns to the diatonicism of the first (Example 16, mm. 30-32). A longer organ interlude in mm. 33-36 re-introduces the rising motive, but now in the form of a diatonic melody with sustained chords. The last of these, in m. 36, is a G⁹ that moves to a C-Major triad with the start of the final vocal phrase. The song to this point travels from a quasi-serial opening to a moment of tonal focus.

Example 16: Diatonic voice phrase and re-introduction of the rising motive, "Ecce odor filii mei," mm. 30-36.

The image shows a musical score for a voice and organ. The top staff is the vocal line, written in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 6/8 time signature. The lyrics are: "do.net ti.bi de ro.re coeli... be.ne.di.cti.o . nem." The bottom two staves are the organ accompaniment, written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The organ part features a prominent diatonic melody in the right hand, with a rising motive. The word "dolce" is written above the organ part, indicating a soft and sweet playing style. The score is divided into measures, with some measures containing rests for the voice.

The final voice phrase, in mm. 37-42, continues the organ's diatonic melody and ends on an A-minor triad. The organ ends the song with a long postlude that begins with echoes of the voice's closing melody. At m. 48 the meter returns to the 6/8 of the organ's introduction. Marked *dolce, pastorale*, the style changes to that of a slow dance, still diatonic and over a C pedal. Chromatic pitches return in m. 53, and the postlude ends with a recall of the six-note chromatic subject, still over the C pedal. While the melody rises again, the pedal in mm. 57-58 moves to F and returns to C for the final three measures. This plagal cadence finishes on a C-Major triad with 4-3 and 2-3 appoggiaturas, a cliché magnified by its contrast with the highly chromatic language of much of the organ part.

The next five years of Casella's life were what Gatti and Loft describe as a violent struggle against death.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Casella continued to compose until 1944 and to conduct and perform as a pianist until three weeks before his death on March 5th, 1947, at the age of 64.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Gatti, "In Memory of Alfredo Casella (1887-1947)," 407.

⁵⁰ Waterhouse "Casella, Alfredo."

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Casella composed approximately sixteen song sets for solo voice and piano. This paper has focused on only a few songs, selected to represent each of his compositional periods. Should the reader wish to explore this repertoire further, several of his other songs are still in print and readily available.

In addition to *Cinq Mélodies*, Casella published six short song sets in his first period, each of them stylistically similar to "Larmes." *La cloche fêlée* for voice and piano (Op. 7) and *Deux chansons anciennes*, also for voice and piano (Op. 22), are both in publication and are good examples of Casella's first style. The latter set is significantly lighter in character than "Larmes" and consists of tuneful settings of a lullaby and another similar text.

In Casella's second style, *L'adieu à la vie*, the set from which "Mort, ta servante" was taken, is one of the two major vocal works from this period. The other song set, *Notte di Maggio* (Op. 20), was published in 1913, and is a relatively easy score to find, although it is available only for voice and orchestra. Two of the other three songs from *L'adieu à la vie* are very similar to "Mort, ta servante." The third song, "A cette heure du départ," stands out from the set because of its upbeat tempo and somewhat lighter affect.

Casella's mature style has three major song sets, all published in 1923. *Tre canzoni trecentesche* (Op. 36) and *Quattro Favole Romanesche* (Op. 38) are more well-known and have received more praise, followed by *La sera Fiesolana* (Op. 37). All three sets are strikingly similar, and the latter two were published with instrumental accompaniment as well as piano.

The song "Ecce odor filii mei" from *Tre canti sacri per baritono et organo*, along with the other two songs in the set and their orchestral versions, are the only solo vocal work from Casella's end-of-life compositions. Each of the other two songs in the set takes on one of the contrasting characteristics from "Ecce odor filii mei." The second song is more chromatic and continues Casella's exploration of serialism, while the third set is more diatonic, resembling a traditional church song.

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