

Cedille Records
CDR 90000 003

**ALFREDO
CASELLA**

Sonatina, Op. 28*
Nove Pezzi, Op. 24*†

**KAROL
SZYMANOWSKI**

Masques, Op. 34

Easley
Blackwood,
piano

*First digital recording

†First time on
compact disc



DDD Absolutely Digital CDR 90000 003
PIANO MUSIC OF ALFREDO CASELLA (1883-1947)
AND KAROL SZYMANOWSKI (1882-1937)

1-3	Casella:	Sonatina, Op. 28 (1916)	(10:37)
		1 I. Allegro con spirito	(3:33)
		2 II. Minuetto	(1:59)
		3 III. Finale	(4:55)
4-6	Szymanowski:	Masques, Op. 34 (1916)	(21:58)
		4 I. Sheherazade	(10:08)
		5 II. Tantris le Bouffon	(5:50)
		6 III. Serenade de Don Juan	(5:51)
7-15	Casella:	Nove Pezzi, Op. 24 (1914)	(28:22)
		7 1. In Modo Funebre	(3:22)
		8 2. In Modo Barbaro	(1:46)
		9 3. In Modo Elegiaco	(4:05)
		10 4. In Modo Burlesco	(1:02)
		11 5. In Modo Esotico	(3:46)
		12 6. In Modo di Nenia	(2:08)
		13 7. In Modo di Minuetto	(2:53)
		14 8. In Modo di Tango	(5:03)
		15 9. In Modo Rustico	(3:36)

Easley Blackwood, Piano

TT: (61:17)

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Printed in Canada Front Cover: The Armored Train, by Gino Severini (1915)

Casella and Szymanowski: The Spread of Musical Modernism

The pairing of the Italian composer Alfredo Casella (1883-1947) and the Polish Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) is not as unlikely as it might seem at first glance. Both absorbed the cosmopolitan influences of pre-World War I Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, and correspondingly were at first thoroughly committed to an international modernism. Both were active in promoting the new music of the day in their own countries, later to become ardent patriots who absorbed and helped to redefine the musical heritage of their respective lands. Both Casella and Szymanowski, like Stravinsky, Berg, Webern, and Bartok, were born in the early 1880s, and came to maturity just before the First World War. The relatively stable social and political situation before the war enabled a whole generation to spend its formative years in an environment highly conducive to cross-fertilization and interaction among artists and patrons. Once the war started, most were

forced abruptly into isolation. Paradoxically, this time of unprecedented destruction produced Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and *L'Histoire du Soldat*, Webern's *Trakl* songs, Satie's *Parade*, Ives's *Concord Sonata*, Schoenberg's *Jacobsleiter*, and Berg's *Wozzeck*, some of the most individual and forward-looking works of the twentieth century. Perhaps as a consequence of being thrust onto their own resources, composers during this period extended their musical languages beyond all previous limits.

With his *Nove Pezzi* (Nine Pieces), Op. 24 (1914), and the *Sonatina*, Op. 28 (1916), Casella plunged into a kind of avant-garde experimentation characteristic of so many during the war years. Both pieces exhibit extremely dense textures leading to the edge of atonality; their advanced musical language is shared by Casella's contemporaneous *Pagine de Guerra*, Op. 25 (1915) and the *Elegia eroica*, Op. 29 (1916), both explicitly intended as responses to the war. The compositions from 1914 through 1918 display an individuality and imagination that Casella was not to equal later. After 1920, he retreated to a brittle and constructivist neo-classicism, and in the 1930s, he was to entertain more than a mild flirtation with facism, most notable in his 1937 opera *Il deserto tentato*, written in homage to Mussolini.

In spite of an uneven career, Casella as a composer, pianist, conductor, and organizer was one of the most important figures in Italian music before 1945. From his youth a precocious pianist, he served for many years as professor of piano at the Liceo de Santa Cecilia in Rome. He had spent the previous twenty years in Paris; at the Conservatoire, he took first prize in piano and attended Faure's composition class. In France, Casella was able to hear the most recent works of Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and Bartok, all of whom had a major impact on Casella's increasingly individual style. In 1915, at the age of thirty-two, Casella returned to Italy with a mission: to expose the somewhat reluctant, opera-infatuated Italian public to the new music of Europe. To this end, Casella, with his colleagues Malipiero, Pizzetti, Respighi, and Castelnuovo-Tedesco, founded the *Societa Italiana di Musica Moderna*, which was dedicated to performing their own works as well as the latest new music from France and Germany. Casella and Malipiero later formed another group, the *Corporazione delle Nuove Musiche*, which toured Italy with Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and Stravinsky's *Les Noces*.

Casella's *Sonatina* for piano has three movements: *Allegro con Spirito*, *Minuetto*, and *Finale*. The first movement is notable for its extreme density; block chords of up to nine voices permeate the texture. The non-developmental form of the movement is also striking. Instead of tying the piece together by linear or motivic progression, Casella explores the juxtaposition of two practically opposite musical ideas without attempting to reconcile them. The first idea -- it appears in too many guises to be called a "theme" -- is a driving, staccato figure in a readily graspable dotted rhythm. The figure does not center around any one tonic, but instead is built on successive notes of the diminished seventh chord C-Eb-F#-A, which is often reduced to a pedal C-F# in the bass. The second idea, massive vertical sonorities built up of fourths and tritones, contrasts with the rhythmically driving first idea as if it were taken from another piece. Marked *Ad libitum*.

Appassionato e rubato assai, con molto fantasia and notated without bar lines, these interludes proceed freely, with the many indications for *accelerando*, *ritardando*, and

stringendo disguising any underlying meter. A sardonic Minuetto follows, which first sets up, then undermines one's expectations of minuet rhythm and meter. The virtuoso finale, marked *Veloce molto*, owes much to Stravinsky, particularly to the vein of grotesquerie found in Petroushka. The rapid figuration, based on the C# pentatonic scale, is interrupted once for a literal restatement of the *ad libitum* idea from the first movement. Near the end, the tempo slows to *Tempos di marcia grave e solenne*; according to the composer, this passage is meant to evoke the tragic Chinese march in Act II, Scene 2 of Carlo Gozzi's play, *Turandot*. The work ends with a dense chordal gesture spanning almost the whole range of the piano.

Casella's *Nove Pezzi*, Op.24 almost form an anthology of the techniques considered advanced in 1914. Each of the "Nine Pieces" carries a dedication; Nos. 3 and 9 were dedicated to Italian composers who were friends and contemporaries, Ildebrando Pizzetti and Francesco Malipiero, respectively. In several of the pieces, the neo-primitivism of Bartok's *Allegro Barbaro* and Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* is evident; Nos. 2 and 9, appropriately titled "In Modo Barbaro" and "In Modo Rustico," feature powerfully rhythmic ostinatos and brief, narrow-ranged melodies. Other pieces offer wry transformations of dance rhythms, most notably the longest piece in the set, No. 8 ("In Modo di Tango"). No. 6 ("In Modo di Nenia"), dedicated to Ravel, is a quiet, contemplative *Berceuse* with a modal flavor. The tour de force of the set, though, is the first piece. Dedicated to Stravinsky, and entitled "In Modo Funebre," the work avoids the parodistic tendencies of some of the other movements and confronts the problem of atonality head on. Here the texture is so dense that the pianist is often required to read four staves; yet the high level of dissonance is controlled by an extraordinary control of rhythm and phrase direction. Casella wrote later, "But if my old and firm Latin instincts preserved me from the extremes of the Viennese composers, I can still frankly admit that for several years I regarded atonality as a natural and inevitable outcome of the whole evolution of music"¹

Like Casella, Szymanowski had just returned to his homeland after years of living abroad as he began to write his most experimental music. For Szymanowski, travels outside Europe, to Algiers, Constantine, Tunis, and other "exotic" places were a means to shake off the mantle of German influence imparted to him both from training and early predilection. In a 1922 article entitled "My Splendid Isolation," Szymanowski wrote: "I am aware that it is difficult to rid oneself of a valued foreign treasure, but one must do so if one is to discover one's own jewels."² His studies of Arabic and ancient Western cultures provided the inspiration for several compositions from these years, including the *Symphony No. 3* (1914-16), based on Arabic poems and the *Myths* for violin and piano (1915), which illustrate scenes from Greek mythology.

In the solitude forced upon him by the war, Szymanowski read widely in addition to composing in a steady stream. Each of the three pieces in *Masques* (1916) -- *Sheherazade*, *Tantris le Bouffon*, and *Serenade de Don Juan* -- has a literary model, but are not simply loose impressions from literature. Rather, they seem clearly-drawn musical depictions of characters, lending them specific identities just as a mask would an actor. The first (and longest), *Sheherazade*, initially evokes the languorous beauty of the

Sultan's storyteller in sonorities reminiscent of Debussy. Contrasting episodes, each built on the continuous transformation of small motivic cells, depict the various tales related by the narrator of the thousand and one tales of the Arabian Nights. A sense of key, though quite clear in some passages, is equally often obscured; instead, pedal points, often centered around A, repeat insistently and unobtrusively, with an Oriental inevitability. The second piece, *Tantris le Bouffon*, is based on Ernst Hardt's 1906 Tristan parody, *Tantris der Narr*. In the play, the Tristan character never appears as himself, but uses two identities (or masks), one of which is "the strange [or foreign] fool" (*der fremde Narr*). Szymanowski writes a further parody of the favorite Romantic love story by interrupting moments of great lyricism with passages of almost ribald burlesque. Szymanowski dedicated the third piece, *Serenade de Don Juan*, to his close friend, the pianist Artur Schnabel. The *Serenade* begins with a long, unbarred cadenza representing Don Juan playing under a lady's window. As if inspired by its opening, the piece itself unfolds in improvisatory fashion, as though the Don were making occasional digressions during his serenade to reminisce about past exploits. Fragments of the original serenade music recur between more metrically organized episodes; the result is an elaborate and virtuosic tone poem for piano.

-- Anne Shreffler
Professor of Music
University of Chicago

1Jim Samson, *Music in Transition: A Study of Tonal Expansion and Atonality 1900-1920* (New York: Norton, 1977), 77.

2Karol Szymanowski and Jan Smolcynski: *Correspondence and Essays*, trans., ed, and annotated by B.M. Maciejewski and Felix Aprahamian (London: Allegro Press, n.d.), 93.

About The Performer

Born in Indianapolis in 1933, Easley Blackwood is a true Renaissance man in the world of music. A Professor at the University of Chicago since 1958, Blackwood received his musical training from such legendary figures as Olivier Messiaen, Paul Hindemith (at Yale, where Blackwood earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in 1953 and 1954), and Nadia Boulanger. While Blackwood is best known as a composer and also renowned as a leading theorist in the fields of harmony and microtonal tunings, Baker's *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* observes that "Blackwood is an accomplished pianist, particularly notable for his performances of modern works of transcendental difficulty" (which the compositions on this disc certainly are). Critical responses to Blackwood's recitals, which have included such technical monsters as Ives' *Concord Sonata* and the *Second Sonata* of Pierre Boulez (on the same program!), speak for themselves:

"... a pianist of power, polish, and poise in complete control." Chicago Tribune

"One of the most intelligent and stimulating pianists of our time."
Manchester Guardian

"Mr. Blackwood has a virtually complete understanding of each piece, of its technical and emotional processes, and of the interpretation of the two, a point emphasized by his constant beauty of tone."
The London Times

Mr. Blackwood also serves as pianist with the Grammy Award-winning Chicago Pro Musica, a chamber group comprised of members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Blackwood.