

NAXOS

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari

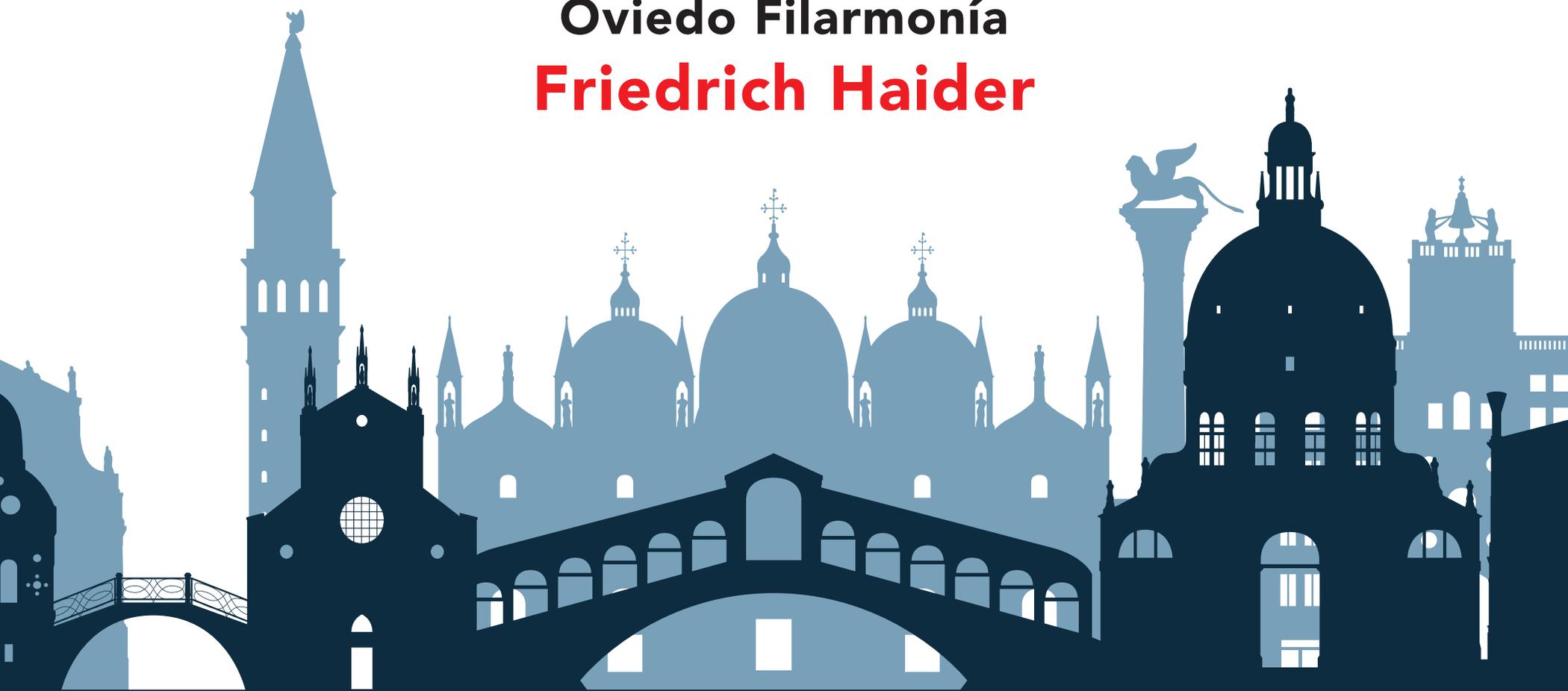
SUITE VENEZIANA

TRIPTYCHON • DIVERTIMENTO

ARABESKEN

Oviedo Filarmonía

Friedrich Haider



Ermanno
WOLF-FERRARI

(1876–1948)

Suite veneziana, Op. 18 (1935)	17:26
1 I. In laguna	4:38
2 II. Barcarola	2:24
3 III. Notturmo – Canali solitari	5:51
4 IV. Alba di festa	4:33
Triptychon in E major, Op. 19 (1936)	15:44
5 I. In excelsis	8:13
6 II. Agli eroi caduti	3:41
7 III. Preghiera	3:50
Divertimento in D major, Op. 20 (1936)	19:10
8 I. Variazioni su un Tema capriccioso	6:30
9 II. Canzone pastorale	3:43
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12 Arabesken in E minor, Op. 22 (1937)	11:12

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Ermanno WOLF-FERRARI (1876–1948)

Suite veneziana • Triptychon • Divertimento • Arabesken

On the trail of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari with Friedrich Haider

I became hopelessly addicted to the music of the German-Italian composer Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari after coming across a piano score to the opera *Susanna's Secret* in a second hand bookshop. The work so inspired me that, soon thereafter, I conducted a highly acclaimed production of it at Munich's Prinzregententheater. Since then I have intensely studied the entire *oeuvre* of the maestro, who 'transplanted' 18th-century Venetian culture into the 20th century, thereby becoming one of the most popular opera composers in the world.

Sources of inspiration for Wolf-Ferrari included the Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni, *Commedia dell'arte*, and composers such as Monteverdi, Galuppi, Pergolesi and Cimarosa as well as Bach and Mozart. Up until the outbreak of the First World War, Wolf-Ferrari's works were standard repertoire in leading opera houses across Europe in Munich, Berlin, Paris, London, Vienna, Prague and Budapest, and even in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. The greatest conductors of the age, including Mahler, Toscanini, Walter, Knappertsbusch and Krauss all eagerly performed his operas. That he should eventually fall into oblivion is nothing short of amazing.

Aside from Munich, Ottobrunn and Krailling (the Bavarian residences of the composer), it was Venice, Wolf-Ferrari's place of birth, that always remained the emotional centre of his life. In 1903, at the age of just 27, he was named director of the Liceo Musicale Benedetto Marcello, the city's conservatory. He was appointed to the position for life, though he resigned six years later, feeling that it brought him 'neither glory nor money'. Another reason must have been that he had meanwhile become a world-renowned opera composer, and that such a position cost him vital time to compose. With *Le donne curiose* ('The Curious Women') at Munich's Residenztheater he landed his first spectacular success. The music world was confronted with a style that struck a completely new musical idiom by alluding to historical forms – an idiom that redefined 'modernity' or, rather, revealed the term to be absurd.

In my view Wolf-Ferrari's music demonstrates perfectly that 'modernity' and 'progressiveness' in art do not exist because such terms completely miss the point of the true character of a work of art. Especially in the early 20th century, musical 'progress' was almost always defined solely in terms of developments regarding harmony and form. Wolf-Ferrari expressed himself just as he had to. And for him, that meant with a diatonic scale, whereas many of his contemporaries were of the misguided belief that merely employing twelve-tone music guaranteed a 'progressive' masterpiece. An artist doesn't have to make concessions to anyone. He must and can follow only his own inner laws. Indeed, Wolf-Ferrari refused any attempt to define art. He himself believed that anyone who was ultimately able to define a work of art had already abandoned the realm of art altogether: 'The wonder can be felt,' he wrote, 'but not seen.'

Venice was undoubtedly considered the lifeblood of Wolf-Ferrari's creativity and artistic spirit. Works such as *I quattro rusteghi* ('School for Fathers'; premiere in 1906 at the Munich Hoftheater) and *Il campiello* ('The Little Square', 1936, La Scala, Milan) are thoroughly rooted in Venetian folk traditions. These operas are not grand, dramatic stories,

but rather sketches of various social environments. They centre on everyday life as it is inhabited by genuine people. The vitality of these works lies in the loving detail shown for their characters. Humour and irony are cultivated in such a remarkable way that one is confronted with the appearance of a new, highly individual art form. Wolf-Ferrari was also a master of melody, perhaps one of the very last. His vocal lines were heard around the world no sooner than they had been composed. The famous *Campiello* theme was sung by throngs of people as a final farewell to the composer during his funeral procession through the canals of Venice. These enchanting melodies embody Wolf-Ferrari's love of Venice and its people – a Venice that is not merely a backdrop, but an authentic part of his being. It is said that Wolf-Ferrari always responded in German when spoken to in that language. Yet the more heated a conversation became, the more he unintentionally switched to Italian. And in his most emotional moments, he would lapse into his Venetian dialect!

On a trip to Venice in 2007 I had my first meeting with descendants of Wolf-Ferrari – his two grandnieces. In addition to original scores, letters, and personal diaries, I was also privy to the drawings the young man completed when he was studying painting. It seemed like a forgone conclusion at the time that Ermanno Wolf (the composer's Christian name) would follow in the footsteps of his father, the German painter August Wolf. He first began his artistic training at art schools in Rome and Munich, yet the 16-year-old was so drawn to music that he soon gave up drawing and took the entrance exam for the Munich Conservatory, where he was accepted into the class of the renowned counterpoint teacher Joseph Rheinberger. I also inspected an enlightening document: the first edition of the *Serenade for String Orchestra*, the rights to which had been bought by the publisher Steingraber for the sum of 150 Reichsmarks shortly before Wolf-Ferrari's completed his studies. This, the composer's first published work, also happens to mark the birth of his double-barrelled surname. Since the name 'Wolf' was just as popular in Germany as the name 'Ferrari' in Italy, the young maestro decided to adopt a pseudonym. It was in this way that he came to unite the family names of his two parents.

Suite veneziana, Op. 18 (1935)

It is astonishing that all of his published orchestral works were created in the autumn of his life, the one exception being his *Serenade for String Orchestra*. Yet between this stroke of genius of an 18-year-old and the later suites, Wolf-Ferrari devoted almost all of his artistic energy to opera. *Suite veneziana, Op. 18*, is the first of four small orchestral suites that he wrote between 1935 and 1939. Far removed from the composer of blithe Goldoni operas, the work carries its listeners into a completely different expressive realm. Wolf-Ferrari was beset by many worries during the years leading up to the Second World War: a heart condition, the economic crises, and the stagnating rate of performances of his works. We thus have four movements immersed in the sounds of a darkness that light can scarcely penetrate. Melancholy and tender grief dictate the piece's idiom. A *Serenatella* for voice and accompaniment, begun years earlier though never completed, illustrates the prevailing mood of the first movement:

Il melanconico desio mi prende
E da lontano colomba amata
vengo a portarti la serenata!
Luna risplendi! Gigli accompagnate
la serenata delle serenate!

*The yearning seizes me
And from afar, my beloved dove,
I bring you my serenade!
Shine, moon! Lilies, accompany
The hymn of the serenades!*

Wolf-Ferrari substituted the part for voice of this unpublished lied with a solo violin. An atmosphere of night also surrounds the second and third movements of the work. *Barcarola* is a Venetian gondola song, and a *Notturmo* transports its listeners in 'lonely canals', only to disappear into nothingness. Even in the fourth movement, *Alba di festa* ('Festive Dawn'), the composer dispenses with true joy. In a first draft, he only called the simple, lingering main theme a *canzone* ('song'), which also drifts off repeatedly into sombre ambiguity.

In the *Venetian Suite* historical Venice becomes almost palpable. Venice is a city that lives in an eternally unreal state of beauty and splendour borne not only of the desire to strive for artistic perfection but an addiction to the display of power obtained by means of intrigue, conquest, torture and capital punishment. Even today, many Venetians avoid certain places because they are reminded of the dark sides of their history. The *Suite veneziana* is composed in A minor, the parallel minor key to the bright and pure C major, its 'underside' so to speak, allowing the music also to resonate with fear and trepidation.

Triptychon in E major, Op. 19 (1936)

Many of Venice's *campi* ('squares') are associated with a church and its *campanile* ('free-standing belfry'), which shape the atmosphere of the entire *parrocchia* ('parish'). It seems safe to say that Wolf-Ferrari was motivated to dedicate an orchestral work to three Venetian churches not merely by an idea for an illustrative work, but rather by a desire to express his emotional and intellectual bond with the origins of Venice. *Le chiese di Venezia* ('The Churches of Venice') is a paean to the three churches of San Marco, Santa Maria dei Miracoli and Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. The work, however, remained unfinished, the composer having completed only rough sketches. Wolf-Ferrari died unexpectedly in Venice while at work on 21 January 1948.

I believe that the idea for *The Churches of Venice* is already present in the first movement of the *Triptych, Op. 19*. The first movement, *In excelsis*, opens with an unaccompanied choral theme that is repeated several times and contrapuntally accented by violins almost continuously in a type of chaconne. Visions of heavenly choirs of angels materialise, just as we are accustomed to them radiating from paintings in Venetian churches. Even from the very first bars listeners can feel the church's interior, which then seems to be pervaded by the sound of an organ as the music continues to gain in force. A masterpiece of instrumentation! The second movement, *Agli eroi caduti* ('For the Fallen Heroes'), is a lament, an expression of grief composed in E flat minor. A great funeral procession passes us by like our own unavoidable fate. The *Pregghiera* ('Prayer'), played by a solo violin, brings the piece to its contemplative and, at times, passionate close. It is not known if the composer chose the title *Triptych* because he had a specific painting of a three-panelled winged altar in mind, or if it was simply meant to reflect the cohesiveness of the three movements. Wolf-Ferrari has not provided us with any clues. From one of his letters we only learn that he regarded the work very highly, and considered it to be 'Apollonian'.

Divertimento in D major, Op. 20 (1936)

Even if the *Divertimento, Op. 20* once again strikes a mournful chord in the *Siciliana* laced with sighs, the opening movement and, especially, the closing finale nonetheless exhibit the humorous and playful nature for which Wolf-Ferrari's music is generally known. There is also a subtle use of counterpoint, a remarkable example of Wolf-Ferrari's trademark ability to adroitly integrate music theory techniques within his writing, resulting in music that is, to all appearances, effortlessly organic. With one hand tied behind his back, as it were, he layers three themes over one another simultaneously in the closing movement as if it were the most natural thing in the world, a feat that appears again and again in his work ever since his brilliant overture to *Susanna's Secret* with its four themes!

Arabesken in E minor, Op. 22 (1937)

The aforementioned trip to Venice was primarily undertaken in order to discover more about a friend of the composer, the Venetian painter Ettore Tito (1859–1941), and his contribution to *Arabesques, Op. 22* – the orchestral score for the work contains the annotation: 'Variations on an aria by Ettore Tito' appended with the footnote 'Well-known Italian painter and teacher.' En route to the Teatro La Fenice archive, I stumbled across an antiques shop. As luck would have it, the owner turned out to be a friend of the painter's granddaughter, and, just a few hours later, I found myself in the house of the artist's daughter-in-law Anni Tito. Italy! I deeply thanked her for her trust. 'The world of artists', she replied, 'is bound together by a secret, invisible web, that simply *has* to unite certain people.' Over the next few hours I was immersed in an enchanting world of ideas and beauty, in a residence that seemed to be devoted to nothing but art, filled with countless paintings, drawings and sculptures emanating Tito's spirit and an indescribable, artistic vitality. I discovered that in the 1930s Tito not only had painted a portrait of his artist friend Wolf-Ferrari, but at the age of 65 suddenly felt tremendously drawn to music and, as a musical autodidact 'with heavy hands', began to take piano lessons. A gorgeous old Bechstein grand piano stood placidly in the corner of the parlour. 'Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli was a frequent guest of ours,' she explained. 'He was often playing it. Nowadays it remains regrettably silent.' That was my cue to play the 'Tito theme', or *Aria*, from Wolf-Ferrari's *Arabesques*, which was, surprisingly, unknown to her. Wolf-Ferrari used this theme as his source material for the work, the composer transforming the elegantly simple melody into orchestral variations of sweeping textures and delicate tonal hues, resolving in a fiercely powerful fugue. The exact circumstances in which the *Arabesques* were created from a melody by the painter are not known, but it is a beautiful example of synergies that can arise in art – here from the friendship between a painting composer, and a composing painter.

Friedrich Haider

*Adapted from the English translation
of the original German by Jeff Tapia*



Photo © Ivan Martínez

Oviedo Filarmonía

Founded in 1999 on the initiative of the Oviedo City Council, the Oviedo Filarmonía is the resident orchestra of the Festival de Zarzuela and of the Oviedo Auditorium's Concert Cycle and Luis G. Iberní Piano Season. The orchestra also plays a major part during the Ópera de Oviedo season and is involved in a variety of community initiatives such as educational programmes, open-air concerts and summer activities. The ensemble has performed under the batons of conductors including Zubin Mehta, Rinaldo Alessandrini and Alberto Zedda, and alongside such soloists as Elīna Garanča, Mischa Maisky and Midori. From 2004 to 2011, during Friedrich Haider's tenure as chief conductor, the orchestra made its name both nationally and internationally, with tours in Japan and concerts in Madrid and Paris. Together they have recorded for Naxos Verdi's *Otello* and music by the Italian-German composer Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, including the complete orchestral works. From 2011 to 2017, under the baton of Marzio Conti, the orchestra strengthened its presence in the city of Oviedo, attracting new audiences with diverse projects. Its current chief conductor is Lucas Macías, and its principal guest conductor Iván López-Reynoso. Since 2003 the Oviedo Filarmonía has been a member of the Spanish Association of Symphony Orchestras (AEOS).



Photo © Sim Canetty-Clarke

Friedrich Haider

Friedrich Haider, an Austrian conductor with Italian ancestry, trained at the Vienna Academy of Music. At the age of 29 he was appointed as music director of the Opéra national du Rhin, Strasbourg. With a repertoire of some 70 operas, he has appeared at leading European opera houses in Vienna, Munich, Berlin, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Venice. In 2006 he made his debut with the Metropolitan Opera in New York with *Rigoletto*. He has conducted the London Symphony Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic and the Camerata Salzburg, among others. From 2004 to 2010 he was principal conductor of the Oviedo Filarmonía, and in 2017 he was appointed chief conductor of the Musicae Antiquae Collegium Varsoviense, Poland's most renowned period instrument orchestra, with whom he has performed Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni* and Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. Haider is an ardent champion of the music of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari. He has recorded the composer's complete orchestral works, his a cappella choral works, *Geistliches Mysterium 'Talitha Kumi'*, and the operas *Il segreto di Susanna* and *I gioielli della Madonna*.

www.friedrichhaider.com
www.wolf-ferrari.com

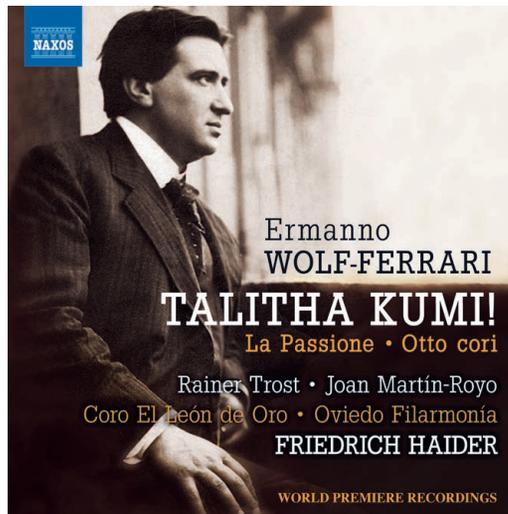
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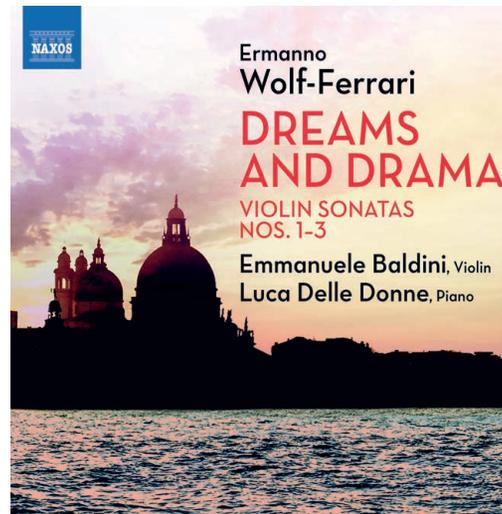
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Wolf-Ferrari is famous for his operatic works in which he invented a new idiom by transplanting 18th-century Venetian culture into the 20th century. But almost all of the composer's orchestral music dates from his final years and occupies a different expressive realm. The *Suite veneziana* resonates with melancholy, and the *Triptychon* is a contemplative, passionate masterpiece of orchestration. Subtle use of counterpoint transforms the *Divertimento* into a playful exploration of themes, while *Arabesken* pays tribute to an old friend, the Venetian painter Ettore Tito (1859–1941). His own elegantly simple melody, known as 'Tito's theme', is turned by Wolf-Ferrari into a sequence of sumptuous orchestral variations culminating in a powerful fugue.



Ermanno
WOLF-FERRARI
(1876–1948)

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Oviedo Filarmonía
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Playing Time
64:34

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet
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