

CHARLES TOMLINSON GRIFFES

Born 17 September 1884 in Elmira, New York; died 8 April 1920 in New York City.

The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan, Opus 8 (composed for piano in 1912; orchestrated in 1916)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Boston, 28 November 1919; Symphony Hall; Boston Symphony Orchestra; Pierre Monteux, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 23 January 1942; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 11 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta, piano and strings.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes, born in Elmira, New York in 1884, was among the most gifted American composers of the early 20th century. He began his musical studies with his sister Katharine and around 1899 was sent for advanced instruction to Mary Selena Broughton, a piano teacher at Elmira College, who quickly recognized his extraordinary talent and arranged and helped finance his four years of study at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin. Griffes at first considered a career as a concert pianist, but his interest in composition was stimulated by the rich culture of the German capital and by some private lessons with Engelbert Humperdinck, whose 1893 opera *Hansel und Gretel* was then winning him international fame. By the time he returned to the United States in 1907, Griffes was determined to be a composer. He became director of music at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York, a position he held until his untimely death thirteen years later, at the age of 35. His earliest works show the influence of the German tradition he imbibed during his study in Berlin, but beginning around 1910, he adopted an Impressionistic style tinged with an almost mystical Orientalism that is distilled in the orchestral tone poems *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan* and *The White Peacock*. The music of his last years (notably the Piano Sonata and the haunting *Three Poems of Fiona MacLeod*) shows a more personal, abstract style, not untouched by the intense expressionism of Schoenberg. His early death was a great loss at a time when American music was just beginning to find its identity.

Inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's fantastic poem of 1816, *Kubla Khan*, Griffes undertook an extended piece for solo piano in 1912 to try to capture the exoticism, mystery and sensuality of the English writer's vision. He worked regularly on the score for the rest of the year, but was not satisfied enough with it at that time to urge it upon any publisher. At the beginning of 1916, Griffes again took up *Kubla Khan*, spurred by the suggestion of some friends that the piece might be better suited to orchestra than to piano, and finished orchestrating the score that summer. Pierre Monteux's carefully prepared premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on November 28, 1919 was a triumph for Griffes and brought him his first wide fame, ironically, just four months before he died.

Griffes supplied the following note for the premiere of *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*: "I have taken as a basis for my work those lines of Coleridge's poem describing the 'stately pleasure-dome,' the 'sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice,' the 'miracle of rare device.' Therefore I call the work *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan* rather than 'Kubla Khan.' These lines include 1 to 11 and lines 32 to 38, which excerpts begin: *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure-dome decree; Where Alph, the sacred river, ran Through caverns measureless to man Down to a sunless sea.*

"As to argument, I have given my imagination free rein in the description of this strange palace, as well as of the purely imaginary revelry which might take place there. The vague, foggy beginning suggests the sacred river, running 'through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.' Then gradually rises the outline of the palace, 'with walls and towers girdled round.' The gardens with fountains and 'sunny spots of greenery' are next suggested. From inside come sounds of dancing and revelry, which increase to a wild climax and then suddenly break off. There is a return to the original mood suggesting the sacred river and 'the caves of ice.'"