

Cavalleria Rusticana

Setting

Time: Easter Sunday, c. 1880

Place: A Sicilian village square

Synopsis

As Easter dawns in a Sicilian village, Turiddu's voice is heard singing in praise of Lola, wife of the prosperous carter Alfio ("O Lola"). Soon the townsfolk gather, dressed in their holiday best. When they disperse, Santuzza approaches Mamma Lucia's tavern in search of Turiddu; the older woman says her son is out of town getting wine. Alfio enters with his companions, boasting of his horse and his new wife, Lola ("Il cavallo scalpita"). He leaves as the villagers follow a religious to mass, first kneeling in prayer ("Inneggiamo, il Signor non è morto!"). The excommunicated Santuzza stays behind to tell Mamma Lucia that Turiddu has abandoned her for his old flame, Lola ("Voi lo sapere"). When the old woman goes off to worship, Santuzza confronts Turiddu ("Tu qui, Santuzza?") until Lola saunters by, infuriating Santuzza with her sarcasm. Lola enters the church, and Santuzza resumes her pleading, but Turiddu refuses to listen. Pushing her to the ground, he runs into the church, cursed by Santuzza ("A te la mala Pasqua, spergiuoro!"). When Alfio happens by, Santuzza avenges herself by revealing his wife's infidelity. The carter vows to get even and rushes away. An atmosphere of peaceful exultation settles on the empty square (intermezzo). Leaving mass, the villagers join Turiddu in a drinking song, only to scatter when Alfio enters and insults Turiddu, following with a challenge to duel with knives. Turiddu admits his guilt but says he will fight to win for Santuzza's sake. Left alone with his mother, Turiddu bids her a tearful farewell ("Mamma, quell vino è generoso"), begging her to care for Santuzza if he does not come back. As Mamma Lucia waits anxiously, shouts rise in crying that Turiddu has been killed.

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Program notes

Cavalleria Rusticana -Mascagni's First and Finest Opera- by Anne Lawson

In 1888, the Milan publishing house Casa Sonzogno announced its second competition for young Italian composers. The subject: unpublished one-act operas. Mascagni, in his early 20s and fairly unsuccessful as a composer, decided to take part and set to work on a short opera that was to be called *Serafina*. His friend and librettist Targioni-Tozzetti, however, after seeing the play, suggested *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Mascagni — who had been present at the Milan premiere of the play some years earlier and who had been fascinated by the subject — agreed to start afresh.

Mascagni feverishly worked up to 18 hours a day to meet the deadline set by the Casa Sonzogno, and on May 6, 1890, the jury shortlisted his *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Niccolò Spinelli's *Labilia* and Vincenzo Ferrari's *Rudello* for performances at the Teatro Costanzi later that month.

Immediately, Mascagni left for Rome, supervising the rehearsals and making last-minute changes in the instrumentation. The premiere on May 17 — just 11 days after the jury's announcement — was a staggering success, with no fewer than 25 or 30 (according to most sources) or 60 (according to Mascagni) enthusiastic curtain calls.

Within the next 18 months, and on its own, the eternal twin *Pagliacci* was as yet uncomposed; *Cavalleria Rusticana* was acclaimed in Livorno, Florence, Turin, Bologna, Palermo, at La Scala in Milan, Genoa, Naples, Venice, Trieste, Munich, Hamburg, St. Petersburg, Dresden, Prague, Buenos Aires, Vienna, Bucharest, Barcelona, Berlin, Philadelphia, Rio de Janeiro, Basel, Copenhagen, New York, Amsterdam and London.

In October 1891, Mascagni's second opera *L'Amico Fritz* premiered at the Teatro Constanzi. No more than a critical success, neither it nor any of his other 154 operas ever approach the immense and lasting popularity of *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Pagliacci

Setting

Time: Ferragosto (the Feast of the Assumption in mid-August) in the 1860s

Place: Monalto in Calabria

Synopsis

Prologue

Tonio the clown steps before the curtain ("Si può") to announce that the author has written about actors, who know the same joys and sorrows as other people.

Act I

Villagers mill around as a small theatrical road company arrives at the outskirts of a Calbrian town, Canio, head of the troupe, describes that night's offering ("Un grande spettacolo"), and when someone jests that the hunchbacked Tonio is secretly courting his wife, Nedda, Canio warns her fidelity is no joking matter ("Un tal gioco"). Vesper bells call the women to church and the men to the tavern, leaving Nedda alone. Disturbed by her husband's vehemence and suspicious glances, she envies the freedom of the birds soaring overhead (ballatella: "Stridono lassù"). Tonio appears and tries to make love to her, but she laughs at him. Enraged, he reaches for her, and she lashes out with a whip. Nedda in fact does have a lover: Silvio, who now appears (duet: "Silvio! a quest'ora") and persuades her to run away with him after the evening's performance. But Tonio, who has seen them, hurries off to tell Canio. Soon the jealous husband bursts in. Silvio escapes, and Nedda refuses to identify him, even when threatened with a knife. Beppe, another player, restrains Canio and Tonio advises him to wait until evening to catch Nedda's lover. Alone, Canio cries out that he must play the clown though his heart is breaking ("Vest la giubba").

Act II

The villagers, Silvio among them, assemble to see the play *Pagliaccio e Colombina*. In the absence of her husband, Pagliaccio (played by Canio), Colombina (Nedda) is serenaded by her lover Arlecchino (Beppe), who dismisses her buffoonish servant Taddeo (Tonio). The two sweethearts dine together and plot to poison Pagliaccio who soon arrives. Arlecchino slips out the window. With pointed malice, Taddeo assures Pagliaccio of his wife's innocence, firing Canio's real-life jealousy. Forgetting the play, he demands that Nedda tell him her lover's name ("No, Pagliaccio non son"). She tries to continue with the script, the audience applauding the realism of the acting. Maddened by her defiance, Canio stabs Nedda and then Silvio, who has rushed forward to help her. Tonio cries that the comedy is ended.

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Pagliacci
-The lasting success of Leoncavallo-
by Anne Lawson

Fascinated — and irritated — by the success in 1890 of Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Leoncavallo decided to write and compose a short, realist opera himself. In the autumn of 1890, he offered the libretto to the Milan publisher Edoardo Sonzogno — who had Mascagni under contract, too — and was told to go ahead with the composition.

Thus, practically two years after the first performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana* in Rome, *Pagliacci* was premiered at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan. The triumphant reception of his opera turned Leoncavallo into an instant celebrity. Numerous Italian opera houses produced *Pagliacci* shortly after its premiere. *Pagliacci* was first shown abroad in Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, London, New York, Buenos Aires, Stockholm, Mexico City, Basel and Moscow.

Cav and *Pag*, more often than not paired in performance, were the only lasting achievements of their respective composers. Leoncavallo's other 14 operas and operettas suffered essentially the same fate as Mascagni's: polite interest, but no rousing success.

However, both *Cav* and *Pag*, so quintessentially of the Italian *verismo* or naturalistic/realistic style — so exuberant, so dramatic, so poignant, and also so lyrical — ensure Mascagni's and Leoncavallo's place in the great operatic Valhalla. Where would opera houses be without them?

Notes

Leoncavallo was fond of telling that his libretto was inspired by an actual incident in his childhood, verified by documents in the possession of his father, a judge who had led the criminal investigation into the case: a servant who had taken little Ruggiero to see a wandering troupe of comedians at Montalto Uffugo in Calabria was stabbed to death by the jealous head of the troupe after being caught in a compromising situation with the man's wife.

However, this story is a lot of nonsense. Research has shown that in fact the action of *Pagliacci* is based on the plot of *La Femme de Tabarin* by Catulle Mendès which premiered in Paris in 1887. Leoncavallo was staying in the French capital during that period, and it is more than likely that he attended one or more of the performances. A further source in the Spanish play *Un drama nuevo* by Manuel Tamayo y Baus, premiered in Madrid in 1867, and which toured Italy in 1868 and 1891.