

AN OPERA GUIDE TO

CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA

ANDREA BOCELLI
LE OPERE

by Giorgio De Martino

WHAT IS IT?

It is a one-act opera which was first performed at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome on 17th May 1890. It is a story of blood and passion, set in feudal Sicily in the late nineteenth century. It is an opera which abounds in world famous melodies and is established as a firm fixture in the popular Italian repertory and in the collective memory of all melomaniacs. It is a violent tragedy based on marital infidelity and so-called crimes of honour, the plot combining the ingredients of love, jealousy and a final mortal revenge. A markedly “Italian” story, starting from the setting which presents a church as the heart of village life in a small community in the far south of the country where this drama of everyday folk unfolds one Easter Sunday.

Cavalleria Rusticana represents an inevitable watershed in the development of opera at the end of the nineteenth century. It exploded with all of its modernity onto a cultural scene where a reassuring calm had prevailed, in a country dominated by imitators of Verdi such as Amilcare Ponchielli. Thanks to Cavalleria Rusticana, the winning entry of a competition organized by the publishing house Sonzogno, Verismo (or Naturalism) broke into the world of opera. This was a real revolution in the way in which stories were presented and sung.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHARACTERS

Turiddu (tenor), short for Salvatore (“Turi” in the local dialect), is a young former officer, and consummate “heartbreaker”. First he was in love with Lola, then he seduces Santuzza. Having completed his military service he goes back to Lola who by this time is married to Alfio.

Santuzza (soprano) is in love with Turiddu. As a result of this “scandalous” relationship (as they are not husband and wife), she is excommunicated by the Church.

Alfio (baritone), is married to Lola. He is a jealous man but (wrongly) trusts in his wife’s fidelity.

Mamma Lucia (contralto), Turiddu’s mother, is the owner of a tavern.

Lola (mezzosoprano), Alfio’s wife, has a secret relationship with Turiddu.

WHAT DOES THE STORY TELL US?

Before going off to do military service Turiddu had been engaged to Lola. Upon his return he finds her married to a carter (Alfio). Disappointed in love, Turiddu finds comfort in Santuzza’s arms and promises to marry her. She loves him and gives herself to him but Lola destroys her friend’s happiness because she entices Turiddu to come back to her again and they become lovers. Santuzza fears for her reputation as her honour has been compromised. In fact she feels that, as a “sinner”, she is excluded from the Easter mass and also from the homes of “respectable” folk. So she confides in Turiddu’s mother who, however, is unable to help her. Rejected by Turiddu, Santuzza in desperation reveals to Alfio that Lola is betraying him with Turiddu. Alfio challenges the young man to a duel. Before going off to fight and being killed by Alfio, Turiddu entrusts Santuzza to his mother’s care.

WHO “INVENTED” THE CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA

Giovanni Verga (1840 – 1922), who was born near Catania, in Sicily, is the writer who is considered to be the father of literary naturalism (Verismo). Although the first Italian writer to theorize on Verismo was Luigi Capuana, it was Verga, previously identifiable as part of the late romantic current, who undertook the realist route with a really substantial literary weight, starting from his groundbreaking short story *Nedda* written in 1874.

The story of the *Cavalleria rusticana* was originally conceived as an episode within Verga’s major novel *I Malavoglia*. However, it was removed from the novel and published as a short story, initially in the magazine *Fanfulla della Domenica* and subsequently as part of a collection of stories entitled *Vita dei campi*.

The writer’s literary beliefs and intentions are set out in his own words: “the story is a human document. I will repeat it to you just as I have gathered it up from the country lanes, in more or less the same



simple and picturesque words used when the stories are told by the country folk, without requiring any searching between the lines or through the writer's lens. The artist's hand will remain entirely invisible and the work of art will seem to have come about autonomously".

So Giovanni Verga did not want to imply any judgment while telling his stories. He considered the writer to be a technical instrument which recorded but did not intervene in the document. Verga did not believe that literature could contribute to bringing about any modification of reality. Consequently his role was to remove himself from the field of action and observe characters and events impassively. The reader, for his part, was supposed to perceive the characters as represented by their speech and to observe their behaviour. This is the reason for the use of such simple language which had to be as real as possible and entirely unfiltered – as indicated above – by the “presumed omniscience” of the writer.

WHO WROTE THE MUSIC

Pietro Mascagni (1863 – 1945), a composer and orchestra conductor from Livorno, produced about fifteen operas, none of which matched the success achieved by *Cavalleria Rusticana*, which was his first venture into the operatic form. In spite of this some of these later works such as *L'amico Fritz* (1891) and *Iris* (1898) are also fully established as part of the present day international opera repertory.

The son of a florist, Mascagni began to study music (piano and singing) very early in his life so that by the age of thirteen he was already working on a project for an opera. In 1882 he transferred from his native Livorno to Milan where he studied at the conservatory. Amilcare Ponchielli was among his fellow students and it was here that he also encountered Giacomo Puccini. Mascagni left the conservatory following an argument with the school principal. He began to work as a double-bass player and then as a conductor for travelling orchestras and companies performing operettas. Eventually he moved to Cerignola, a small town in Puglia in the south of Italy where he was the director of the local orchestra. In 1888 the Milanese music publisher Edoardo Sonzogno organised a competition which was open to all young Italian composers who had not yet had an operatic work performed on stage. Entrants were required to submit a one-act opera and the three best productions were to be performed in Rome funded by Sonzogno.

Mascagni came to know of the competition from a newspaper just two months before the final registration date for entries. He realized that this represented a last chance for him to escape the artistic exile he experienced living in Cerignola and decided to take part. He chose Giovanni Verga's short story *Cavalleria Rusticana* as his subject matter and asked his friend and fellow Livornese Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti, who was a poet and teacher of literature at the Livorno Naval Academy, to help by producing the libretto. The latter worked on this project assisted by his colleague Guido Menasci, performing the task by correspondence which involved forwarding the verses for *Cavalleria* to Mascagni on postcards. The competition attracted more than seventy entries. The jury selected three operas: *Labilia* by Nicola Spinelli, *Rudello* by Vincenzo Ferroni and Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. On 17th May 1890 *Cavalleria* premiered at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome to rapturous success creating a major turning point in the twenty-seven year old composer's life.

The fact that Benito Mussolini's fascist regime considered Pietro Mascagni the Italian composer par excellence led to some of his colleagues – including Arturo Toscanini – rapidly dissociating themselves from him. The favourable accolade he received from the governing regime was also far from helpful in enhancing attitudes to the status of his body of work in the post-war period after his death.

THE RHYTHM DRIVING CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA

The extremely tight musical and narrative rhythm of the opera is a fundamental feature of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Mascagni's rebellious and youthfully impetuous nature finds expression in irregular phrasing and extremely diverse harmonic choices to extremely innovative effect. The composer seems to have taken heed of the Wagnerian lesson, giving a marked personality to the orchestral mass. *Cavalleria Rusticana* has very little in the way of dialogue. The brevity of the one-act form means Mascagni avoids



lingering on pathos. Everything is swift and the entire score is propelled forward by an impulse which makes it both coherent and compelling.

Mascagni's melodic creativity produced a number of musical motifs which have become immortal, for example Turiddu's Siciliana, Alfio's Canzone, Santuzza's Romanza, Turiddu's Brindisi and the tenor's wonderful Addio alla madre.

AN UNPRECEDENTED SUCCESS

The critics' response to the *Cavalleria Rusticana* was to speak of a revelation, of a masterpiece, which trod a fine line bordering on scandal. Its young composer achieved instant fame. In its first year, 1890, the opera was performed in a great many Italian theatres and after just a few months it was also staged abroad where it enjoyed great success everywhere including central Europe where the celebrated critic Eduard Hanslick wrote an essay full of admiration for Mascagni's one-act opera. It was staged in Berlin in October 1891 and at the Royal Opera House in London in May 1892. It premiered in the United States on 9th September 1891, at the Grand Opera House in Philadelphia and on 30th December 1891 *Cavalleria Rusticana* was presented at the "Metropolitan" in New York for the first of almost seven hundred subsequent performances in that famous opera house. By 1945, the year of Pietro Mascagni's death, *Cavalleria Rusticana* had already been performed about fourteen thousand times in Italy alone.

VERGA'S LEGAL BATTLE OVER ROYALTIES

Following the sensational success of the opera based on his short story, Verga put in his claim to Mascagni and the publisher Sonzogno for his share of the proceeds by way of royalties as previously agreed. However, he was instead offered a one-off fee of 1000 lire. The writer then turned to the Society of Authors and in 1891 he initiated legal proceedings. This resulted in a complicated legal battle which was only concluded years later with a victory for Verga who received a payment of 143,000 lire.

VERISMO IN LITERATURE

Before being used with reference to music, the term Verismo (realism or naturalism) was used to describe a trend in Italian literature which had started in the middle of the second half of the nineteenth century originated by a group of writers, mostly novelists and playwrights, who constituted a veritable "school" of writers founded on very precise principles. Verismo came about as a result of the direct influence of the climate of Positivism, that absolute trust in science, in the empirical approach and the infallible instruments of research, which developed and thrived from 1830 until the end of the nineteenth century. Verismo was not an ingenious and isolated notion invented by Italian writers but was clearly inspired by a literary movement which had become widespread in France from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The French protagonists of literary naturalism included Émile Zola, who was the same age as Verga, Gustave Flaubert, the author of *Madame Bovary* - and Guy de Maupassant.

The naturalist writer – they said - tries to discover the laws that govern human society "moving from the lowest towards the highest social forms, as a scientist does in the laboratory when he tries to discover the laws of physics which underlie a phenomenon."



VERISMO IN MUSIC

Verismo in music sees *Cavalleria rusticana* first, and *Pagliacci* (by Ruggero Leoncavallo) later, as the two originators, the two models that stand out in late nineteenth century Italy. It is worth dwelling on the year – 1890 – when Mascagni’s masterpiece came to light. Only three years separate this work from 1893 which saw Verdi’s resounding final coup, *Falstaff*, and the first true mark made by Puccini with *Manon Lescaut*.

It has been observed with great perception that *Cavalleria Rusticana* has the merit of restoring the trust and credibility to the Italian musical theatre that it was at risk of losing. It is an opera that stands up to comparison with European productions and at the same time remains the legitimate heir to the Italian tradition. By adhering to Verismo it forged a bond between the musical theatre and the literature of the time.

According to some musical historians, the origins of musical Verismo can be traced to Bizet’s *Carmen*, others find its roots in Verdi’s *La Traviata*. The “Verismo” label puzzled a genius like Verdi who made the following reflection: “Ah, ah realist if you like... Shakespeare was a realist but he did not know it. He was a realist by inspiration: we are realists according to plan, by calculation..”.

The musicologist, Mosco Carner, pointed out, as a main distinguishing feature of Verismo, “the excess, the unbridled inflation of dramatic and emotional effects. One atmosphere follows another in rapid succession and once an atmosphere has been created it is already destroyed. The characters have an above average energetic charge and they are drawn into a turmoil of passions driven by sex”.

THE INGREDIENTS OF A NATURALIST OPERA

The “brand” requires a libretto which deals with “everyday matters” possibly set in the present day: simple events (albeit with impending doom and primordial passions at stake) presented as the stage representation of “episodes from daily life”. Psychological and emotional conflicts remain the basis of the story (not unlike many romantic dramas), but they are presented with an unprecedented violence and with a singing style which is held at a constant level of tension. In summary the ingredients are episodes drawn from daily life, characters from poor social classes, heroes who are forced to fight desperately for their survival, a language that reflects popular culture and local dialects, a degree of local colour (albeit frequently counterfeit) and occasionally tones of protest and condemnation.

CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA AND PAGLIACCI: THE TWIN OPERAS

There is a clear connection between Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* and Ruggero Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* (which premiered in 1892). The reasons for this are both musical and dramatic. The operas are also linked by a number of similar circumstances surrounding their origins. Both works are tragedies which could have come from the crime reports in the newspapers, both deal with the theme of betrayal and both are set in rural environments with a chorus representing a group of peasants. Even the structure is similar, starting with the overtures which describe the events of the story to follow, one in the form of a “Sicilian serenade” and the other by means of a kind of “musical chat with the audience”. Both use a ritual (the Easter Mass in *Cavalleria* and the little theatre in *Pagliacci*) as a strong focal point in the story and finally both provide a decisive impulse allowing naturalism (Verismo) to break into Italian opera. As a result of the above-mentioned operas, the composers suddenly achieved great fame. This is why these have always been considered to be operatic twins and why they have frequently been performed as a pair on the same evening. In fact it was Mascagni himself who, from the 1920’s onwards, took to directing his *Cavalleria* alongside Leoncavallo’s work.

PALE IMITATIONS OF CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA

Many later operas were modelled on the *Cavalleria Rusticana* most of them short and treating themes typical of literary realism: stories of tragic passion played out in a social context of country peasants or of the lowest proletariat class and frequently set in the south of Italy. A quick glance at the titles is all that



is required to get a sense of the musical climate which had been established at that time: Mala Pasqua!, Mala vita, La bella d'Alghero, Vendetta sarda, Un mafioso, Trecce nere...

These strongly depicted dramas, specifically regional in character and set in the context of the humble masses invaded the Italian theatres reminding the late nineteenth century audiences - through music as well as through literature - that the Kingdom of Italy did not only consist of the large cities such as Milan, Turin, Florence and Rome but that it included a suffering underbelly stemming from centuries of poverty and backwardness which was excluded from the commercial development and the industrial plan which was beginning to take shape in the northern part of the country.

In this period the six main composers working within a similar kind of musical theatre ((Pietro Mascagni, Ruggero Leoncavallo, Giacomo Puccini, Umberto Giordano, Francesco Cilea and Alberto Franchetti) were in some way grouped together and labeled under the name of "Giovane Scuola Italiana".

THE "SOFT" NATURALISM OF MASCAGNI

Pietro Mascagni's masterpiece only partially, and perhaps rather superficially, takes up the naturalist baton of Verga's short story. The opera is captivating but it does not try to force its way impersonally into the setting which it presents in order to create "a complete illusion of reality". Mascagni does not want to "put himself into his characters' shoes, seeing things through their eyes and expressing them with their words". He tells a story about poor folk (the protagonists are no longer kings or pharaohs, nor even rich members of the bourgeoisie) and he takes us into the countryside of the south of Italy. The music gives a nod to the popular style but there is no trace of any specific research into the folk heritage of the peasant culture.

Moreover, in the transition from Verga's text to the opera libretto certain elements are left out: there are no references made to the carabinieri, which Verga had included with specific intent: the Arma (forces of the law), then, at a time when Italy was struggling to remain united, represented the central governing power and national justice.

"I will look after my own interests, alone, without any need for those of the plume" says Alfio. And in his declaration there is the sense of the Sicily of his day. In Verga there is a real Sicily. In Mascagni there is a fascinating and captivating snapshot of that environment.

A COMPARISON OF THE TEXTS

The language used by the librettists, Targioni Tozzetti and Menasci, is decidedly more elegant and poetic than Verga's very rough and original style. Let us try and compare the exchange between "Santuzza" and Turiddu's mother (who is called "Gnà Nunzia" in the Verga's novel):

- The short story

Santuzza: I know... Master Turiddu, before going off to be a soldier... was speaking to Lola.

Gnà Nunzia: Well! Then when he returned he found her married to Master Alfio of Licodiano, and he set his mind at rest.

Santuzza: Not at all! He did not put his mind at rest.

Gnà Nunzia: Oh and how do you know that?

Santuzza: I know that he would look out every time he saw her pass by my door and that devil would steal him from me with her eyes! And she would try and draw him into conversation too! "Master Turiddu what brings you to these parts? Don't you know that it was not the will of God? Now leave me alone as I belong to my husband". The will of God was to seduce him! He would come and sing beneath my window to spite her for having married another man. There is no forgetting an old love.

- The libretto

Santuzza: You know, mother dear, before going off to be a soldier Turiddu had vowed he would be eternally faithful to Lola. He came back and found her married and with another love he tried to put



out the flame that burned in his heart: so he loved me and I loved him. She, envious of all my delight, forgot her husband, consumed with jealousy... she stole him from me... I remain dishonoured: Lola and Turiddu love each other, I weep, I weep, I weep!

THE PLOT

The curtain is still closed but the music already transports us into the climate of the story which is about to be told. The voice we hear is that of Turiddu singing a serenade (a "Siciliana") declaring his love for Lola. We are in a small village near Catania towards the turn of the century. The background to the story is that the young country boy Turiddu had sworn eternal love to the beautiful Lola before going off to do his military service. Upon his return he learns that his love has married the wealthy carter Alfio. He tries in vain to find consolation in the arms of Santuzza. It is Easter morning. Bells are ringing in celebration everywhere and there is a joyful chorus of peasant folk. Santuzza is jealous and suspects that Turiddu has turned his attentions to his old flame once more. She has heard that he has been spotted roaming around at night near Lola's house. Santuzza goes off to look for Turiddu at his mother Lucia's house. Lucia first tells her to leave her son in peace, then she tells her coldly that he is not there and that he has gone to fetch the wine from Francofonte. "He has not left the village" replies Santuzza. Then Mamma Lucia tries to bring her inside in order to avoid gossip but Santuzza is desperate and explains to her how the Church has excommunicated her as a result of her affair with Turiddu. As a result of this excommunication she is not allowed to darken the door of any "honourable" house. This exchange is interrupted by the arrival of Master Alfio who is singing with rough good cheer in celebration of the carter's nomadic existence. Alfio claims to be happy to have a faithful wife waiting for him at home. Meanwhile the Easter procession has got underway which will end in the church with the solemn mass. Being excommunicated Santuzza cannot set foot inside the church so she goes back to talk to Mamma Lucia and, weeping, reveals her tragic love for Turiddu. He seduced her to seek comfort for the fact that Lola had married another man but his heart was still entirely committed to Alfio's wife who reciprocated his love, openly betraying her husband. Distressed Mamma Lucia goes into the church. Santuzza is left alone and, seeing Turiddu approaching, decides to confront him but he will not listen to her. First he tries to lie about his absences and his meetings with Lola, then, as Santuzza's protests increase, he hypocritically adopts a tone of annoyance with her "unjustifiable jealousy" progressing to feign hurt pride, indignation and then making threats. Santuzza, for her part, moves from accusations of obvious infidelity to anger, humiliation and to begging his forgiveness (as she fears she will lose him). Lola appears singing a refrain secretly dedicated to Turiddu. Seeing the two of them she stops and sarcastically enquires of Santuzza why she is not going to the Mass. «Ci deve andare chi sa di non aver peccato» ("Those should go who know they are without sin") replies Santuzza caustically. Once Lola has gone into the church the couple resume their argument and the dramatic tension increases with Turiddu's false indignation and the exasperation of Santuzza who eventually, faced with Turiddu's derision as he makes his way towards the church without deigning to look at her, launches a curse at him "A te la mala Pasqua, spergiuro!" When Master Alfio arrives, Santuzza, upset, reveals the secret love affair between his wife and Turiddu. He realizes that Santuzza is telling the truth and swears he will avenge his honour.

The crowd of worshippers emerge from the church and a group of men stop off at the tavern. Turiddu invites his friends to join him in an Easter toast and offers Alfio a drink. «Il vostro vino non l'accetto. Diverrebbe veleno entro il mio petto». ("I do not accept your wine. It would turn to poison in my chest") Turiddu understands and, throwing the wine away, he declares himself ready to fight. The two Sicilians know that there is only one way to deal with the situation: Turiddu challenges Alfio to a duel, biting his right ear as the simple rustic ritual demands. They are to meet immediately in the nearby allotments just outside the village. Before following his rival, Turiddu meets his mother and asks for her blessing «come quel giorno che partii soldato» ("as on that day when I left to be a soldier"). He begs her to look after Santuzza in the event he should not return. Lucia is upset by his words but her son pretends to be rambling as a result of his drinking. He gives her a quick kiss goodbye. Santuzza comes



into the tavern and embraces Mamma Lucia. A growing murmur can be heard from the narrow lanes followed immediately by a woman's anguished cry : «Hanno ammazzato compare Turiddu!». (“They have killed Master Turiddu!”)

THE LAST WORD TO GIOVANNI VERGA

“When Turiddu Macca, the son of Mistress Nunzia, came home from the army, he strutted about the piazza every Sunday in his Bersagliere uniform and his red forage-cap, looking like a fortune-teller setting up his stall with a cage of canaries. The girls couldn't take their eyes off him as they went to Mass with their faces half hidden behind their mantillas and the little boys buzzed round him like flies. He had even brought back a pipe carved with a lifelike image of the king on horseback and he would strike matches on the seat of his trousers, raising one leg as if to give a kick at something. But all the same Angelo Massaro's Lola failed to show up either at Mass or on her balcony, for she had wed a man from Licodia who was a carter and had four Sortino mules in his barn. When Turiddu first learned about this, Christ in Heaven! he would have torn the guts out of that man from Licodia, he would! However he did nothing of the kind and only vented his anger by going and singing all the abusive songs he could think of under the fair young woman's window”.

These are the opening words of Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, first published in the weekly “*Fanfulla della domenica*” on 14th March 1880 and subsequently incorporated into the collection of short stories “*Vita dei Campi*” published by Treves in Milan in August of the same year. The short story ends as follows:

“They were both good shots; Turiddu was hit first and managed to take it in the arm. When he returned it he returned well aiming at the groin.

- Ah! Master Turiddu! You are really out to kill me!

- Yes, I told you. Now that I've seen my old mother in the chicken roost I feel as though she is always before my eyes.

- Open those eyes well! shouted out Master Alfio, because I'm about to give you a good one back. While he was keeping a watch, all huddled up to hold his left hand on the wound which was painful, and as he practically slid along the ground on his elbow, he quickly grabbed a handful of dust and hurled it into his adversary's eyes.

- Ouch! cried Turiddu blinded, I am dead.

He tried to save himself by desperately leaping backwards, but Master Alfio got him with another blow to the stomach and a third one to the throat.

- And three! This is for the house that you have decorated for me. Now your mother will leave the chickens alone.

- Turiddu stumbled about among the prickly pears and then fell like a stone. The blood foamed from his throat and he could not even utter an “Ah Mamma mia!”

TO DOWNLOAD THE LIBRETTO

<http://opera.stanford.edu/Mascagni/Cavalleria/libretto.html>

<http://www.librettidopera.it/cavrust/cavrust.html>

PIETRO MASCAGNI ON “YOUTUBE”

Some audio documents and even material now available on video on Pietro Mascagni have survived to this day. There are some particularly celebrated sequences - easily found on “Youtube” – of the composer conducting *Cavalleria Rusticana* at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome in 1940 for the fiftieth anniversary celebration of his masterpiece.





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