

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Cavalleria Rusticana



Music by
Pietro Mascagni

Libretto by
Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti
and Guido Menasci

After Giovanni Verga's novella
and play, *Cavalleria Rusticana*

Melodrama in One Act

Setting: A Sicilian village
on Easter Sunday, around 1880

Characters

Turiddu, a young peasant (tenor) Plácido Domingo
Santuzza, a young peasant woman (soprano) Tatiana Troyanos
Mamma Lucia, his mother, an innkeeper (contralto)..... Jean Kraft
Alfio, a teamster (baritone) Vern Shinall
Lola, Alfio's wife (mezzo-soprano)..... Isola Jones
Chorus of villagers

Conducted by James Levine
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus
Directed by Franco Zeffirelli

Première performance: May 17, 1890 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome, Italy

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Synopsis

Background: Turiddu, recently returned from military service, lives with his mother, Mamma Lucia who keeps a wine shop in the village square. Before he left, he was betrothed to Lola. On his return, he found out that she had already married Alfio, a teamster, who made good money with his horse and cart. To console himself, Turiddu seduces Santuzza, another village girl. Since Alfio is frequently away on business, Lola and Turiddu have resumed their affair.

Just before dawn on Easter Sunday

The opera begins with a lovely orchestral prelude. In the distance, the voice of Turiddu breaks the quiet of an Easter morning. As he leaves Lola's home, where he has just spent the night, he serenades her sweetly.

The villagers prepare to go to church, bubbling with excitement about the pleasant weather and the beauty of the spring morning. The men of the village sing of their admiration and longing for the women, as the women rejoice in the sensuous atmosphere of nature in bloom.

The depressing figure of Santuzza enters, going to the wine shop run by Mamma Lucia, Turiddu's mother. She is looking for Turiddu. Mamma Lucia tells the girl that her son has gone earlier to a nearby village to take delivery of some wine. Santuzza refuses to believe it and suspects that he is with Lola because he was seen in the village the previous night. Mamma Lucia tries to invite her in, but Santuzza refuses, saying that in her dishonored state she cannot enter, and neither can she join the other villagers who are making their way to church for the Easter service.



Lola's husband, Alfio, returns and is greeted by the villagers. He enters the square, full of pride in his work and passion for his beautiful young wife, Lola. Mamma Lucia greets Alfio who asks her if she still has some of her good wine left. She tells him that Turiddu has gone to Francofonte to replenish her supply. Alfio confirms what Santuzza has suspected and tells Mamma Lucia that he had seen Turiddu the night before near his own house. This leaves the old woman shocked and concerned.

The Church Easter music starts and begins to dominate the square with the singing of the *Regina coeli*, which is heard within the church and echoed in the square by the distraught Santuzza and arriving churchgoers. The villagers enter the church, except for Mamma Lucia and Santuzza, who has been excommunicated because of her affair with Turiddu.

As the crowd disappears into the church, Santuzza explains to Mamma Lucia that she and Turiddu had been in love, but he had betrayed her with Lola. While Turiddu was away serving in the military, Lola, tired of waiting for him, married Alfio instead. On his return, Turiddu took up with Lola again, betraying Santuzza. Alfio was frequently away, and his affair with Lola was easy to continue. Seduced, abandoned and reviled, Santuzza has no one to turn to. Mamma Lucia agrees to pray for her and leaves for the church.

Turiddu saunters in, his night with Lola still in his thoughts. He is most surprised and annoyed to find Santuzza there and treats her with cool contempt. He asks her why she does not go to Mass. She replies that she is an outcast and accuses him of infidelity and attacks him for returning to Lola. He tries to lie about it but, seeing that Santuzza will not accept his answer, he tells her that he fears for his life should Alfio find out about them. Santuzza, still in love with him, is moved to forgive and protect him.



The scene is interrupted by Lola's entrance, who sings an alluring song. Lola asks Santuzza if she is going to Mass. Santuzza replies that only those should go who are without sin. Lola gives thanks to God that she is without sin and enters the church. Turiddu is about to follow Lola when Santuzza begs him to stay. Turiddu then turns on Santuzza. The two fight angrily, and she begs Turiddu to take her back. He is repelled by her neediness and the way she literally clings to him. Angriely, he throws her to the ground and runs to the church to find Lola. Shattered and without hope, Santuzza hurls a Sicilian curse at him — "A to la mala pasqua, spergiuoro!" ("An evil Easter to you, betrayer!")

Alfio returns to the square and Santuzza, frantic with jealousy, and not caring for what affect her words will have, tells him of his wife's illicit affair with Turiddu. As Turiddu predicted, Alfio is filled with rage and swears vengeance. Santuzza suddenly realizes what she has done, and is horrified at the events that she has just set in motion. But it is too late to stop the inevitable — the code of honor requires Turiddu's blood to be shed.

The orchestra plays a lovely Intermezzo

The Mass is over and everyone leaves the church. Turiddu is so exhilarated to be with Lola again that he invites everyone to Mamma Lucia's for a glass of wine. He sings a drinking song as the glasses are filled. Alfio has joined the crowd and Turiddu offers him wine, not realizing that Alfio has found out about him and Lola. Alfio refuses, saying that it would be like poison in his veins. Turiddu throws the wine from the glass.



Alfio challenges Turiddu to a duel by biting his right ear. Turiddu accepts the challenge to duel with knives in a nearby orchard. The villagers who have witnessed this scene disperse in expectant silence.

Rushing into the tavern, Turiddu asks his unsuspecting mother for her blessing and bids her to take care of Santuzza should he not return. Mamma Lucia gives him her blessing but is alarmed when he runs out towards the fields behind the village.

Santuzza enters and throws her arms around Mamma Lucia's neck. As the two wait anxiously, shouts rise in the distance. The women of the village run back into the square, one of them shrieking that Turiddu has been killed.



Pietro Mascagni

Born: December 7, 1863 in Livorno, Italy — Died: August 2, 1945 in Rome, Italy



Pietro Mascagni was born just as Verdi was coming into his own as the most popular, successful and powerful Italian composer the world had known since Rossini's active years. But Mascagni's roots were humble — his father was a baker who expected his son to take up the family trade. He studied first at the Cherubini Institute in his native town and then, with his uncle's help, he attended the Milan Conservatory, where he studied with the brilliant composer, Amilcare Ponchielli (*La Gioconda*). His fellow-pupils included Puccini, his senior by five years.

Hasty and quarrelsome by temperament, he found the discipline hard to bear and was thrown out of the conservatory in 1884 without completing the course. There followed years of hardship as musical director of various traveling opera companies, all of which were forced sooner or later to close down because of lack of funds. At one point he was faced with the humiliating prospect of having to return to Livorno and his father's bake shop.

At last, however, he obtained a post as municipal music master at the little Adriatic township of Cerignola, where he was required to give lessons on every conceivable instrument (several of which he had to learn beforehand to play himself) and to conduct the town band. By this time he was married and beginning to raise a family. A series of letters to his friend Gianfranceschi tell of harrowing domestic misfortunes, including the death of a baby.

One day his eye caught an advertisement of a competition for a one-act opera in the *Teatro Illustrato*, house magazine of the publishing firm of Edoardo Sonzogno. Mascagni struck out in a new direction with a plot taken from Giovanni Verga's highly successful play of Sicilian peasant life. The manuscript was hurriedly finished, taken to the post office just in time before the expiration date. (According to one account, he had originally intended to submit an act of *Guglielmo Radcliff*, and it was his wife, Lina, who took it upon herself behind her husband's back to send *Cavalleria Rusticana* instead — a likely story!) The opera was at first rejected by The Milanese Publishers who were seeking one-act operas only. Mascagni quickly adjusted the work to a one-act opera, which was later accepted. After weeks of anxious waiting, Mascagni finally received the news that he had been awarded the prize.

The unimaginable success of *Cavalleria Rusticana* after its premiere transformed Mascagni's career. Mascagni was, in many ways, a victim of the 20th century, where his music would be judged superfluous and his choices and allegiances would prove personally disastrous, right up to his death in 1945. Though his career after the turn of the 20th century was intermittently successful and gratifying many of his later operas are thrilling entertainments, badly underrated. He was haunted and ultimately frustrated by the long shadows cast on that amazing night in Rome in 1890.

The first public performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana* took place in 1890 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome. It was conducted by Leopoldo Mugnone, with Gemma Bellincioni as Santuzza, Roberto Stagno as Turiddu, and Gaudenzio Salassa as Alfio — to tumultuous applause. Overnight the unknown young bandmaster from Cerignola became the most talked-of composer in Italy and, within months, throughout the whole of Europe.

Mascagni was the musical hero of the hour, and *Cavalleria Rusticana* was performed everywhere. But his later works failed to repeat this success. Of his later operas *L'Amico Fritz* and *Iris*, the latter set in Japan, won some success. Both have provided popular tenor arias. Though *Cavalleria Rusticana*, with its *verisimo* (opera realism) and catchy melodies, still held the stage, this succession of failures involved a steady decline in the composer's reputation.

Pietro Mascagni is one of the most important Italian composers of the turn of the 20th century. The formidable success of his first masterpiece in 1890, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, unfortunately eluded many of his following works. Mascagni however wrote 15 operas, an operetta, several beautiful orchestral and vocal works, as well as songs and piano music. He enjoyed amazing operatic successes during his lifetime, and at the same time pursued a very successful career of conductor. Mascagni's approach to opera differed a lot from that of his friend and rival Puccini, which arguably was one of the factors that led to an under-appreciation of the value of his music by critics.

Cavalleria Rusticana

Mascagni wrote *Cavalleria Rusticana* with the idea that he might enter it in a prestigious competition for one-act operas sponsored by the publishing house, Sonzogno. The source was a short story of the same title by the Italian writer, Giovanni Verga. (Mascagni later claimed that, when the time came, his wife entered the work in the competition without his knowing, while he was still wondering if, instead, he should enter the fourth act of his opera, *Guglielmo Ratcliff*) Mascagni won the Sonzogno competition.

Mascagni's instinct in *Cavalleria Rusticana* was primarily to create, through a series of continuous scenes, a fluid background to the individual passions. Mascagni sketched in the local background from the beginning, including an example of the dialect siciliana within the prelude before the curtain rises, so providing a true prologue to the action in his use of a formal element that breaks with tradition but is consonant with the rustic code of honor of the melodrama. The voice of Turiddu, accompanied by offstage harps, at once places Sicily at the core of the action, in which it reappears several times evoked with a descriptive capacity arguably even greater than Bizet's prelude and the chanson bohémienne.

Mascagni commissioned the libretto from his fellow-citizen, Targioni-Tozzetti, who, worried about his ability to satisfy the precise terms of the competition, enlisted the help of another Livornese writer, Menasci. The libretto was ready in December 1888, the opera in May 1889. Part of it was sent to Puccini and he in turn sent it to his own publisher, Giulio Ricordi, who failed to realize its worth, thus losing a golden opportunity.

Both Leoncavallo and Mascagni submitted their respective works to a famous prize competition in 1890. Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* and Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* were rejected as The Milanese Publishers was seeking one-act operas only. Both composers adjusted their respective works to one-act operas and were later accepted. Needless to say, the opera won the competition and made a fortune for the publishing firm of Edoardo Sonzogno, who had arranged that the short season of the Teatro Costanzi in Rome would include the operas of the three finalists. *Cavalleria Rusticana* came first, premiering May 17, 1890 in Rome and igniting such a frenzy in Italian audiences that it is generally recognized as the first successful opera in the vivid style known as *verismo* (opera realism).

The premiere of *Cavalleria Rusticana* began inauspiciously. The Teatro Costanzi in Rome was only half-filled, but the audience greeted the opera with hysterical ovations. Word of its success spread instantly and, within a year, it had been performed around the world. There were places in Italy where audiences demanded, as they cheered a performance, that the entire opera be repeated. Such euphoria led to the composer being hailed immediately as the long-sought successor to Giuseppe Verdi, the aging master of modern Italian opera.

Mascagni's masterpiece was a resounding success and, within a few months, had been rapturously received in all the principal cities of Europe and America. For over a century it has found a place in the repertory of leading singers and conductors from Mahler, who conducted it in Budapest and included it in the programs of the Vienna Staatsoper, through Levi and Weingartner and on to Karajan, among more recent performers.

Cavalleria Rusticana represents one of the most remarkable success stories in the history of opera. The work achieved a perfect balance between all its components, the dominant feature still being

stylization in the 19th-century sense. It was soon evident that this national path led nowhere, and the spirit of his unrepeatable masterpiece haunted its composer for the rest of his life.

Today *Cavalleria* is usually paired with Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, a work of similar concision from which it has become virtually inseparable. "Cav," and the opera, "Pagliacci" (often called Cav-Pag) have provided a favorite double bill for years and are in fact linked, perhaps indelibly, in the mind of the opera public. The careers of Leoncavallo (composer of *Pagliacci*) and Mascagni are remarkably similar in that each achieved lasting fame with a single opera, while their other works fell into comparative obscurity.

Cavalleria Rusticana: The Video (1978)

Starring Plácido Domingo and Tatiana Troyanos; conducted by James Levine



This was first telecast by the Met in 1978. The video and audio have been restored and, while understandably not state of the art by today's standards, this DVD is certainly very watchable and listenable.

In both Cav and Pag, Domingo sings with a passion and demonstrates why he went on to have a superstar career. The late Tatiana Troyanos delivers a knockout Santuzza. In Pag, Sherrill Milnes is in excellent voice as Tonio and brings down the house after the Prologue. The superb singing actress Teresa Stratas IS Nedda. Every gesture and facial expression is perfect. The rest of the Met cast is wonderful and Franco Zeffirelli's production is very convincing.

Interestingly, the same Zeffirelli Cav-Pag production is what Pavarotti sings in his 1984 film performance. And, Teresa Stratas (6 years later) is once again an amazing Nedda. I wouldn't be without either DVD. However, this 1978 Met Cav-Pag is a must for any opera fan.