Synopsis

Cavalleria Rusticana

A village in southern Italy, circa 1900

At dawn on Easter Sunday, Turiddu is heard in the distance singing of his love for Lola, wife of the carter Alfio. She and Turiddu had been a couple before he went to join the army. When he returned and found her married to Alfio, he took up with Santuzza and seduced her, but now has abandoned her and rekindled his relationship with Lola. Later in the morning, a distraught Santuzza approaches the tavern of Mamma Lucia, Turiddu's mother, who tells her that her son is away buying wine. But Santuzza knows that Turiddu has been seen during the night in the village. Alfio arrives with a group of men, boasting of his horses—and of Lola. He asks Mamma Lucia if she has any more of her good wine. When she says that Turiddu has gone to get more, Alfio replies that he saw the other man near his house that same morning. Lucia is surprised but Santuzza tells her to keep quiet. As the villagers follow the procession to church, Santuzza stays behind and pours out her grief about Turiddu to Mamma Lucia. The old woman expresses her pity, then also leaves for mass. Turiddu appears and is confronted by Santuzza about his affair with Lola but denies her accusations. Just then Lola passes by on her way to church. She mocks Santuzza, and Turiddu turns to follow her, but Santuzza begs him to stay and implores him not to abandon her. Turiddu refuses to listen and leaves, cursed by Santuzza. Alfio arrives, late for mass. Santuzza tells him that Lola went to church with Turiddu and reveals that his wife has been cheating on him. In a rage, Alfio swears to get even and rushes off, leaving behind the now conscience-stricken Santuzza.

Returning from the church the villagers gather at Mamma Lucia's tavern. Turiddu leads them in a drinking song, but the atmosphere becomes tense when Alfio appears. He refuses Turiddu's offer of wine and instead challenges him to a knife fight. Turiddu admits his guilt but is determined to go through with the fight, for Santuzza's sake as well as for his honor. The two men agree to meet outside the village. Alone with his mother, Turiddu begs her to take care of Santuzza if he doesn't come back, then runs off to the fight. As Mamma Lucia waits anxiously, shouts are heard in the distance. A woman runs in screaming that Turiddu has been killed.

Pagliacci

A village in southern Italy, 1949

Prologue

Tonio the clown announces that what the audience is about to see is a true story and that actors have the same joys and sorrows as other people.

Act I

A small theatrical company has just arrived and Canio, the head of the troupe, advertises the night's performance to the gathered crowd. One of the villagers suggests that Tonio is secretly courting Canio's young wife, Nedda. Canio warns them all that he will not tolerate any flirting offstage—life and theater are not the same. As the crowd disperses, Nedda is left alone, disturbed by her husband's jealousy. She looks up to the sky, envying the birds their freedom. Tonio appears and tries to force himself on her but she beats him back and he retreats, swearing revenge. In fact, Nedda does have a lover—Silvio, a young peasant, who suddenly appears. The two reaffirm their love and Silvio persuades Nedda to run away with him that night. Tonio, who has returned and overheard the end of their conversation, alerts Canio, but Silvio manages to slip away unrecognized. Canio violently threatens Nedda but she refuses to reveal her lover's name. Beppe, another member of the troupe, restrains Canio, and Tonio advises him to wait until the evening's performance to catch the culprit. Alone, Canio gives in to his despair—he must play the clown even though his heart is breaking.

Act II

That evening, the villagers assemble to watch the performance, Silvio among them. Beppe plays Harlequin, who serenades Columbine, played by Nedda. He dismisses her buffoonish servant Taddeo, played by Tonio, and over dinner the two sweethearts plot to poison Columbine's husband Pagliaccio, played by Canio. When Pagliaccio unexpectedly appears, Harlequin slips away. Taddeo maliciously assures Pagliaccio of his wife's innocence, which ignites Canio's jealousy. Forgetting his role and the play, he demands that Nedda tell him the name of her lover. She tries to continue with the performance, the audience enthralled by its realism, until Canio snaps. In a fit of rage he stabs Nedda and then Silvio, who rushes to her aid. Turning to the horrified crowd, Tonio announces that the comedy is over.

Pietro Mascagni

Cavalleria Rusticana

Premiere: Teatro Costanzi, Rome, 1890

Cavalleria Rusticana is a story of passion and jealousy in a rough Sicilian village, told with the force of primal myth. The opera is based on the highly influential short story of the same name by Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga, which created a sensation with its straightforward yet evocative prose so radically different from the flowery, dense style that had been common in Italian literature. Mascagni created a musical counterpart to Verga's achievement—his score seems a direct expression of the characters' emotions without any comment or adornment on the part of its author. *Cavalleria* won first prize in a competition for one-act operas by emerging composers (Puccini was another contestant) and took the operatic world by storm at its premiere. It earned delirious praise and equally vehement antipathy and has never been out of the core repertory. Its success was crucial in launching the verismo movement in opera, inspiring other composers to turn to stories and characters from real life (and often from society's grungier elements). The influence of verismo reached well beyond the dozen operas that can safely be categorized as the core of the genre (perhaps most famously Puccini's *La Bohème* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*). It is a strain that has also run through the neo-realist Italian cinematic masterpieces of the mid-20th century, and more recently can be seen in the films of such directors as Lars von Trier. *Cavalleria Rusticana*, then, is among the most influential operas and one of the most important in terms of defining the art form as a whole. But beyond any historical considerations, it remains a vital music drama as gripping in many ways as it was at its first performance. The intense characterizations and the plot with its sense of moving toward a cataclysmic ending, all of it deftly woven into an evocative setting, make it one of the most relentlessly exciting works in the repertory.

The Creators

Pietro Mascagni (1863–1945) studied at the Milan Conservatory with Amilcare Ponchielli and even shared a small apartment for a while with fellow student Giacomo Puccini. *Cavalleria Rusticana* made him rich and famous literally overnight, and although he was not the one-hit wonder he has been labeled by non-Italian critics, his long, varied, and controversial career never quite hit the same apex again. The then-unknown librettists Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci earned praise for their excellent work on *Cavalleria Rusticana* and went on to provide other libretti for Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and other composers of the day. Author Giovanni Verga (1840–1922) was born in Catania, Sicily, and used the imagery of his native land in his novels and stories. Among these, *Cavalleria Rusticana* was perhaps the most celebrated, packing a wallop in a mere four pages of razor-sharp prose. Verga adapted the story into a play, featuring the legendary actress Eleanora Duse, that achieved great fame and notoriety in Italy.

The Setting

The setting of *Cavalleria Rusticana* in the piazza of a Sicilian village is not merely picturesque. The village is, in a sense, a character in the opera, and is key to its dramatic and musical weight. The place is crude, untouched by modernity, close to nature's cycles of life and death and the primitive human rituals associated with them. It's dirt-poor but stabilized by codes of conduct and mores so ancient that no one remembers—or questions—their original intent. The drama unfolds on Easter Sunday. David McVicar's new Met production sets the action around 1900, a few years after the opera's composition.

The Music

The score of *Cavalleria* is direct, unadorned, and honest. Early critics who complained of its crassness and lack of artistry were paying it an unwitting compliment. The famous intermezzo, often heard outside the context of the opera, summarizes its musical plan: gorgeous, melancholy melody carried by unison strings with very little harmonization. The opera opens with the tenor's traditional Sicilian song, performed from a distance and flowing across the empty stage, suggesting a deep connection between characters and their environment. This was a startling effect in 1890 (and the same idea appeared hardly less startling 50 years later in the musical *Oklahoma!*). The impassioned vocal solos in *Cavalleria Rusticana* used to be sung with a considerable amount of extra-musical effects, such as sobs, gasps, and shouted words, especially in Italy. This delivery is less in style now. Some artists have pointed out that the secret is to make the audience believe a word has been screamed when it was, in fact, sung. Santuzza, the leading female role, is sung by both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos: her great aria, "Voi lo sapete," is a stirring challenge to the singer's musical and dramatic abilities, and her solo voice leads the impressive Easter Chorus. The tenor's equally impassioned farewell, "Mamma, quel vino è generoso," amounts to a suicide aria as all-encompassing as any in opera, while his confrontational duet with Santuzza becomes a clash of archetypes.

Ruggero Leoncavallo

Pagliacci

Premiere: Teatro dal Verme, Milan, 1892

Pagliacci is a tale of jealousy and murder among a troupe of traveling clowns, a look at the intersection of art and life so definitive that it has in many people's minds come to represent all opera. Written hot on the heels of the success of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Pagliacci* consciously utilizes the same verismo techniques in its musical and dramatic core and yet remains a distinct and equally powerful work of theater. While *Cavalleria* reveled in the realism of a village whose mores were unchanged since pre-history, the drama of *Pagliacci* found a way to expand the narrative vision of the verismo movement: the second half of the opera is a sort of opera-within-an-opera, and the frivolity of the subject of adultery in the traditional *commedia dell'arte* presentation of the traveling clowns becomes one of the driving forces of the climactic murder. By drawing this sort of a narrative frame around the on-stage action, Leoncavallo could harness all its irony, tradition, and symbolism while remaining firmly in realism, and using the artifice of theater to emphasize, rather than obscure, the truth of human emotion. *Pagliacci*, no less than *Cavalleria*, has seared itself onto the communal conscious well beyond the opera house, and the poignant image of the clown working to make an audience laugh while in a state of despair reverberates to the present day.

The Creator

Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857–1919) studied music in his native Naples and became an ardent admirer of Richard Wagner. He wrote all his own libretti, as Wagner had, and had a checkered, rather picaresque career from Cairo to Berlin. Along with several others, he contributed to the libretto of Puccini's hit *Manon Lescaut* before the two parted ways. The most notable wedge between them came when Puccini declared he was setting *La Bohème* as an opera, after Leoncavallo had already announced the same intention to the press. Both were successfully staged, and although Puccini's has become one of the world's most popular operas, Leoncavallo's is still heard on occasion and has received some lasting attention. In fact, several of Leoncavallo's other works have received ongoing acclaim in Italy, but the composer's international reputation rests squarely on his youthful verismo hit.

The Setting

Pagliacci is set in a village in Calabria, in southern Italy. In the mid-19th century, traveling troupes of commedia dell'arte players, interpreting the stock characters of Harlequin, Columbine, and others, were a familiar feature of this landscape. The specified time is the Feast of the Assumption (August 15), a major holiday in Italy. The current production moves the setting to the late 1940s, creating a sense that the story is taking place in the same village as *Cavalleria Rusticana*, two generations later.

The Music

In some ways, the score of *Pagliacci* expresses verismo ideals even more directly than *Cavalleria*, most notably in the unity of each scene and the seamless transitions between individual solos. After some early scene painting (including the pretty bell chorus), there is scarcely a line of music that does not advance the swift action of the drama. The soprano's aria, "Stridono lassù," shows that even verismo works demand beauty of tone. Likewise, Harlequin's serenade requires elegant phrasing, especially since it is delivered within the framework of a play-within-the-opera. Tonio's opening prologue, "Si può?," a daunting solo traditionally delivered in front of the curtain, is a magnificent tour de force for the baritone (and a superb dramatic touch). There is, as in *Cavalleria*, a powerful orchestral intermezzo, but *Pagliacci* is most noted for its Act I climax, the tenor aria "Vesti la giubba," one of the world's most familiar melodies. It was, in Caruso's rendition, the recording industry's first million-seller.

Cavalleria Rusticana *and* Pagliacci *at the Met*

Cavalleria was first performed by the Met on tour in Chicago in December 1891, paired with Act I of Verdi's *La Traviata*. *Pagliacci* followed in December 1893 at the opera house in New York, in a double bill with Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. The Met was the first opera company to present *Cav/Pag* together on December 22, 1893, and this combination soon became standard practice around the world, but occasional pairings with other operas were still common into the early 20th century. *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* individually shared the Met stage with such diverse works as *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Don Pasquale*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La Fille du Régiment*, *Il Trovatore*, *Rigoletto*, *La Bohème*, and even Rimsky-Korsakov's *Le Coq d'Or*. An unlikely double bill of *Pagliacci* and *Hansel and Gretel* was especially popular, with almost 100 performances between 1906 and 1938. Among the notable early interpreters of the leading roles were Emma Eames, Emma Calvé, Johanna Gadski, Olive Fremstad, Emmy Destinn, and Rosa Ponselle (Santuzza), Francesco Tamagno and Enrico Caruso (Turiddu), Nellie Melba, Destinn, Lucrezia Bori, Claudia Muzio, and Queena Mario (Nedda), Caruso (more than 100 performances) and Giovanni Martinelli (Canio), and Pasquale Amato (Tonio). A new production in 1951 starred Zinka Milanov and Richard Tucker in *Cavalleria* and Delia Rigal, Ramón Vinay, and Leonard Warren

in *Pagliacci*. This was succeeded by another new staging in 1958, with Lucine Amara as Nedda, Mario Del Monaco as Canio, and Milanov and Warren reprising their roles. The following production, directed and designed by Franco Zeffirelli, premiered in 1970 with Leonard Bernstein conducting *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Fausto Cleva conducting *Pagliacci* and a cast that included Grace Bumbry and Franco Corelli in *Cavalleria* and Amara, Richard Tucker, and Sherrill Milnes in *Pagliacci*. Among the many other artists who have appeared in the two operas since the late 1950s are Giulietta Simionato, Eileen Farrell, Fiorenza Cossotto, and Tatiana Troyanos (Santuzza), Teresa Stratas and Diana Soviero (Nedda), Jon Vickers, James McCracken, and Giuseppe Giacomini (Canio), and Cornell MacNeil and Juan Pons (Tonio). Tenors who have faced the challenge of taking on both leading roles include Plácido Domingo, Roberto Alagna, and José Cura. The Met's latest new production, directed by David McVicar, opens in April 2015 with Eva-Maria Westbroek as Santuzza, Patricia Racette as Nedda, Marcelo Álvarez singing Turiddu and Canio, George Gagnidze as Alfio and Tonio, and Fabio Luisi conducting.

Program Note

In 1888 Pietro Mascagni was a failure. His father was a respectable journeyman baker who didn't want any musicians in the family, but the young Mascagni had gone to the Milan Conservatory anyway. He didn't like it, though, finding the disciplines of counterpoint and fugue not suited to his temperament. He soon left to become a conductor in an itinerant opera company, and when that folded he settled in a small town and gave piano lessons.

Then, in 1888, the publishing house of Sonzogno arranged a contest for one-act operas. Mascagni turned to a work of Giovanni Verga's—the short story *Cavalleria Rusticana*, which had been adapted as a play—and within a few short months wrote an opera. It beat out 72 other contestants and had its triumphant premiere in Rome in 1890. Even the aged Verdi, who had written *Otello* but not yet *Falstaff*, conceded that *Cavalleria Rusticana* wasn't bad: "It has all the elements of success." Although Mascagni lived until 1945 and wrote more than a dozen other operas, his reputation still rests on his early masterpiece, composed when he was 25.

Some time after *Cavalleria*'s premiere, another unsuccessful young man who was earning his living as an accompanist and café pianist set out to try his hand at a similar work. Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* opened at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan in May 1892, two years after *Cavalleria*, creating the same kind of sensation. The following year, the Met was the first opera company to present the two works together in one evening—a pairing that soon became standard practice.

In the 1890s both *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* were thought to represent something new: Tonio, in the familiar prologue to Leoncavallo's opera, goes a way toward telling us what. He appears in front of the curtain to reassure us that this is not just a story; instead he's bringing us a slice of life. (In fact, Leoncavallo claimed, almost certainly falsely, that he had taken his story from an actual court case that his father, a magistrate, had tried.) We will see human passions as they work themselves out in the real world, Tonio continues—love and hatred, woe, howlings of rage, and scornful laughter.

Of course, opera had depicted such emotions for a long, long time—all of these elements occur in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, written more than 100 years earlier. What is new is the social position of the characters. With *Cav* and *Pag*, along with Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), we move away from dramas about people of noble birth acted out in remote historical settings. In early opera, the action on the stage reflected the preoccupations of the aristocratic audience; later, for audiences of a wider social range, the music served to make the emotions of remote characters accessible, to show that persons of high rank are swayed by the same passions as the audience that listens. (Though in fairness to a few other antecedents, Verdi's *Luisa Miller* is about a farmer's daughter; and though a baron and a marquis make incidental appearances, *La Traviata* is about what happens when the respectable middle-class gets involved with the demi-monde.) In the music of *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* we find the emotions of the lowborn ennobled, given size and importance. Characters in these operas frequent taverns and go

to blacksmiths and work in the fields and rub down donkeys—and experience love and hatred, woe, howlings of rage, and scornful laughter; these are part of what Verdi meant by "the elements of success." The emphasis in the verismo genre is on the size of emotion, as a look at some of the marks of expression in the score of *Cavalleria* demonstrates: *con disperazione*, *con angoscia*, *con dolore*, *con amarezza* ("with bitterness"), *nel colma dell'ira* ("at a peak of fury"), *con forza*, and, of course, *con suprema passione*.

Much has been made of the swiftness of action in these operas, and indeed there are striking, sudden transformations, mostly brought about by emotional upheaval. After the few measures of Santuzza's narrative, the affable Alfio sings that his love for Lola has turned to hatred; wildly he calls for vengeance and blood. Alfio and Turiddu go off together and a moment later a peasant woman screams that Turiddu has been killed; Canio erupts and sings that he is no longer a clown. What Shaw wrote of *Cavalleria* is equally true of its partner: the opera, he said, is "a youthfully vigorous piece of work, with abundant snatches of melody broken obstreperously off on one dramatic pretext or another."

But it is also necessary to observe that at the same time both operas are slow-moving, traditional pieces, with arias, duets, and choruses formally worked out, before being broken "obstreperously" off. The Easter chorus and drinking song in *Cavalleria*, the bell chorus and Nedda's aria in *Pagliacci* may tell us a little about character, but mostly they sketch in background and atmosphere, and a very prettified version of peasant life it is. *Cavalleria*, in fact, is nearly half over before anything much happens and, oddly, even then most of the real action occurs offstage. For all the violence of the emotions the music depicts, we see only an ear getting bitten. But all the atmospheric musical genre-painting is what gives the culminating events their context and much of their effect: the swiftness of the tragic action is like the swiftness of most of the crucial events in real life, rudely intruding on the ordinariness of the daily.

Critics have always tended to condescend to these operas, especially to *Cavalleria*. And it is true that the emotions in Mascagni's opera are uncomplicated, the tunes sturdy and simple, the orchestration borderline crude. *Pagliacci* is more sophisticated dramatically and musically in its exploitation of the perennial theme of theatrical illusion and reality. But each of the operas has had diverse and even surprising admirers—Puccini, of course, but also Massenet, Debussy, Sibelius, even Gustav Mahler. And for more than 120 years the loyalty of the public has never once wavered. That's the kind of prolonged success it's hard to argue with.

—Richard Dyer