



Cavalleria Rusticana

Synopsis

Santuzza *a young peasant woman* soprano
Turiddu *a young peasant* tenor
Lucia *his mother, an innkeeper* contralto
Alfio *a carrier* baritone
Lola *Alfio's wife* mezzo-soprano
Villagers
Setting A village in Sicily on Easter Sunday 1880

Verga's play *Cavalleria rusticana* received its first performance in the Teatro Carignano, Turin, on 14 January 1884 with Eleanora Duse as Santuzza. Mascagni saw it less than a month later in Milan but did not think of making it into an opera until June 1888, when he read in *Il secolo* that the publisher Sonzogno had announced the second competition for a one-act opera (Puccini had unsuccessfully submitted *Le villi* for the first). 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 the publisher Giulio Ricordi, who failed to realize its worth, thus losing a golden opportunity. 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. Mascagni's masterpiece, interpreted by Gemma Bellincioni and Roberto Stagno and conducted by Leopoldo Mugnone, 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 programmes of the Vienna Staatsoper, through Levi and Weingartner and on to Karajan, among more recent performers. Today *Cavalleria* is usually paired with Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, a work of similar concision from which it has become virtually inseparable.

The plot can be briefly summarized. On Easter morning, Turiddu sings of his love for Lola. Among the people on their way to church is Santuzza, who had been seduced by the young peasant before he returned to his former love, now married to Alfio. Santuzza reproaches him, with entreaties and finally with curses, and tells Alfio of his wife's infidelity. Alfio insults Turiddu, and finally challenges him to a duel. Turiddu charges his mother to look after Santuzza, and is killed in the fight.

It has often been said that Verga's *Cavalleria* inaugurated the *verismo* period in Italian theatre. Mascagni stressed his adherence to the play as his source, insisting that it was Verga's treatment of the subject which had spurred him to set it and rejecting the idea of a close affinity between his opera and Bizet's *Carmen*. But *Cavalleria* is as closely linked to the French opera, which, as the box-office hit of the day, was widely admired and imitated, as it is to Verga's text, which was performed everywhere and so available to any composer in need of a good subject. It was used by Gastaldon for his *La mala Pasqua!*, which was withdrawn from the competition won by Mascagni so that it could be

performed at the Costanzi some weeks before the winning entries.

Carmen was in reality a decisive model for the dramatic composition of *Cavalleria*, not only because jealousy is in both cases the driving force of the action and its bloody outcome (presented more realistically on stage in the French work), but above all because Bizet had chosen a subject set not in the remote East as was then fashionable but under more familiar Mediterranean skies, clearly indicating a shift in stylistic influence. 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 honour 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*.

The entire structure of *Cavalleria*, in which almost all the action occurs while the Easter Mass is taking place in the church, mirrors Act 4 of *Carmen*, where the enthusiasm of the spectators at the bullfight serves as background to the murder of the Spanish gypsy. But here too Mascagni outdoes his model, in which collective pleasure is contrasted with individual tragedy and the new lover with the old, because the church that dominates the square, and the popular devotion expressed in the Easter hymn, symbolize the violated innocence of Santuzza, the more dishonoured by Alfio's accusation.

All the tragic elements of the story are concentrated in a musical framework calculated to convey maximum immediacy. In this Mascagni followed a line of logical adherence to the traditional plan of 19th-century opera, returning to the closed numbers already abandoned by Verdi, a regressive step compared with *Otello* (1887). Mascagni's aim was to provide himself with a traditional channel of communication, but he treated his material with an originality first seen in the prelude, before the curtain rises: although it appears at first to be typical in its exposition of the principal melodies of the work, the way in which they are later recalled re-evokes its entire structure in the listener's memory, with the orchestral crescendo of the prelude interrupted by the siciliana and resumed more strongly when the voice behind the curtain ceases. In the continuation of the duet between Santuzza and Turiddu, the central point of the drama, the reprise of the prelude is in the orchestra only, intensifying the emotion of the concluding *appassionato* section. Mascagni attained his aim of creating an opera realistically dominated by sentiment by using formal means more effective in their subtlety than openly veristic and impassioned ones, of which there are indeed few. Conscious of the need to write an 'Italian' work, he made use above all of the special qualities of the closed number and its interaction with recitative. The melody on the lower strings that accompanies Santuzza's entrance is in effect a leitmotif, reminiscent of the theme that concludes the overture to *Carmen*. In using it in proximity to the song of Alfio, Turiddu's executioner, which immediately follows, Mascagni links him with Santuzza as different facets of a common destiny, the motif itself being linked not so much to Santuzza as to the deadly destiny she brings. It reappears at all the high points of the drama, from the *romanza* to the 'Mala Pasqua' she tragically hurls at Turiddu, before concluding the opera and so revealing itself as the musical symbol of the tragic ending. This sense of conclusion is reinforced by the use of the key of F at crucial moments, from the prelude (in the major) to the central series of numbers and the Intermezzo, and to the final statement, in the minor, of the 'tragedy' motif.

Mascagni's instinct was thus primarily to create, through a series of continuous scenes, a fluid background to the individual passions. In the first scene, devoted to the Sicilian peasants, the atmosphere of an important religious feast is conveyed by an attractive orchestral waltz, a barrel-organ piece above which the chorus is heard and which reappears when the church service is over. Turiddu's entrance is delayed until interest in him has been aroused by the siciliana ('O Lola ch'hai di latti la cammisa'). Meanwhile Santuzza's dramatic dialogue with Mamma Lucia, giving the background to the story, precedes the arrival of Alfio; she then leads the chorus of peasants in the powerful prayer ('Inneggiamo, il Signor non è morto') that follows the *Regina coeli* of the offstage chorus. The tripartite *Romanza e Scena* rounds out her portrait in a generous and sensuous but elegant vocal line that remains within the traditional stylized limits: the middle section is skilfully crafted from variants of the tragedy motif, and the number ends with a final reference to the prelude.

Alfio makes his entrance with a character-piece ('Il cavallo scalpita') in which,

like Bizet's toreador, he boasts about his occupation, accompanied by the chorus; but there is in his song an element of ambiguity arising from the syncopation and the sinister nature of the melody and harmony in the middle section, which give the lie without a trace of irony to Alfio's words ('Mi aspetta a casa Lola, che m'ama e mi consola').

The song becomes agitated on Turiddu's entrance: the beginning of his duet with Santuzza ('Tu qui, Santuzza?'), the first of four sections, takes the form of a recitative interspersed with brief arioso passages. The tension approaches a climax but is frozen for a few moments by the simple stornello, 'Fior di gaggiolo', which Lola begins to sing offstage; it explodes with renewed force in the continuation of the duet after she has gone into the church and her melody is recalled on the flute. The situation is resolved in the melodic impulse of the vocal line, with high *appassionato* phrases in the first violins doubled at various octaves by the orchestra, and in the contrast between sonorities and dynamics: the marking *quasi parlato* is placed only on 'Mala Pasqua', though it is often disregarded by the singer. The duet that follows concludes with a fiery cabaletta in F minor for Alfio and Santuzza ('Ad essi non perdono').

All the tension that has accumulated up to this point is channelled into the Intermezzo, a hymn in F based on the melody of the *Regina coeli* with which the service began, metrically varied and doubled by the violins with a simple chorale-like harmonization. Played with the curtain up, it marks the end of the Easter ceremony, but the story continues to unfold, the serenity of village life being contrasted with the passions devouring the main characters.

After the orchestral reprise of the waltz heard at the beginning, mingling with the sound of bells and followed by the chorus, the tonality is raised to G for Turiddu's brindisi, 'Viva il vino spumeggiante', one of the most brilliant drinking-songs in all opera. It conveys well the atmosphere of nervous excitement surrounding Turiddu and Alfio at the moment of the challenge and prepares the tragic ending. The anxious whispering of divided violins accompanies the fragmented recitative in which Turiddu addresses his mother before taking his leave of her ('Mamma, quel vino è generoso') in an impassioned progression towards the top note, a last *cri de coeur* before the cries of the women offstage and the tragedy motif bring the opera to an end.

Evaluation of *Cavalleria rusticana* by present-day criteria necessitates examination of the reasons for its continuing unqualified success. The work achieved a perfect balance between all its components, the dominant feature still being stylization in the 19th-century sense. Even such possible defects as the conventional orchestration and academic harmony have their place in the dramatic characterization, combined with felicitous melodic invention and an original way of handling the standard formal operatic situations so as to please both the traditional Italian opera-going public and that of foreign theatres in a nostalgic frame of mind. Mascagni's masterpiece hastened the end of an epoch by exhausting its possibilities, leaving to Puccini the task of representing Italy in the context of international opera and the fin-de-siècle crisis. 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.

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