

True to Form: The *Verismo* of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*

In a season filled with portrayals of modern humanism, of life in its realistic, troubled, and groundbreaking forms, it is fitting that Michigan Opera Theatre's season begins with a concert presentation of *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890). A consciously Italian realist work, Pietro Mascagni's first opera launched the operatic *verismo* movement. A decade after its premiere, a Roman journalist reflected on the impact of this sensationally successful opera in an article entitled "The Direction and Promises of Italian Art": audiences "had to realize that it was the natural consequence of a new attitude of spirits... It seemed healthy to return to the pure and raw and naked—very naked!—reality. The heroic era was declining; Verdian patriotism had used and abused scepters and swords and tyrants; romanticism had tired us with eternal languors."¹ Mascagni's one-act work featured neither nobles nor pompous heroes of generations prior. *Cavalleria*'s peasant characters and working-class Sicilian environment articulated a new aesthetic perspective for audiences. Idealism became trite. The echoes of the Italian Risorgimento were certainly outdated by the turn of the twentieth century. With its layered soundscapes, streamlined drama, declamatory vocal lines, and use of local dialect, Mascagni's *verismo* opera eschewed the Romanticism of a previous era.

The plot of *Cavalleria rusticana* is derived from Giovanni Verga's short story and play of the same name. Verga, regarded among the forefathers of literary *verismo* in the 1870s, published stories to northern Italian audiences about the ordinary lives of impoverished citizens in his hometown of Catania, a port city in Sicily. Verga published *Cavalleria* in *Vita dei campi* (1880), a collection of novellas and short stories. Also included in this volume is a letter from Verga to fellow writer Salvatore Farina. In it, he lays the groundwork for Italian *verismo*. "In its living contours," Verga describes, stories "will preserve no imprint of the mind that brought it to life, no shadow of the imagination that first conceived it."² Works of *verismo* should appear as natural, or as true to reality, as possible. In 1884, Verga adapted the short story

¹ "L'indirizzo e le promesse dell'arte italiana," *Rivista d'Italia*, 1902, 3, no. 11, (November 1902), 860.

² Giovanni Verga, "Gramigna's Mistress," in *Cavalleria Rusticana and Other Stories*, trans. G.H. McWilliam (London: Penguin, 1999), 94.

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as a play. The play was such a hit that Mascagni and his librettist, Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti, chose Verga's staged adaptation as the foundation for his entry for the 1888 Sonzogno competition for young opera composers. They hoped that the play's popularity would appeal to the Milanese judges and northern Italian audiences. It evidently did.

Taken in full, the fast-paced, layered scenes of *Cavalleria rusticana* create a kaleidoscopic soundscape, capturing the many shades of human complexity that underlie even the simplest bucolic setting. In creating a multifaceted, operatic version of *verismo*, Mascagni also reinforces the troubling and political undertones of this artistic movement as well. The opera's hymns, antiphons, and songs of celebration provide an idealistic sonic backdrop that is constantly juxtaposed with the dark, richly vocal drama of the local Sicilian characters, offering a pessimistic, regional view of Italian realism. This mixture of expressive registers complements contemporary images of southern Italy (the *Mezzogiorno*) that were often conjured up by northern Italian journalists, photographers, and intellectuals in the late nineteenth century. Following the Italian Unification in the 1860s, the nation's south was imagined as a region that was uncivilized, resistant to national uniformity and modernity. Marginalized by the north, southern Italy was considered idyllically agrarian, yet socially deprived. *Cavalleria rusticana*'s explorations of character deviance—of passionate adultery, violence, and alcoholism—support these visions. Mascagni relies on local color, or *tinta*, to convey his characters' deviancy, suggesting an intrinsic relationship between a distinctly southern Italian identity and its association with human vice. The textual elements of *Cavalleria* augment this *verismo*-specific vision of Italianness as well. Mascagni mixes local Sicilian dialect, Latin, and modern standard Italian throughout the opera. These linguistic choices portray the characters' "southernness" not only as distinctive, but literally deviating from a standard language that was actively being formed in Italy at this time.

Mascagni insisted on his faithfulness to Verga's original text by featuring the story's love triangle, quick-paced dialogue, Sicilian setting and dialect, and the characters' coarseness. Following a brief orchestral introduction, Turridu sings a pastoral *siciliana* about his adulterous lover, Lola, before dawn breaks. Soft harps resembling a strummed guitar accompany his sensual, offstage song, the text's

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dialect derived from the original story. The day rises to a bustling square on Easter morning. A chorus of villagers emerges to welcome the day, singing paeans to spring and a hymn to the Virgin Mary as bells toll. A shadowy leitmotif on low strings sounds at the opening of the following scene, when Santuzza, Turridu's naïve lover, visits Lucia, Turridu's mother.



The theme, which reoccurs many times throughout the opera, reveals that the pastoral quality of the scene is merely a façade. Darkness lies beneath the community's surface. Suspecting Turridu has been unfaithful to her, Santuzza asks Lucia where he has gone. The orchestra shifts energetically to accompany the bold entrance of Alfio, Lola's husband. Tensions rise between Alfio, Turridu, and Lola, but an offstage iteration of the *Regina coeli* interrupts their secular affairs. In the following Romanza, Santuzza returns to Lucia to disclose all that has ensued. With alternations of gentle lyricism and dramatic exclamation, Santuzza evokes pity in Turridu's mother. A three-part duet ensues between Santuzza and Turridu, the leitmotif weaving through their tense exchanges. Santuzza reveals that she knows of his affair just as Lola's *stornello* interrupts from a distance. Her street song, "Fior di gaggiolo," initiates an uncomfortable exchange between the three. Turned off by Santuzza's cloying jealousy, Turridu brutally rejects her. The spurned lover finds Alfio, the scene ending with her impassioned cries of shame and his thirst for blood. The following Intermezzo recalls the *Regina coeli*, indicating the passing of Easter Mass. After the service, the chorus disperses in happy song while Turridu heads to the tavern, launching into the *brindisi*, "Viva il vino spumeggiante." The chorus joins in drunken merriment until Alfio appears. Refusing to imbibe, Alfio dampens the mood, and the crowd disperses, sensing danger. The two agree to a fight to the death, initiated in traditional Sicilian fashion by an embrace and bite to the ear. A brief

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reminiscence of the tragic leitmotif sounds during their final, solemn exchange. A charged duet arises as Turridu returns to Lucia to bid her farewell. Dissonant orchestration accompanies screams from a distance, pronouncing Turridu's death. Villagers rush in as Lucia cries in agony and Santuzza faints, ending the opera.

Though the realism of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* carries both innovative and historically troubling weight, we learn an important lesson about the early origins of operatic realism, one that makes our experience as listeners and spectators all the more human. The stark "realities" of Italian *verismo* are at once messy, moving, and subjective, informed by cultural biases and political agendas, as art often is. We can hear and hold this irony as modern audiences, listen thoughtfully and self-reflectively to such histories—to adapt Verga's own words from long ago—"of reality as it was, or as it should have been."³

³ Giovanni Verga, *I malavoglia* [*The House by the Medlar Tree*], translated by Raymond Rosenthal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 5.