

BY FRED PLOTKIN

TRUE SOUTH

The Italianissimo
Cavalleria Rusticana
and *Pagliacci*

Without any question, the most popular double bill in all of opera is Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. Audiences have always been moved by the gorgeous music and sure-fire emotional impact of these two works. Both were submitted to a competition in 1890 sponsored by Sonzogno, an important Italian music publisher that sought to develop new talent and repertory. (The rule was that the opera be in one act. The winner was *Cavalleria Rusticana*. *Pagliacci* was not disqualified even though, technically speaking, it is made of two acts that run continuously.)

While there are countless operas set throughout Italy, especially in Venice and Rome, a special group of them takes place in the south, the part of the nation that looms large in the global imagination because many of the immigrants who left Italy came from regions such as Campania (and its capital, Naples), Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily. What's more, Southern Italy has been a setting for many operas by leading composers, including Mozart (Naples in *Così fan tutte*), Bellini (Sicily in *Il Pirata*), Rossini (Siracusa in *Tancredi*), Verdi (Palermo in *I Vespri Siciliani*), and even Wagner in his early comedy, *Das Liebesverbot*, which is set in Palermo.

The way they were originally intended, *Cavalleria Rusticana* takes place in Sicily and *Pagliacci* is set in rural Calabria. Unlike operas that seem to have Southern Italy as a backdrop, *Cav* and *Pag* are entirely informed by the life, suffering, and insistent rhythms of changing seasons and religious celebrations. The fact that *Cav* takes

"Rustic chivalry" may require a certain behavioral code toward outsiders or those who do not adhere to the norms and traditions of the village (such as circus people). But if their behavior is out of bounds, retribution is customary. The men in both these operas fight and kill each other over the question of honor (*onore*). As is often the case in opera, a man may lose his life, but it is the heroine (Santuzza in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Nedda in *Pagliacci*) whose sufferings we connect to most. Their reactions are part of the powerful storytelling and music which these composers knew how to deploy with great effect.

The style of these works is often referred to as *verismo*, a term that has been corrupted through the decades. The word derives from *vero* or *verità*, both of which connote truthfulness but may also imply reality. In our own times, in which "reality television" seldom has much to do with truthfulness or realism, it is hard to know what to believe. Scholars who say that *verismo* began in 1890 with these two operas ignore the fact that realism and truthfulness existed in earlier operas, most notably *La Traviata* (1853) in which Verdi dealt with contemporary characters and used his opera as a mirror to his audience and suggest that they were being hypocritical as judges of morality.

Perhaps a better way to think of *verismo* is to view characters in its operas as having to deal with the rigors of everyday life, including poverty, illness, and violence. As often as not, the language of the libretto will include simple words and direct speech and might be spoken in dialect. This stands in contrast to the more literary

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place on Easter Sunday and *Pag* is set on Ferragosto (August 15, the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin into Heaven) is no coincidence. The religious underpinnings amplified audience perceptions of these works' characters when the operas were new. Because these are holidays when families gather, the townspeople in both operas impart an important sense of cohesive community.

A key to understanding the traditional life of rural Calabria and Sicily comes in acknowledging the citizenry's great need for structure. This is provided, above all, by family, but also by church and occasionally by outside individuals. Since ancient times, southerners have sought protection from troubles such as poverty, plague, earthquakes, drought, and foreign occupation. While prayer may resolve some of these problems, others are said to require intervention from so-called men of honor. This might partly explain the origin of the Mafia, which was originally a form of protection, not a criminal organization. Loyalty was expected by the family or individual who provided protection.

You can find these sentiments in subtle ways in both operas.

Left: Keeping with Sicilian custom, Turiddu bites Alfio's ear, signifying a fight to the death. The climactic scene from Cavalleria Rusticana is depicted by the artist Rauzzini in an 1891 oleograph.

usage found in works about larger-than-life characters.

Cavalleria Rusticana (Rustic Chivalry) is based on a novella by Giovanni Verga that became a famous play. For audiences in the 1880s in central and northern Italy, seeing characters in native costume, speaking in dialect and drinking wine from large jugs, was akin to watching a documentary on a foreign civilization. Italy only unified as a nation in the 1860s and northern cities such as Milan or Turin had much more in common with Paris than with Naples or Palermo.

Cav premiered in Rome in 1890 and even that city, only recently made the capital of a united Italy, had little in common with life further south. The opera is about Santuzza, whose name is a Sicilianized one that implies "saint gone wrong." She is a good woman who has been excommunicated because of her relationship (and pregnancy) with Turiddu, who has abandoned her for a married woman. Turiddu's mother, Mamma Lucia, owns a tavern that sells powerful wine (Turiddu describes it as "generoso"), and she is the one person who talks to Santuzza, in part because she senses that her son is endangered because of his recklessness.

Pagliacci (Clowns) is the story of an itinerant group of commedia dell'arte performers who pitch a tent in Montalto, Calabria on Ferragosto and announce to the locals that there will be a show an



Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* inspired Federico Fellini's iconic 1954 film *La Strada*, starring (from left to right) Giulietta Masina (as Gelsomina), Anthony Quinn (Zampanò), and Richard Basehart (*The Fool*).

hour before sunset (“un grande spettacolo a ventitre ore”). Circuses in Italy date back to at least the time of the Roman Empire. Until very recently, small circus troupes would ply the backroads of rural Italy, going to towns without theaters.

The iconography of *Pagliacci* is central to Federico Fellini’s classic film *La Strada* (1954), a story of traveling players in the rural south. A mix of Canio and Tonio, the cruel and jealous Zampanò (whose name must derive from *zampogna*, the shepherd bagpipe one hears in the opera) travels with Gelsomina (Nedda in the opera), a timid woman whose pathos and humanity elicit sympathy from everyone except Zampanò. The expression of caring from a happy-go-lucky character called the Fool (the counterpart of Silvio in the opera) leads to Gelsomina’s tragic demise.

In rural Calabria, Ferragosto is a rare day off for poor people who must work seven days a week to earn a living. When the touring troupe of comic players arrive to perform, the entire town gathers in great anticipation and watches the clowns (*pagliacci*) act out a comedy about infidelity. In fact, this is what has been happening in real life as Canio, the lead actor, knows that his wife Nedda has been having an affair with Silvio, a younger man. The audience onstage watches with excitement and then horror as reality merges with the story being told by the performers. Comedy turns to tragedy as Canio kills Nedda and then Silvio.

Initially, many opera companies chose *Pagliacci* to start the evening that concluded with *Cavalleria Rusticana*. While it has been customary for more than a century to pair these two operas

for an evening program, they are not always presented that way. At its first performance in the Metropolitan Opera House in 1891, *Cavalleria Rusticana* was preceded by Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*. The Met first paired *Cav* and *Pag* in 1893. It has been presented with works as diverse as Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Le Coq d’Or* and, even, Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel*.

Pagliacci is often presented on its own or has been paired with a ballet or operas as diverse as Puccini’s dark comedy *Gianni Schicchi* or Richard Strauss’ lurid *Salome*. Both operas are audience favorites. Purists insist that *Cav* is the superior work because of its flawless construction and gorgeous music. Others prefer *Pagliacci* for its powerful final scene. In the not-too-distant past, companies such as the New York City Opera liked to stage *Cav* and *Pag* as either a matinee or evening performance on a weekend with *Carmen*. Why? Because all three works usually include a horse. By presenting them all in the same day, the company only paid one horse rental fee and saved on insurance and stage personnel.

However they are presented and for whatever reason, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* are a pleasure to rediscover and enjoy. While no work of art can be called perfect, these two masterpieces come very close. And they remind us that opera can uniquely represent a special kind of truth that is at its most rewarding and gratifying when we don’t attempt to analyze it but simply give ourselves over to the music and story. 🌸

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