

## Testimonies of Passion and Pride:

# CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA and PAGLIACCI in SAN FRANCISCO

For more than a century, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* have been regular presences in the opera houses of California and around the world. If we dig deeper into San Francisco history, we discover fascinating tales of touring composers and ambitious dreams of enterprising immigrants—down to the very roots of San Francisco Opera.

### Mascagni and Leoncavallo Go West

By the turn of the 20th century, both Pietro Mascagni and Ruggero Leoncavallo had achieved a high level of fame in their home country. The two composers shared similar career trajectories: both were prolific and ambitious artists who strived for global recognition beyond their most popular works, *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci*. When the opportunity arrived, they both enthusiastically embarked upon tours of the U.S.

For Mascagni, the opportunity arose in 1902, when he first signed a contract for a North American tour. He traveled to New York first, then Chicago, and reached California in February 1903, after an invitation from San Francisco manager Will Greenbaum. “The greatest of living opera composers had to come to the Golden Gate to discover America,” leading drama critic Ashton Stevens proudly reported in *The San Francisco Examiner*. In fact, his visit marked a celebratory moment for Italian immigrants as well as the Bay Area music community. In *Sunset* magazine, celebrated playwright and scholar Porter Garnett declared that it was in the Bay Area that the Italian composer had risen to his well-deserved glory: “Mascagni represents the new movement and San Francisco has discovered him.” When the composer was made honorary member of the Bohemian Club, Garnett himself wrote a poetical greeting to the maestro from “that sweet land where Palestrina strove / Where proud Rossini sang and Verdi wrought.”

The composer presented a series of performances at different venues—such as the Alhambra Theater and the Mechanical Pavilion—during what the *San Francisco Chronicle* labeled the “Mascagni season.” He conducted his own works (especially the beloved *Intermezzo* from *Cavalleria*) and those of diverse artists, from Rossini to Tchaikovsky and Wagner to Goldmark. The highlight of Mascagni’s visit was a series of performances of *Cavalleria* at the Tivoli Opera House, accompanied by non-operatic works such as his *Hymn of the Sun*. The concerts were a success, and in the *Examiner*, Stevens wrote: “No other leader has ever been bravoed and boot-thundered and hand-crashed by San Franciscans as Mascagni was last night [...] One person more packed into the theater would have cracked the old building that for more than 22 years has been the most faithful music teacher of the West.”

In 1906, only three years after Mascagni had left the West Coast, Leoncavallo arrived in New York, eager to immerse himself in American culture and to gather materials to compose a work set in the U.S. “I want to go to the theatres,” the composer declared, “to see the people and meet and talk with them, to learn their ideas and ideals, and see if I can capture them in words and music.” Although his American opera never became a reality, it was with the same enthusiasm that he traveled back to the U.S. in 1913, when he arrived in San Francisco.



Licia Albanese as Nedda in San Francisco Opera's *Pagliacci* from 1955.



Irene Dalis (*Santuzza*) and Thomas Tipton (*Alfio*) from the Company's 1962 *Cavalleria Rusticana*.



Leoncavallo with Native Americans during his 1906 U.S. tour.

Leoncavallo's major engagement during his California tour was at the Tivoli Opera House, after having been appointed musical director of the Western Metropolitan Opera Company. The company's managing directors, Ettore Patrizi and Eugene D'Avigneau, planned to present a "grand opera season" in October and November 1913. In this context, Leoncavallo conducted a series of concerts of his own works, such as the Intermezzo from *Maïa* and the Overture to *Roland von Berlin*, as well as other popular pieces—including *Cavalleria* in a double bill with his own *Pagliacci*.

The West Coast tours of the two Italian maestros were overwhelming successes, and their California experience inspired them to dedicate original compositions to places and people that welcomed them so generously. In 1903, Mascagni wrote the piano miniature *Un pensiero a San Francisco* (*A Thought for San Francisco*), published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, while in 1913 Leoncavallo started work on the song, "O California, Italia dell'America" ("O California, Italy of America"). These pieces are a testament to the Californian warmth that welcomed the two artists.

### An Operatic Home for San Francisco

Mascagni and Leoncavallo both hoped to return to the U.S. They never did, but their celebrated one-act operas became a staple in repertoires all over North America and the world. San Francisco Opera boasts a long performance tradition of these two works—one as old as the Company itself. In fact, *Pagliacci* was part of the inaugural 1923 season at the Civic Auditorium, in a double bill with Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, while *Cavalleria* was first presented there in 1927. The two operas were later performed as a double bill during the first season in the newly completed War Memorial Opera House, where the company made its permanent home in 1932.

A deeper legacy ties one of these works, *Pagliacci*, with the history of San Francisco Opera, even before the Company existed. To unearth these operatic roots, we need to travel back to when another Italian sailed to the U.S. to make the Bay Area his home: Gaetano Merola, the conductor from Naples, who, in the early 1900s, first came to the West Coast as a touring conductor, later to become the founder and first general director of San Francisco Opera from 1923 to 1953.

Conscious of Californians' profound passion for opera, Merola first saw the actual potential of a Bay Area opera season in 1921 during a quintessential American event: the football match between Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley known as the Big Game (a popular event to this day). "When he heard the band down on the field," Arthur Bloomfield wrote in his authoritative history of



The plaque commemorating Merola's 1922 opera productions at Stanford Stadium adorns the War Memorial Opera House lobby.

San Francisco Opera, "he was immensely stirred. The acoustics were surprisingly impressive. With tenors more on his mind than quarterbacks, Merola decided the [Stanford Stadium] had excellent possibilities for opera. It reminded him of Verona's celebrated Arena, and the Baths of Caracalla in Rome." With the broad financial support of the Italian immigrant community and philanthropists who trusted in his vision, Merola gathered the necessary funds and permits to organize a series of performances in the 17,000-seat stadium. A stage was built, and special trains from Palo Alto were organized to ensure patrons reached the performances. Merola borrowed the orchestra from the San Francisco Symphony and put together a chorus. As for the repertoire, three operas were planned, and Merola had no doubt: the inaugural performance on June 3, 1922 would be *Pagliacci*, followed by *Carmen* on June 7 and 16, and *Faust* on June 10.

Ads in the *Stanford Illustrated Review* spoke of a "grand opera" festival and

boasted the size of the enterprise: "These operas will be produced on a gigantic scale." For the performance of *Pagliacci*, the stadium wasn't full (6,000 attended), but the audience grew with each performance. All three operas were met with wide acclaim, despite the fact that the financial burden turned out to be heavier than expected, resulting in a deficit.

The most significant outcome of this enterprise was that the festival's success—cultural if not financial—cemented the idea that San Franciscans were eager and ready to have their own operatic home.

About a month later, in a front-page article titled "Brilliant Grand Opera Season Assured," the *Pacific Coast Musical Review* published a statement by Merola. The conductor admitted that better financial support was necessary to make an opera house sustainable, but he had no doubt that the Bay Area would become a prestigious music center thanks to the patronage of cultural entities and music lovers. He went on to announce the first season of San Francisco Opera at the Civic Auditorium—including, once again, *Pagliacci*.

And indeed, Merola was right: since the first *al fresco* *Pagliacci* in Stanford Stadium, San Francisco Opera has continued to shine as an international center of artistic excellence. Because of the support of Bay Area music lovers and beyond, as well as the enterprising vision of artists and music professionals, the dream of an operatic home for the Bay Area has been a reality for almost a century. 🌸

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