

“A story of passion, bloodshed, desire and death – everything in fact that makes life worth living...”

- From *Irma La Douce*, a film by Billy Wilder, 1963

Although *Irma* is a comedy, and the description is intended to be humorous, it sums up the appeal of our double bill today. *Cavalleria rusticana* (*Rustic Chivalry*, 1890) and *I pagliacci* (*The Players* or *The Clowns*, 1892) brought obsessive sexual passion, adultery and murder to the opera stage. Called “verismo” (“truthism” or “realism”), this opera genre followed a trend for social realism in French works by, for example, Zola and Maupassant, and in Italy by authors like the Sicilian, Giovanni Verga (1840-1922), who wrote the novel and play on which *Cavalleria* is based. As opposed to costume plays, history or legends, these operas told stories of common, often rural, people, in everyday settings. The lower classes had previously appeared regularly in opera, and especially in comedies, but almost exclusively in the roles of servants to their aristocratic or upper-class masters.

Just as verismo was a harbinger of some trends in 20th century opera, there were previous signs of its emergence in such works as Bizet’s *Carmen* (1875), in which the taunting seductress is killed on stage. And Puccini’s *Tosca* (1900) had real howls, although off-stage, from Cavaradossi in torture, and a prayer from Tosca which did not conventionally beg for *pieta* or *pace* (mercy or peace), but questioned God’s fairness in treating her so unkindly when she had always been good. However, as early as the 1890’s, verismo had begun to give way to other trends in literature which also influenced opera, such as symbolism (Bartok’s *Bluebeard*, 1918); exoticism (Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, 1904); and expressionism (Debussy’s *Pelleas et Melisande*, 1902). Later, Puccini composed an unquestionably verismo work, *Il tabarro* (*The Cloak*, 1918; one of three short operas comprising *Il trittico*), a tale of passion, adultery and murder involving a stevedore, a barge owner and his wife on the Seine in Paris. Like many “isms,” verismo can be more or less widely applied, and it has been used to describe other works by Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano, Puccini, and Cilea.

Verismo operas advanced the steady tendency in the latter half of the 19th century toward dramatic continuity, with rapidity of action, emotional rhetoric, and a complete absence of coloratura (elaborate decoration of the vocal line.) In these operas, recitative, solo pieces and ensembles were of equal importance, and orchestral motifs provided musical cohesion. A

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regional setting laced with local color and the expression of strong emotion leading to violence were also characteristic. The unmitigated portrayal of urban poverty, however, proved too much for Neapolitans in Umberto Giordano's *Mala vita (Wretched Life)*, 1892). It lasted only one performance in its native city, although it had moderate success elsewhere. In the years following *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci*, a tendency for strong emotion and local color "to lapse into sensationalism and picturesqueness became...irreversible." (The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, vol. 4, p. 955.) Probably this is the reason we have only "Cav and Pag" still in the repertory.

Although Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945) did not invent verismo, the immense success of *Cavalleria* brought the trend to the eye of the public. The composer had been struggling with a larger work when his friend Puccini urged him to try something different and more commercial. (Puccini and Mascagni were music students together in Milan for a time, providing material for Puccini's opera of student life, *La Boheme*.) Mascagni entered a competition for one-act operas with *Cavalleria*; it won the competition, was immediately received to great acclaim, and within a year had been heard in theaters the world over. In Verga's novel and play, the characters spoke their natural dialect (a hallmark of verismo in literature), but the libretto was cast in high-flown operatic language that no peasant would have spoken. The audience did not mind.

Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919) deliberately modeled his *Pagliacci* after *Cavalleria*, and it also had a tremendous reception, making him famous overnight. The Metropolitan Opera in New York staged the two operas together in December, 1893, after which they became inseparable companions. The story was an old one, and Leoncavallo was sued for plagiarism; he defended on the ground that he remembered from his youth when his father, a magistrate, had adjudicated just such a case. The musical style is different in the "real" world and in the "play within the play": "great throbbing tunes" versus "arch gavottes and minuets." (Martin, *The Opera Companion*, Dodd, Mead, 1961, p.583.)

Except for Mascagni's *L'amico Fritz (Friend Fritz)*, 1892, not verismo), which is occasionally heard today, neither composer has another opera remaining in the repertoire.

- Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester