

Italian Verismo Operas



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Historical Background Italy 1840-1870

- The country is all under foreign domination, broken into many little pieces occupied by Austria, France, and Spain.
- The House of Savoy in Piedmont is the seat of a monarchical family seeking to unify the country under its rule.
- Patriots such as Cavour and Garibaldi lead the struggle for unification through oratorical and military means.

1/31/2005

3

- Giuseppe Verdi leads the same fight for the unification from the stage of La Scala Opera House in Milano.

The son of a grocer, Verdi always claimed that he did not write for opera snobs, but that he wrote music for regular honest-to-goodness people. "From the beginning -- he once said -- my best friends have been the common people."

1/31/2005

4

In 1842 his *Nabucco* was such a big hit that during the rehearsal the theatre “turned upside down... The style was rapid, so forceful, so unusual, that everybody was amazed. Backstage it was impossible to work; for the employees, painters, machinists, workmen, excited by the music, left their tasks to watch what was happening on stage”. Word-of-mouth reports soon flooded Milano and the public was beside itself to see the opera.

1/31/2005

5

NABUCCO was Verdi's first great success. The story of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, his capture of Jerusalem and the intrigues of his adopted daughter Abigaille against the legitimate Princess Fenena. The Hebrews' choral lament “*Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate*” with its simple and unison texture creates a powerful sense of nostalgia. It was the longing of the Jewish exiles for their homeland which was identified by all Italians with their longing

1/31/2005

6

for freedom. With its political implications, “*Va, pensiero*” struck Italy musically and politically, it was sung with a spirit of freedom throughout the peninsula.

Verdi was only 29, and whether or not he deliberately set this chorus as a politically oriented message is not known. What is certain is that “*Va, pensiero*” became a symbol of the Resistance. An acrostic was even made on the name VERDI.

1/31/2005

7

It stood for:

Vittorio	Victor
Emanuele	Emmanuel
Re	King
Di	Of
Italia	Italy

“Viva Verdi!” was not only a tribute to the composer, but a hidden declaration of allegiance to the Savoy King.

- Italy was liberated in 1860 and united in 1870.

1/31/2005

8

1842 Nabucco

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813-1901

Libretto by Temistocle Solera, after the
play *Nabuchodonosor* by Auguste
Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu.

First Performance, 1842, Milano

Act III Scene 2 “Va, pensiero”

Chorus of Hebrew Slaves

1/31/2005

9

“Va, pensiero”

from Verdi's *Nabucco*

Fly, my thoughts, on gilded wings;

Go, rest on the slopes and mounts

Where the sweet breezes

Of our native soil give off a sweet perfume

The banks of Jordan, greet,

And the fallen towers of Zion...

Oh my country, so beautiful and so lost!

Oh remembrance so dear and so desperate!

1/31/2005

10

Golden harp of the prophetic poets,
Why do you hang so silently from the willow?
Reignite the memories in our hearts,
Speak to us of the times which once were!
O like Solomon draw forth a sound
Of raw lament to destiny,
Or may the Lord inspire you to a harmony
Which instills the courage to suffer!

1/31/2005

11

With *MACBETH* in 1847, Verdi reached another turning point in his career: he broke free from the Italian operatic convention, moving toward the direction of music drama.

- The emphasis now had to be placed mostly on the drama of the play.
- The sounds produced by the singers had to reflect their inner turmoil and psychological stresses.

1/31/2005

12

- Verdi himself requested a singer for the role of Lady Macbeth who would be twisted and ugly, with a raw, choked, hollow voice that had something devilish in it.

With RIGOLETTO (1851), IL TROVATORE and LA TRAVIATA (both 1853), Verdi abandons mythological and historical characters.

His heroes on the stage are now hunchbacked jesters, consumptive courtesans, and dirty gypsies.

1/31/2005

13

After these operas, Verdi had become a public idol, for the people could not seem to get enough of last three operas.

He had established a special relationship with the public, he was responsive to the public opinion and it is said that his choice of librettos was conditioned by the taste of the public. His works were always dramas of raw emotions: love, hate, revenge, and lust for power.

1/31/2005

14

In Italy Verdi managed to popularize opera as a form of art. In the newly united country, the doors of the Opera Houses opened to every citizen. Going to the opera was not longer for the nobility and the aristocracy only, but, and most of all, for the middle class who would begin to identify its daily passions and emotions with those of Verdi's heroes.

1/31/2005

15

- One of Verdi's contributions to the *Verismo* opera is perhaps the active role the audience played in the theatre.
- Soon the spectators will become the actors, and the theatre will become the stage.
- It is the idea of the 'play within a play', when the distance between actor and spectator has been eliminated, and the audience plays the part of the character on stage. This will be the most significant achievement of *Pagliacci* in 1892.

1/31/2005

16

What is *Verismo* Opera?

- The word *VERISMO* comes from *vero* (true) or *verità* (truth).
- *Verismo*, meaning 'realism', is a term applied to a type of opera which emerged in Italy in the 1890s and which is defined by its subjects, literary style and music.
- High born men and women are replaced by humble characters, strong in passion and swift in revenge.

1/31/2005

17

- The plots deal with humble people and are delivered with great directness and powerful dissonant harmony.
- The orchestration and vocal writing deliver a strong emotional message.
- The passions of the characters are those of real people.

1/31/2005

18

- The origins of Verismo are literary, beginning with the French *naturaliste* writers led by Émile Zola.
- Zola's twenty *Rougon-Macquart* novels, written between 1871 and 1893, exemplify a theory derived from Taine's philosophy that human behavior is determined by heredity and circumstances and it is often brutal.

1/31/2005

19

George Bizet (1838-1875)

Carmen is an opera of great musical and dramatic skills. Its musical challenge was taken up by the Italian *Verismo* opera composers of the next generation: Mascagni and Leoncavallo in particular.

The two constant features of the opera are the popular, often primitive simplicity of the music, the recitative and dialogue spoken rather than sung.

1/31/2005

20

- Some critics claim that *Carmen* started the *Verismo* school, for it is a highly realistic story about cigarette-factory girls, smugglers, bullfighters, and a nasty murder on stage. *Carmen* is an opera of passion, power and truth. It contains contemporary characters who are true to life. It is about real people in real places. A true crime of passion that leaves nothing to the imagination.

1/31/2005

21

CARMEN

- George Bizet (1838-1875)
- *Opéra comique* in four acts.
- Libretto by H. Meilhac and L. Halévy after the novel by Prosper Mérimée
- Premiere, Paris 1875

1/31/2005

22

Synopsis:

Don José, a corporal, is infatuated by the gypsy girl Carmen, jeopardizes his career, and follows her to the mountains. She soon is tired of him because is attracted by the toreador Escamillo. On the day of the bullfight, José, enraged with jealousy, kills her and then gives himself up.

1/31/2005

23

The "*Habanera*" song is a revelation of Carmen's character. She is a gipsy girl, passionate yet fickle, quick to love and quick to tire. She flirts most of all with death, which, as her dark 'Fate', is later revealed in the "*Card Aria*".

In contrast to the 'Fate' theme, and the final tragic end of Carmen, the melodies of the choruses in the opera detail a genuine Spanish flavor, full of the local color of the streets of Spain,

The most famous is the "Toreador Song"

1/31/2005

24

“Habanera”, from Bizet’s *Carmen*

When will I love you? Good lord, I don't know,
maybe never, maybe tomorrow. But not today,
that's certain

Love is a rebellious bird that nothing can tame,
and it is simply in vain to call it

If it is convenient for it to refuse. Nothing will work,
threat or pleading, One speaks, the other stays
quiet;

And it's the other that I prefer

He said nothing; but he pleases me.

Love! Love! Love! Love!

1/31/2005

25

Love is the child of the Bohemian, It has
never, never known any law, If you don't
love me, I love you, If I love you, keep
guard of yourself!

If you don't love me, I love you!

But, if I love you, If I love you, keep guard of
yourself!

If you don't love me, If you don't love me, I
love you! But, if I love you, If I love you,
keep guard of yourself!

1/31/2005

26

The bird you thought to surprise Beats its wing and
flew away;

Love is far away, you can wait for it; If you wait for
it no more, it is there! All around you, quickly,
quickly, It comes, goes, then it comes back!

You think to hold it, it avoids you; You think to
avoid it, it holds you!

Love, love, love, love!

Love is the child of the Bohemian, It has never,
never known any law,

If you don't love me, I love you, If I love you, keep
guard of yourself! If you don't love me, I love
you, If I love you, keep guard of yourself! If you
don't love me, If you don't love me, I love you!

1/31/2005

27

“Toreador Song” from Bizet’s *Carmen*

- Your toast, I can give it to you. Sirs, sir, for along with
the soldiers. Yes, the Toreros, can understand; For
pleasures, for pleasures They have combats!
- The arena is full, it is the feast day! The arena is full,
from top to bottom; The spectators, losing their heads,
- The spectators began a big fracas! A grand fracas!
Apostrophes, cries, and uproar Grow to a furor!
- Because it is a celebration of courage! It is the
celebration of people with heart! Let’s go, on guard! Let’s
go! Let’s go! Ah!

1/31/2005

28

Toreador, on guard! Toreador, Toreador!
And dream away, yes, dream in combat, That a
black eye is watching you, And that love awaits
you, Toreador, love awaits.
All of a sudden, it is silent Ah, what is happening?
More cries! It is the moment! More cries! It is
the moment! The bull throws himself out
Bounding out of the stall!
He throws himself out! He enters. He strikes! A
horse rolls, Dragging a picador, Ah, Bravo! Bull!
The crowd roars! The bull goes, he comes, He
comes and strikes again! Shaking his
banderillos, Full of fury, he runs! The arena is full
of blood! They save themselves, they pass the
gates It is your turn now. Let's go!

1/31/2005

29

“Card Aria” from Bizet’s *Carmen*

In vain in order to avoid harsh message, In vain
you shuffle, That settles nothing, the cards Are
sincere and won't lie!
In the book on high If your page is happy, Shuffle
and cut without fear The card under your fingers
Will turn itself up happily Announcing its good
luck
But if you must die, If the dreaded word Is written
by fate, Try again 20 times ,The pitiless card
Again: death! Again! Again! Always death! Again!
Despair! Always death!

1/31/2005

30

Giovanni Verga (1840-1922), a Sicilian writer, and a follower of Zola, in 1888 published an extensive collection of short stories dealing with the struggle for existence of the peasants of his native Sicily.

1/31/2005

31

- One of these short stories, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, published in 1880, inaugurated the Verismo period of Italian Literature.
- In 1883 it was made into a stage tragedy in which Eleonora Duse displayed her great powers as an actress.
- *Cavalleria Rusticana* is a drama of swift action and intense emotion; of passion, betrayal and retribution. It is a real story about real people, a 'slice of life' as Canio would define it later in *Pagliacci*.

1/31/2005

32

- It was transferred to opera by Pietro Mascagni in 1890 and it became quickly his most significant achievement.
- Part of its success was due to faithfulness to the plot; to the character and to the motivation already established in Verga's original short story.
- The action takes place in a Sicilian village on Easter Sunday, and it is firmly set in the late 19th century, although one feels that these people's lives have not really changed for generations.

1/31/2005

33

Synopsis:

The young soldier Turiddu has seduced Santuzza, but still loves his former girlfriend Lola, now the wife of the village carter Alfio. In her jealousy, the pregnant Santuzza tells Alfio that his wife has been unfaithful with Turiddu. The peasant code of 'rustic chivalry' to which the title refers, demands that the two men fight a duel, and Turiddu is killed.

1/31/2005

34

- The *Prelude*, which at once places Sicily at the core of the action, contains three passages of significance in the development of the story:
 - The phrase of the despairing Santuzza, in which she cries out to Turiddu that, despite his betrayal, she still loves him and pardons him.
 - The melody of the duet between Santuzza and Turiddu, in which she implores him to stay with her and not to follow Lola into church.
 - The air in Sicilian dialect, the *Siciliana*, which, as part of the *Prelude*, Turiddu sings behind the curtain, as a serenade to Lola.

1/31/2005

35

CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA (1890)

Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945)

Melodrama in one Act

Libretto by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci

After the play *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Giovanni Verga

"SICILIANA"

O Lola, white and red as the cherry
In your nightdress white as milk,
when you appear at the window you smile;
Happy he who gave you your first kiss!
The mark of blood is over your door,
But I care not if I am killed;
If through you I die and go to Paradise,
It will not be Paradise for me unless you are there. Ah!

1/31/2005

36

“Resurrection Hymn” from Cavalleria Rusticana

Let us rejoice
That Our Lord is not dead,
And in glory
Has opened the tomb!
Let us rejoice
That Our Lord is risen again
And today is gone up
Into the glory of Heaven!

1/31/2005

37

“Tu qui, Santuzza...” from *Cavalleria Rusticana*
(Scene between Santuzza and Turiddu in front of the church)

Turiddu:

You here, Santuzza?

Santuzza:

I was waiting here for you

Turiddu:

It is Easter

Aren't you going to church?

Santuzza:

I cannot.

I must speak with you...

Turiddu:

I was looking for my mother

1/31/2005

38

Santuzza:
I must speak to you...
Turiddu:
Not here! Not here!
Santuzza:
Where have you been?
Turiddu:
What do you mean?
At Francofonte!
Santuzza:
No, it is not true!

1/31/2005

39

Turiddu:
Santuzza, believe me...
Santuzza:
No, do not lie;
I saw you returning
Down the road...
And this morning at dawn
You were seen
Near Lola's door
Turiddu:
Ha! You were spying on me!

1/31/2005

40

Santuzza:
No, I swear it.
Alfio, her husband,
Was telling us
Just now.
Turiddu:
Is this the way you return
The love I bear you?
Do you want me killed?
Santuzza:
Oh, do not say such things...
Turiddu:
Leave me, then;
In vain you try,
With your pleas for pity
To lessen my scorn.
Santuzza:
Then you love her?

1/31/2005

41

Turiddu:
No
Santuzza:
Lola is
Far more lovely.
Turiddu:
Be quiet, I do not love her.
Santuzza:
You do love her,
You devil!
Turiddu:
Santuzza!
Santuzza:
That wicked woman
Stole you from me!
Turiddu:
Take care, Santuzza,
I am not the slave
Of this mad
Jealousy of yours!

1/31/2005

42

Santuzza:
Beat me, insult me,
I love you and forgive you;
But my anguish
Is too much to bear.
(Hearing Lola approaching, singing a song,
Santuzza and Turiddu fall suddenly silent)
Lola:
O flower of the iris,
The angels in their beauty
Stand a thousandfold in Heaven,
But only one there is
As handsome as he. Ah!
O flower of the iris...
Oh! Turiddu... has Alfio been here?
Turiddu:
I have just come into the square.
I do not know...

1/31/2005

43

Lola:
Perhaps he has kept
At the blacksmith's,
But he can't be long.
And you... are you listening
To the service from the square?
Turiddu:
Santuzza was telling me...
Santuzza:
I was saying that today is Easter,
And the Lord sees everything!
Lola:
Aren't you coming to Mass?
Santuzza:
Not I: only they can go
Who know they are free from sin.

1/31/2005

44

Lola:
I thank the Lord and kiss the ground.
Santuzza:
Oh! You're so good, Lola!
Turiddu: (to Lola)
Come, let us leave her! Why do we stay here?
Lola:
Do stay here!
Santuzza:
Yes, stay, oh stay, I've more to tell you!
Lola:
The Lord be with you: I'm going. (She goes into the church)
Turiddu:
Ah, you see? What have you said...?
Santuzza:
You wished it: then so be it.

1/31/2005

45

Turiddu:
Ah! By Heaven!
Santuzza:
Tear me to pieces!
Turiddu:
No!
Santuzza:
Turiddu, listen!
Turiddu:
Go away!
Santuzza:
No, no. Turiddu, stay with me awhile. Why do you seek to fly from me?
Stay with me awhile.
Turiddu:
Why do you follow me spy on me without respite to the very
doors of the church?

1/31/2005

46

Santuzza:
Your own Santuzza weeps and pleads with you; how could you drive
her away like this?
Turiddu:
Go, I say, Do not plague me;
Vain is your repentance after what you have done..
Santuzza;
Take care!
Turiddu:
I do not heed your anger.
(He throws her to the ground)
Santuzza;
(in a fury)
May your Easter be cursed, you traitor!

1/31/2005

47

Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919), who appreciated the quality of Verga's opera, tried soon after him to compose an opera of the same style. "*Pagliacci*" premiered in 1892 and it established itself to be the most 'Verista' opera of all.

It is a 'slice of life' that sweeps the real audience on to the stage and wraps it with the passions of the actors who are in turn spectators of their own drama.

1/31/2005

48

It is the 'play-within-a-play' in the "*Commedia dell'Arte*" fashion. During the performance we need to pay close attention to when Canio is himself or 'Pagliaccio', Nedda is herself or 'Colombina', Tonio himself or 'Taddeo', and Beppe himself or 'Arlecchino'. And at the end, when Canio kills Nedda and Silvio, he turns to the crowd *-to us-* to announce that "*la commedia é finita*". Again, as in the *Verismo* tradition, the play-acting is the real life.

1/31/2005

49

PAGLIACCI **(1892)**

Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919)
Dramma with Prologue and two Acts
Libretto by Ruggero Leoncavallo
Based on a real story which happened in
Montalto, Calabria.

1/31/2005

50

Synopsis:

Outside a village in Calabria on the feast of the Assumption.

Canio, the leader of a troupe of strolling players, finds that his wife Nedda has a lover Tonio and murders her in the course of the play they enact before the audience.

1/31/2005

51

Tonio steps in front of the curtain to announce that he is the 'Prologo'. He stresses that the action should not be dismissed as fiction: the actors are human too, and they are there to represent real human feelings.

This presentation of the story of *Pagliacci* takes the form of the 'Manifesto' in all of the 'Verismo Poetics'.

1/31/2005

52

Prologo from *Pagliacci*

TONIO:

Excuse me! Ladies and gentlemen, forgive me for appearing alone. I am the Prolog!

Since the author is putting on the stage again the old Comedy of Masks, he would like to revive some of the old customs, and so sends me out again to you.

But not to say, as of old, "The tears we shed are feigned! Do not alarm yourselves at our suffering and torments!"

1/31/2005

53

No! The author instead has sought to paint for you a scene from life. He takes as his basis simply that the artist is a man and that he must write for men.

His inspiration was a true story. A horde of memories was one day running through his head, and he wrote shedding real tears, with sobs to mark the time.

So you will see love as real as human beings' love. You will see the sad fruit of hate. You will hear agonies of grief, cries of rage, and bitter laughter!

1/31/2005

54

So think then, not of our poor theatrical costumes but of our souls, for we are men of flesh and blood. Breathing the air of this lonely world just like you!

I have told you his plan. Now hear how it is unfolded.

(calling towards the stage)

Come. Let's begin!

(He goes in, and the curtain rises.)

1/31/2005

55

Pagliacci is only seventy minutes long and it focuses on Canio's lament that, though his heart is consuming with jealousy, he must put on another face and be merry before his audience. His strolling player destiny forces him to "perform the play" disguised as 'Pagliaccio'.

1/31/2005

56

Canio's grief over the betrayal by his wife is one of the most famous numbers in Italian opera.

“Vesti la giubba” with its tragic *‘Ridi Pagliaccio’* is the old effective story of the buffoon who must laugh, and make others laugh, no matter what it is going on with his life.

1/31/2005

57

“Vesti la giubba”

Recitative

How can I perform! While I'm in such delirium,
I no longer know what I'm saying,
or what I'm doing!

But you must! Force yourself!

Bah! Can't you be a man?

{Laughs ironically}

No! You are a clown!

{Sad orchestral punctuation: “and that's that!”}

1/31/2005

58

“Vesti la giubba”

Aria – Lyrical section

So put on your clown suit,
and your funny whiteface makeup.
The people pay, and they want to laugh,
don't they!
So what if Harlequin steals away your
Colombine?
Laugh, clown, laugh! and the world will
applaud!

1/31/2005

59

“Vesti la giubba”

Aria - Transition

Turn your tears into a funny face,
Change your pain into laughter.

1/31/2005

60

“Vesti la giubba”

Aria - Dramatic Climax

So laugh, clown laugh!

Laugh at your broken love!

Laugh at the pain

That crushes your heart!

{Weeping . . .}

{Orchestral recapitulation}

1/31/2005

61

Conclusion:

Italian opera has had a rich and meaningful artistic development both for Italy and the Italians. In less than seventy years, it had gone from the comedies of Rossini, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816) and the dreaminess of bel canto with Donizetti, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) to the grandeur of emotion and spectacle of Verdi, to the razor-sharp psychological realism of *Verismo*.

1/31/2005

62

Other Verismo Operas

L'Amico Fritz (1891) by Pietro Mascagni

Andrea Chenier (1896) by Umberto Giordano (1867-1948)

Louise (1900) By Gustave Charpentier (1860-1956)

Adriana Lecouvreur (1902) by Francesco Cilea (1866-1950)

Il Segreto di Susanna (1909) by Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari (1876-1948)

La Fanciulla del West (1910) by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

L'Amore dei Tre Re (1913) by Italo Montemezzi (1875-1952)

Gianni Schicchi (1918) by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

1/31/2005

63

Thank You



And Good Night!

1/31/2005

64