Opera & Real Life

10. Verismo, really?

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Verismo, really?

VERISMO, ITALIAN OPERA AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY, what can it be but real life on the opera stage? Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, and a number of operas by Puccini, all have become sure recipes for box-office success, famous for urging their performers to heights of passion and, in productions like those of Franco Zeffirelli, filling the stage with Hollywood spectacle and a wealth of period detail.

Yet isn't the result of realist staging to create just another stage device, where the audience reacts in amazement at how they got all that on the stage, rather than recognizing the reality of the characters and situations? Isn't there are difference between *verismo*, realism, and the real? We shall sample three directors' takes on the traditional *Cavalleria/Pagliacci* double bill: one strictly in period, another equally realistic but resolutely modern, and a third that throws such realism away altogether to embrace the deliberate artifice that is the theater. *rb*.

A. Zeffirelli

Pietro Mascagni (1863–1945) wrote *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry) in two months, as a late entry in a competition for opera composers who had not had an opera performed. It won a triumphant production in Rome in 1890, and has been part of the repertoire ever since. The opera is a setting of a story of the same name by the writer **Giovanni Verga** (1840–1922), a leader of the literary *verismo* movement that drew its subjects from the lives of common people.

We shall watch scenes from productions in different media by **Franco Zeffirelli**: his 1978 staging at the Metropolitan Opera, which is both spectacular and full of period detail, and his film of 1981, made on location in Sicily. What criteria of authenticity apply in each medium?

♬ **Mascagni**: *Cavalleria rusticana*, opening, Easter hymn, and aria
    Metropolitan Opera, 1978; c. James Levine, d. Franco Zeffirelli;
    Tatiana Troyanos (Santuzza)

♬ **Mascagni**: *Cavalleria rusticana*, opening and Easter hymn
    Film, 1981; c. Georges Prêtre, d. Franco Zeffirelli; Elena Obraztsova
    (Santuzza)

B. Michieletto 1

Another approach to realism is shown in the 2015 production of the Mascagni opera at the Royal Opera House in London, by **Damiano Michieletto**. He also reproduces a Sicilian town in all its detail, but his is entirely modern, with satellite dishes and industrial food mixers. And rather than showing a still picture of a distant world, he uses the devices of theater to create a montage of frequently changing views, outside, inside, and occasionally entirely subjective.

♬ **Mascagni**: *Cavalleria rusticana*, selected scenes
    Royal Opera House, 2015; c. Antonio Pappano, d. Damiano Michieletto;
    Eva-Maria Westbroek (Santuzza), Elena Zilio (Mamma Lucia),
    Aleksandrs Antonenko (Turiddu)

C. Carsen

The most common pairing for the one-act *Cavalleria rusticana* is *Pagliacci* (The Traveling Players) by **Ruggiero Leoncavallo** (1858–1919). Coming just two years after *Cavalleria, Pagliacci* is also *verismo* in its focus on common people; the libretto is by the composer himself, based on a newspaper account of a murder during a play put on for popular entertainment. The fact that this deals with the theater gives the piece a surface glamor that its companion lacks, although it is a veneer no deeper than grease paint. It also triggers a series of metaphors that director **Robert Carsen** develops to great effect in his 2019 production of the double-bill in Amsterdam, in which he makes the one concept enfold both operas.

♬ **Leoncavallo**: *Pagliacci*, selected scenes
    Amsterdam, 2019; c. Lorenzo Viotti, d. Robert Carsen; Ailyn Pérez
    (Nedda), Brandon Jovanovich (Canio), Mattia Oliviero (Silvio)

♬ **Mascagni**: *Cavalleria rusticana*, opening and closing scenes
    Amsterdam 2019, as above; Brian Jagde (Turiddu)

D. Michieletto 2

We end with a glimpse of **Damiano Michieletto's** staging of *Pagliacci*, which plays in a parochial school hall in the same town where the first opera had been set. And indeed he finds many ways of connecting the two operas, including having characters from one appear in the other. Michieletto also explores the metaphor of theatrical illusion, in a way both different from and complementary to Robert Carsen's

♬ **Leocavallo**: *Pagliacci*, opening and closing scenes
    Royal Opera House 2015, as above; Aleksandrs Antonenko (Canio)

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