

Class 10 : Verismo, really?

A. Zeffirelli

1. Title 1 (Verga illustration)

There is no way I could do a course on Opera and Real Life without looking at the topic of *verismo*, Italian operas of the later 19th century. *Verismo*, after all, means “realism” and a number of *verismo* operas have become box-office gold: notably a bunch of operas by **Puccini** and the often-paired double-bill of *Cavalleria rusticana* by **Mascagni** and *I pagliacci* by **Leoncavallo**, which will be my subject today.

2. Scenes from Giovanni Verga’s *Cavalleria rusticana*

Verismo started as a literary movement, with a bunch of authors from the sophisticated North of Italy calling upon the peasant life of Sicily and the South as their subjects: hot passions and local customs. Chief among them was **Giovanni Verga** (1840–1922), who was actually born in Sicily but moved to Milan. His most famous short story, *Cavalleria rusticana* or Rustic Chivalry, was taken by the young composer **Pietro Mascagni** (1863–1945) as the subject for his entry in a competition for newbie opera composers run by an Italian publishing house. He was late entering, and dashed off the opera in two months. It won, was premiered in Rome in 1890, and the face of opera was changed.

3. Zeffirelli’s *Cavalleria rusticana* at the Met

Verismo opera has long been associated with the wide-stage spectaculars of **Franco Zeffirelli**, whose penchant for period detail is legendary. Only gradually has the Met begun replacing some of his productions; they are just too well-loved by audiences, and truth to tell, they have reached the status of historical documents in their own right. When Franco seemingly puts an entire Sicilian town on the stage, down to the smallest detail, surely this is as close to reality as you can get? My purpose today is to pose and answer that question: is there any difference between *verismo*, realism, and real? To start the ball rolling, let me play the opening of Zeffirelli’s Met production of 1978, showing the town waking up on Easter morning. At a certain point, though, I will switch to the **film he made of the opera in 1981**. What are the differences between the two media, and how do they affect you?

4. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, opening scenes (Met and film)

5. Franco Zeffirelli and a scene from *Cavalleria rusticana*

What did you think? I started with the stage production, because that is impressive enough, just watching the stage begin to fill with life. But the film medium completely redefines the meaning of “realism.” Although I know that it too is an elaborately conceived production, an artifact, I can still buy it as *real* in a way I never do in the theater. There, my main reaction is amazement that somebody could get so much onto the stage—that, and the nagging question: why did he bother? Let’s pick up the

comparison again with the biggest set number in the opera, the **Easter Hymn**. This is the traditional procession to the Church for Easter Mass. The woman who will hear singing the solos is the protagonist, **Santuzza**. She cannot go to church because she is in a state of sin, having given herself to a man outside of marriage; more about that in a moment. She is not literally in prison, though, merely in a shop whose open windows are covered with bars. I will play the scene complete in the movie, followed by just the start of it from the Met stage. Again, let's compare the two.

6. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, Easter Hymn (film)
7. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, Easter Hymn, beginning (Met)
8. Tatiana Troyanos as Santuzza

So why can Santuzza not go to church? She explains it all in this famous aria, “Voi lo sapete, O mamma,” which she sings to **Mamma Lucia**, the mother of her former lover **Turiddu**. Once Turiddu was engaged to **Lola**, a girl of the town. But he went away on military service, then came back to find that Lola had married Alfio, the local carter. Turiddu took up with Santuzza on the rebound, and seduced her. But Lola, burning with jealousy, seduced Turiddu back to her again, leaving Santuzza dishonored and abandoned. Note, above all, the *passion* that develops in this aria. Reality—even intensification—of passion, far more than surface realism, is what *verismo* is all about.

9. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, “*Voi lo sapete, O mamma*” (Met)

B. Michieletto I

10. Section title B (Michieletto production)

Here is Mamma Lucia again, this time with her son Turiddu at her knees rather than Santuzza. The production is a recent one from Covent Garden. **Damiano Michieletto**, the director, takes a different approach to *verismo* from Zeffirelli, every bit as realistic in its detail, every bit as Sicilian, but from the contemporary world rather than an archaeological recreation of a past century. For the rest of this hour, I shall show you scenes from his production, which I must say I like very much. I wish I could play it all!

11. *Cavalleria Rusticana* at Covent Garden (Damiano Michieletto): the opening tableau
12. *Cavalleria Rusticana* at Covent Garden (Damiano Michieletto): end of the overture

The curtain rises on a tableau: the shocked crowd gathered around the body of a dead man in the ground. This is **Turiddu**, and the scene is a flash-forward. On the DVD at least, the music stops abruptly, and we get two minutes of silence as the camera pans over the crowd. Then the music resumes, and the crowd disperses, leaving **Mamma Lucia (Elena Zilio)**, the grieving mother rejecting all help, alone outside her bakery shop. I'll pick it up there, with the opening scene we saw in the two Zeffirelli productions. Note the differences with this one. Note also the man putting up posters for *I pagliacci* that evening, and the interplay between the young man in the yellow tee and the woman handing out flyers; you will see more of both of them.

13. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, opening scene (Michieletto)

14. Elena Zilio as Mamma Lucia

This is realist, certainly, but what are the differences? The period, of course; the bakery shop has a satellite dish on the outside, and sparkling modern equipment inside. But where is the crowd flooding the stage? Michieletto showed them at the opening tableau and then dispersed them; for the most part, he keeps the chorus offstage during the opening, focusing instead of the detail of individual figures, whether they are named characters or not. He will bring the crowd back in force, though, for his tremendous take on the Easter procession—but look for the ways in which this is *not* realistic.

15. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, Easter procession (Michieletto)

16. — still from the above

Did you see what he did? The statue coming to life, obviously (I had no idea it was a real person!). But also what happened before that: going back to night-time instead of continuing with the bright morning. He turns his back on Zeffirelli-type objectivity, to show the whole thing *subjectively* through Santuzza's eyes. And yet, the miracle is that it still works in terms of traditional Sicilian church customs.

17. Aleksandrs Antonenko as Turiddu and Eva-Maria Westbroek as Santuzza

I turn now to a new scene, the latter part of the duet in which Santuzza (**Eva-Maria Westbroek**) begs Turiddu (**Aleksandrs Antonenko**) to return to her. This shows that other aspect of *verismo*—musical passion—at its height, especially when Turiddu insultingly rejects her, and she curses him to a *Mala Pasqua*—Evil Easter.

18. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, Santuzza/Turiddu duet (Michieletto)

19. End of scene between Santuzza and Alfio

Santuzza then tells the carter Alfio, Lola's husband, that Turiddu is sleeping with his wife. He swears vengeance, which is the scene shown here. Then follows the famous Intermezzo. Michieletto devotes the first half of it to Mamma Lucia, but when the big tune starts he shows another little vignette between the boy in the yellow tee-shirt and the young woman who was handing out flyers. It is a lovely piece of human detail, a story within the story, as it were.

20. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, Intermezzo (Michieletto)

21. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*, Silvio and Nedda (Michieletto)

Once the DVD of *I pagliacci* arrived, I realized that this couple would become the young lovers in the second opera, as I shall show you later. I was almost disappointed to discover this, though, as the scene worked so perfectly as a throwaway. But first, I have to finish *Cavalleria rusticana*. Alfio challenges Turiddu to a duel; he accepts, bids farewell to his mother, and is killed offstage. And we return to the same tableau as the opening

22. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, final scene (Michieletto)

23. — still from the above

C. Carsen

24. Section title C (Brandon Jovanovich as Canio)

As I mentioned, **Damiano Michieletto** connects the two operas by making *Cavalleria's* most frequent companion piece, *I pagliacci* (The Traveling Players) by **Ruggiero Leoncavallo** (1858–1919), the show put on by the troupe visiting the town where *Cavalleria* takes place; I'll show you more of his connections at the end of the hour. **Robert Carsen**, the most radical of my three directors, does the opposite. By starting the evening with *I pagliacci*, he makes the whole evening about theater: not the theater's ability to reproduce reality, but to engage us in the willing acceptance of artifice—so we are blindsided when that artifice turns out to be real. He lays it all out in the Prologue, sung by the dramatic baritone, who breaks through the curtain to address the audience. I haven't time to play it, but here is part of the text.

25. Quotations from the Prologue text

The play between fiction and reality is *Leoncavallo's* point, but Carsen takes off from it. First, let me point out three things in the picture. The house lights are still on; the singer and the audience still occupy the same space. The main red curtain has parted on the Prologue's command, but there is another identical one behind it—and, as you will see, a third identical one behind that. And keep an eye on the people in the front three rows.... Let's pick it up when the Prologue ends. See if you can count all the ways in which Carsen emphasizes (a) that this is theater, and (b) that theater is inherently artificial.

26. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*: opening chorus (Robert Carsen, Amsterdam 2019)

How many did you count? The chorus in the audience. The crowd coming down from the back. The make-up tables. The rubber masks. The very artificial use of spotlights. The carnival-barker showmanship of the manager of the troupe, Canio (**Brandon Jovanovich**). Probably more. Let me show you the moment when we first see Canio's wife Nedda alone (**Ailyn Pérez**), musing on his jealousy and her own growing feeling of being trapped in their marriage. It is another marvelous moment when Carsen exposes all the guts of normal stage illusion. Towards the end of the clip, Nedda will have a script in her hands; is she reading from it, or are these her own thoughts?

27. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*: Nedda's soliloquy (Robert Carsen, Amsterdam 2019)

Nedda is visited in turn by the two baritones in the piece: the loathsome Tonio, whom she rejects violently, and the local lad Silvio (**Mattia Olivieri**), who tries to persuade her to go away with him. Let's take the end of their duet, a beautiful love scene, both in the music and in the staging here. What they do not realize is that Tonio is spying on them from above.

28. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*: Love duet, ending (Robert Carsen, Amsterdam 2019)

So Canio realizes that his wife is betraying him. But he must get on with the show. His aria, "Vesti la giubba" ("On with the costume"), is famous and of course is a powerful statement of the theme that Carsen emphasizes so strongly. It is another *verismo* technique to use orchestral interludes as well as

arias to convey emotion, so we'll watch beyond the end of the aria; I'll play the entire **Intermezzo** if possible, but it may not be. What costume is Canio about to put on?

29. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*: "Vesti la giubba" (Robert Carsen, Amsterdam 2019)

30. — the same, 2 minutes shorter

Did you get my point about the costume? It is another wonderful Carsen touch that Canio is about to put on identical garments to the ones he is taking off. I have to move ahead now to the final scene. Most of the action after the Intermezzo is the play the group put on for the villagers. It is a farce about a persistent lover and a jealous husband. But it comes too close to reality. Even as Nedda tries to continue the play, Canio rips off his wig and declares "Pagliaccio non son!" — I'm no longer acting!

31. Leoncavallo: *I pagliacci*: ending (Robert Carsen, Amsterdam 2019)

32. — still from the above

Now follows the intermission. But Carsen begins his *Cavalleria rusticana* much as Michieletto had done, with a freeze. But the dead bodies on the ground are still those of Nedda and Silvio. Let's pick it up from the point towards the end of the overture where the crowd disperses, then move ahead into the first scene of the opera. This is where Zeffirelli, where in the film or onstage, had the crowd beginning to converge on the town square. This is where Michieletto had his scene inside and outside the bakery. And this is where Carsen... well, watch!

33. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*: opening (Robert Carsen, Amsterdam 2019)

Carsen's approach seems to be that we are now in an opera company rehearsing for a forthcoming production of the Mascagni opera; the Easter Hymn scene, for example, takes place in a chorus rehearsal room. But it doesn't work nearly as well for me, partly because it does not feel true to any rehearsal situations I have ever known, and partly because he has difficulty establishing the actors as distinct from the roles they play. But he has a terrific ending. Note the huge mirror at the rear of the stage; those rows of lights are the front of the balconies in the Amsterdam opera house.

34. Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*: ending (Robert Carsen, Amsterdam 2019)

35. — still from the above

D. Michieletto 2

36. Scenes from *I pagliacci* (Damiano Michieletto, director)

In the second half of his double-bill, **Damiano Michieletto** sets *I pagliacci* in the same place and period as his *Cavalleria rusticana*. He imagines that the troupe is performing in some parochial school hall, and the revolving set reveal in turn the school gymnasium, the dressing rooms (again with illuminated make-up mirrors), and the auditorium itself. Although slightly less gripping than the first opera, it still works excellently, and Michieletto manages to make several of Robert Carsen's points without sacrificing

realism. He also continues to link the two operas. The younger assistant in Mamma Lucia's bakery becomes Silvio, as we have seen, and the blonde-haired woman in pink turns out to be Nedda. The connection is weakened slightly by casting the same tenor, *Aleksandrs Antonenko*, as both Canio and Turiddu (who is now supposed to be dead), but I guess you can't pay his fee and use him only once! You will see other connections as I move on. I have only time for two excerpts. The first clip must be his take on Canio's aria, "Vesti la giubba," and his lovely use of the Intermezzo that follows.

37. *Leoncavallo: I pagliacci: "Vesti la giubba"* (Damiano Michieletto, London 2015)

And the second clip is the very ending of the opera. I thought Robert Carsen's dropping front curtain was a masterstroke, but Michieletto's ending is almost as good.

38. *Leoncavallo: I pagliacci: ending* (Damiano Michieletto, London 2015)

39. Main title 2 ("So where is *verismo* now?")