

## 11. VERIST MELODRAMA. *CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA* BY PIETRO MASCAGNI - TRADITION AND INNOVATION

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**Abstract:** For three centuries, the opera series presented on the stages of musical theaters various subjects with noble characters (kings, queens, princes, princesses), passionate loves, battles between state rations, the sense of duty, while servants and peasants found their place only in opera buffa. With Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853) something began to change when the composer brought the courtesan Violetta Valery and her drama to the center of the opera's action. But the decisive turning point is Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), which assigns the main role to a gypsy woman, a worker in a cigarette factory, a smuggler, who practices and recommends the freedom of life and love, capable of defying even death for she stays true to her questionable lifestyle. Soon, the verist school, or the new school, will appear in Italy, made up of a group of young composers: Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano, Cilea, Puccini, very different from each other in formation, style and personality, but on which united his firm desire to revolutionize and renew the work in a realistic sense.

**Key words:** dramaturgy, verist opera, the evolution of the opera

### 1. Introduction

The Verist school appears at the end of the 19th century, when some composers approached in their works the topic of realism (a literary trend concerned with the daily events faced by poorer social classes, the humblest characters, devoid of sentimentality and brilliance), striving to restore the truth of things and reality as it actually presented itself. These themes were developed in literature by the great Sicilian novelist Giovanni Verga, being taken over by opera composers. Thus, Pietro Mascagni composed the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), based on a novella written by Giovanni Verga and Ruggero Leoncavallo wrote the opera *I Pagliacci* (1892), true masterpieces that have enjoyed resounding successes since the first performances.

As stated above, the inspiration model of the verist composers comes from the masterpiece of French music *Carmen* by G. Bizet, who at the premiere sparked a great scandal because of the conception of the protagonist's role (a woman with a strong, possessive character, described with very rhythmic and incisive songs, at the limit of vulgarity) and for the highly exposed dramatism. We will discover exactly the same characteristics in the works of Mascagni and Leoncavallo. With the verist opera, the transition to a representation is made in which the stage and musical deployment correspond to what the character wants to express, with his feelings and emotions. *Hanno ammazzato compare Turridu*<sup>43</sup> is the cry of the plebeian who denounces the crime committed in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and which led the opera to a new stage of development, totally different from previous creations.

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<sup>43</sup> They killed our friend Turridu (t. a. C. G. M.)

The composers supporting the Italian verism of the last decade of the 19th century have established themselves in the stylistic picture of the genre through the principles and topics addressed in the opera performances, and by combining the means of expression of traditional musical language with innovative concepts. These "composers were oriented towards realism, often dressed their characters in contemporary costumes, used intrigues involving simple people, not aristocrats, delighted in the violence on stage and described the action and emotional states with the help of a music of intense dramatism"<sup>44</sup>.

## 2. Italian verist opera

Next, we will present the defining characteristics of the late 19th century Italian verist melodrama - *the verist opera* or *rustic philon*, also known as the *opera of slums* or the *melodrama plebea*, but without insisting on Puccinian creation, which we will analyze in a future larger work, intended exclusively for the master. Thus, May 17, 1890 is the birth of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, historically a reference point in the evolution of the Italian melodrama. This first verist opera was composed during a contest launched by the Sonzogno Publishing House<sup>45</sup> in Milan.

Verist composers have shown their preference for people or bourgeois characters, heroes animated by passions or violence, very close to ordinary people, characters conceived not only by the imagination of the authors, but also captured in their reality, therefore, more human. After the resounding success achieved by Mascagni, all the young composers tried to write short works, with characters almost always inspired by the most oppressed and exploited social strata in southern Italy. The melodramatic typology called *plebea* has a language derived from romantic melodrama, in part from contemporary literary experiences. Indeed, the germs of verism can also be recognized in the opera of Bizet or Verdi. For example, in Verdi, the fight between good and evil staged the daily conflict between woman and man, and the show remains the traditional one, with beautiful songs, with charming love stories, but the truly veristic character is found to a very small extent.

By definition, *drama plebea* must be placed among poor, humble people, and verist composers, in search of strong sensations, presented middle classes in their works. The love theme was adapted to people with a downgraded social status and thus acquired primordial, often brutal aspects. A specific feature of opera *plebea*, innovative and at the same time mandatory, is the fact that the story must take place in a contemporary environment of representation, with a topical subject, taken from the daily news.

Structured in a single act, *opera plebea* can sometimes include an orchestral *Intermezzo* (*Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*), it does not contain clear boundaries between scenes, arias or duets, closed forms are becoming rarer, being intended for serenades, toasts or prayers. Much of this work presents *uno squarcio di vita*<sup>46</sup>, as Leoncavallo says in the *Prologue* of *I Pagliacci*, without revealing the true dramatic deployment or other intrigues specific to the romantic theatre. In fact, the intrigues are not too complicated because the action is not very rich in events

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<sup>44</sup> Harold. C. Schönberg - *Viețile marilor compozitori*, Lider Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, p. 397

<sup>45</sup> Together with Mascagni, this publishing house brings together the composers Ruggero Leoncavallo, Umberto Giordano and Francesco Cilea. (Puccini wrote for Ricordi Publishing House).

<sup>46</sup> A look at life (t. a. C. G. M.)

and must lead to a tragic end. Also, we note in the *opera plebea*, the presence of liturgical scenes, gatherings of people preparing for religious or profane holidays (*Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*), the use of dialects that depict the folklore tint, all of these being innovative forms of the genre.

Of course, the new themes approached will also influence the musical conception. Thus, the verist composers took over the model of Mascagni from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, characterized by ample phrases intended for the main characters, and shorter phrases and low sonority for the secondary characters, and the orchestra does not have only the role of accompaniment, but it serves to express the voice of the composer who aims to obtain surprising scenic effects, because the orchestral apparatus is more numerous, it wins in the sound consistency and is decisively involved in the stage action.

The verist vocality develops lyrical moments of extraordinary beauty, although it tends to get very close to the inflections of spoken language. Thus, the vocality undergoes some transformations and we notice the introduction of the melodic recitative extremely close to everyday speech, a solid sound vocabulary, the use of the *declamato* genre (which must be different from the timbre of the sung voice) - sometimes with screams, but also giving up the finesse elements specific to the *bel canto* genre. Very loud sounds in the acute register, frequent use of chest resonance in female voices, and obtaining non-musical effects such as sighs, crying, howling, hysterical laughter, etc are attributed to the verist vocality.

The inclusion of the life of artists as a subject of the opera became frequent in the verist opera, when the historical content was not taken into account, but the burning passion, the daily feelings, concerns and anxieties of the characters. We notice that there is a distinctive binder for the subject, for the theme and for the music, and we find it in the end, when we discover that the guilt of the protagonists can only be atoned for by death. We notice that neither in *Paiate* nor in *Cavalleria* we have transparent or bright characters, and it is enough to remind of the culpability of the Nedda – Silvio, Lola - Turridu couples or the guilty reaction of Canio and Tonio, or Santuzza and Alfio: the crime and the denunciation that triggers the final tragedy.

It is very important that the narrative of the opera *I Pagliacci* takes place in the so-called rustic context, and perhaps that is why this opera has contributed significantly to encouraging the popularity of this genre of musical theatre inaugurated by Mascagni, as well as to strengthen the process of disseminating and even vulgarizing the themes of realistic literature. From this trend ubiquitous in the late 19th century Italian opera, *I Pagliacci* is noted for the specific features it reveals: passionate drama culminating in the violent death of one or more protagonists, adherence to narrative action that develops at a speed synonymous with verisimilitude, and last but not least the presence of simple categories of people, immune to confusing psychological implications, who explicitly manifest the feelings of love, jealousy or revenge with accentuated tension.

The immense distance that exists between the actor's outward appearance and the substance within man is what actually makes the drama of Canio's jealousy much more tragic; he lives so deeply the dicotomy actor - man, that he thinks about this aspect in the monologue he carries between him and himself, at the end of act I:

*Bah, se' tu forse un uom! Tu se' Pagliaccio!*<sup>47</sup> The skillful and original interpretation of the dual scheme representative in *I Pagliacci*, inspired by the illustration of a series of complementary binomials (man - actor, person - character) inscribed in the general opposition between reality and mimesis, is especially important in the vocal-dramaturgical context of the work. We note that the narrative unit of the work is built on the dramaturgical deployment on the stage and is governed by the alternation of the characters on stage, while in *Cavalleria Rusticana* the narrative sequence is dictated by the chaining of musical numbers according to the logic of closed musical numbers.

### 3. *Cavalleria rusticana* - tradition and innovation

By its specificity, the verist opera exposes various shocking, harsh and contradictory situations from the authentic reality by affirming conflicting dialectics such as: hope - discouragement, love - hate, stinginess - generosity, sadness - joy, fears and frustrations, authoritarian behavior, isolation, escaping pleasure, unfettered sexuality or lying behavior. Consequently, the verist composers resonate more with the sinister effect of human behavior and not according to the principle of realistic novelists of accumulation of passions that ultimately lead to a catastrophe.

Mascagni composed *Cavalleria rusticana* under a lot of pressure, aiming to win a contest for the composition of an opera in a single act organized by Sonzogno publishing house in Milan, for young musicians, which represented the composer's unique opportunity to launch himself in his professional career, but also for a better financial condition. The very short time (the work was started in January) allowed him to realize the happy synthesis between tradition and innovation, managing to express with great skill the natural phylon and the musical instinct so deep that it immediately reaches the heart of the listener. The contest was launched on July 11, 1888<sup>48</sup>, and Mascagni managed to finish the work the day before the deadline. Certainly, the composer<sup>49</sup> did not imagine that this opera will bring him so much fame and that he will remain immortal, signaling at the same time the true affirmation of the verism in the opera. Of the 73 participants in the contest, the jury selected 3 finalists who, in addition to a cash prize, had the opportunity to represent their works at *Teatro Costanzi* in Rome.

Mascagni saw the theatrical version of Verga's *Cavalleria rusticana*, considered it a very good subject, and appealed to his friend, the poet Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti who, in turn, asked for the help of another poet friend, Guido Menasci, for the achievement of the libretto. The commission joint on February 1, 1890 selected 18 works at first, to have 3 works in the end, that were classified as follows: 3rd place *Rudelio* by Vincenzo Ferroni, 2nd place *Labillia* by Vincenzo Spinelli and first place *Cavalleria rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni.

*Cavalleria rusticana* was first represented on May 17, 1890 at the *Teatro Costanzi* in Rome with immense, unprecedented success and thus, Pietro Mascagni - who had not completed his studies at the Milan Conservatory because he disagreed

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<sup>47</sup> Oh! If you were a man! But you're a clown! (t. a. C. G. M.)

<sup>48</sup> The contest ended in May 1889.

<sup>49</sup> At the time Mascagni was 27 years old, director of the Philharmonic of Cerignola in the province of Foggia, conductor of opera companies and an obscure composer.

with the teaching methods - joined the gallery of the great Italian opera composers. Because almost no one was interested in coming to listen to a work of an unknown composer, the theater was half empty. When conductor Leopoldo Mugnone attacked the *Prelude* to the opera *Cavalleria rusticana*, the audience was immediately captivated by the magic of music, and the performance lasted about 2 hours, with the spectators cheering fascinated, asking bis for more numbers that impressed them deeply.

The protagonists employed by Sonzogno for the roles of Santuzza and Turiddu were truly commensurate with the work: Gemma Bellincioni and Roberto Stagno (couple in real life and on stage, the tenor over 50 years old, and his much younger wife) who had the interpretative skills and temperament to give voice to the drama and strong passions of the characters they embodied. Mascagni and the artists in the scene were called 60 times on stage for applause and ovations, the composer suddenly becoming famous. As I have already said, Mascagni's opera has as literary source the novella with the same title written by Giovanni Verga, published in 1880 together with other stories in the collection *Vita dei campi*, this is the first realistic work of the author who abandons the aristocratic decor of sentimental novels of his first youth, to represent the humble and disadvantaged classes of Sicily (villagers, shepherds, miners, etc.), *Cavalleria* being probably inspired by a real fact that occurred in Vizzini.

The novel reveals the story of Turiddu Macca, who returned home after being away to do his army training. He finds his ex-girlfriend, Lola, approaching the wedding with the carter Alfio, which will result in disappointment, jealousy and envy of the social situation Alfio has, Turiddu being very poor. In anger, Turiddu marries Santuzza, the daughter of Massaro Cola, a winemaker, who lived near Lola's house and she could see him daily. Lola decides to resume her relationship with Turiddu and triggers Santuzza's jealousy. Back from work Alfio meets Santuzza, who reveals how things are between the two. The man does not think too much and even on Easter day, while Turiddu is at the pub with friends, he searches for him and invites him to discuss outside.

Turiddu understands very well what it is about, admits that he was wrong, but warns him that he will not allow to be killed so as not to cause his mother suffering, he then bites his ear, thus accepting the duel of honor challenge. Turiddu is wounded first, then hits Alfio, but he throws sand in his eyes and blinds him, to finally kill him with two blows to the stomach and throat. Mascagni introduces for the first time in the lyrical theatre common people as protagonists of the drama, with their carnal and passionate manifestations, thus interrupting the series of traditional characters (kings, princes, nobles, rulers, etc.), this is one of the important points that contributed to the great success of *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Also, the musical language is innovative, as well as the way of expressing of the characters - an essential and effective language, the use of unconventional recitative, the protagonists who tell their stories and express their feelings just like in a theater performance, scenes are short, the dialogues dynamic, tense and fast, fast, but without completely abandoning the melodrama and conventional distribution of roles. The two librettists Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci had the inspiration to evoke the voice of the villagers by using the choir,

which intervenes quite often to superimpose the collective rhythm to individual action. Because of his lack of experience, or because he probably did not imagine that he could achieve such success, Mascagni was not concerned with formally defining the copyright issue with Verga, but he limited himself to asking permission in a general way, committing himself to pay him a percentage of his gain.

After the resounding success of the opera, the publisher Sonzogno bought the copyright and offered Verga only 1,000-pound compensation. Angry, Verga sued the two and won a 143,000-pound compensation from Sonzogno. A few years later Verga authorized Domenico Monleone to compose a new version for *Cavalleria rusticana* (in 1907) and the war was resumed, Mascagni and Sonzogno being the ones who sued and defeated Verga this time. Monleone's *Cavalleria* had a new libretto, and the title was changed to *La giostra dei falchi* (1914)<sup>50</sup>.

Why is *Cavalleria rusticana* an opera such appreciated by the public and what are the reasons why it still enjoys huge success? First of all, for the intrigue of the tragic narrative, condensed into a single act, in which the tragic ending is prepared by a mechanism that alternates the moments of tension with those of the detouring of action, but only for it to grow immediately and further, to maintain the attention and involvement of the public. The second reason is the wonderful music that Mascagni wrote with great skill, a perfect music, of folk inspiration, familiar to poor people, his origin being a modest one. At the same time, the composer does not give up the traditional opera creation, but reduces it to a simpler form, devoid of artificiality, which is why his music penetrates directly into the heart of the listeners.

The effect of the musical discourse, but also of the breaks, is immediate and realistic, the music accompanies and gives voice to the drama by exalting it to the maximum with a naturalness similar to the realism of Verga. Mascagni uses traditional closed numbers - especially in stage music intended in the choir, representing the voice of the community and the moments of celebration or liturgical celebrations, profane joys, etc., but outside of them, introduces an innovative element that stands out in the dialogues that play the free, open song, following the rhythm of the discourse and the mood of the characters.

The work is dressed in various leitmotifs and revivals of musical themes that bring cohesion to the whole and demonstrate Mascagni's knowledge of the Wagnerian school. He did not want his characters to look strange, distant or exotic, but preferred them to be familiar and recognizable by the Italian public in general, even in the serenade that Turiddu sings in the Sicilian dialect, reminiscent of the Sicilian song. Surely, the master could have introduced more Sicilian music, but he did not. For example, Lola sings a Tuscan-inspired song, so the popular concept crosses Sicilian borders and extends into wider territory.

The choirs of the villagers of Mascagni perform the function of collective voice, of mass presence of the people - an important stage presence because it translates very well the sense of community always present in the works of Verga. The composer attributes to the orchestra the role of protagonist by two extremely beautiful musical numbers: *Preludiu* and *Intermezzo*, thus giving up the classic overture. Another innovative element is the interruption of the Prelude that

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<sup>50</sup> *Caruselul soimilor* (t. a. C. G. M.)

generates the beginning of the *Sicilian* serenade (*Oh Lola, c'hai di latti la cammisa*) that Turiddu sings in the Sicilian dialect.

#### 4. Conclusions

*Cavalleria Rusticana* focuses on the tragic sense of drama, the strength and the enlivening of the passions that inevitably lead to the final tragedy, as no one had ever done before in the opera, at the same time creating a musical and formal language very suitable for the representation of themes with an extremely strong emotional load. Mascagni successfully succeeds in the difficult mission of concentrating in a one-act work all the musical and theatrical styles that make up the lyrical theatre, while bringing some significant musical improvements and a new, revolutionary compositional conception.

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