

## CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA – OPERA BY PIETRO MASCAGNI

Presented by George Kurti Plohn



Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945) was an Italian composer who endured many years of poverty and obscurity, touring the countryside in Italy as an unknown musician and teaching music, until suddenly he hit the jackpot, so to speak.

It just happened that he heard of a competition sponsored by the famous Milanese music publisher Sonzogno offering a prize for the best one-act opera to be submitted.

Having nothing to lose, Mascagni took a story – a passionate love tragedy that takes place on Easter morning and set out to work. It took him two months to compose the opera, which he named *Cavalleria Rusticana* (in English “Rustic Chivalry”). But when the time came to submit the score, his courage deserted him. Fearing failure, he put the score in a drawer, where it might have remained had it not been for his wife, who sent it off. In all, 73 operas were submitted, of which the judges selected the final three to be performed. *Cavalleria Rusticana* opened on the

evening of 19 May 1890 to a half empty house. However, the audience included not only the most authoritative music critics in the country, but also Queen Margherita, a great music lover. It was a success from its opening notes. Following the rendition of the *Siciliana*, the famous prologue sung behind the curtain, the audience leaped to their feet with a thunderous applause not heard for many years. The aria was encored as were a number of other arias in the opera. It was a sensation, with Mascagni taking 40 curtain calls and winning the First Prize. He was only 26 years old. Suddenly this unknown composer gained the status of an international famous opera composer and in less than a year *Cavalleria* had been performed all over Europe.

And not only that, but his opera became a door opener in musical history by creating a completely new operatic genre that came to be known as "verismo opera" (meaning "realism opera", from Italian word 'vero' meaning "true") a post-Romantic new operatic genre associated with Italian composers such as Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Puccini, the latter the composer of *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*. The subject matter of the verismo operas is oriented toward the lives of the poor, focusing not anymore on gods, mythological figures, or kings and queens, but on the average contemporary man and woman and their problems, generally of a sexual, romantic, or violent nature, that had not generally been seen until then as a subject fit for opera libretti. And then, out of the blue moon, the Italian Giovanni Verga wrote a short story which he called *Cavalleria rusticana* and even developed it into a play. It became the source for what is now considered to be the first verismo opera: *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Mascagni and in less than a year it had been performed all over Europe.

Medals were struck in Mascagni's honor; Livorno welcomed him home as a hero; the King of Italy bestowed on him the Order of the Crown of Italy – an honor even Verdi wasn't given until his middle age. On the strength of one masterpiece, the struggling composer became wealthy and famous overnight.

### Synopsis

The opera expresses an ambience of Southern Italy of those days.

Its story is about passionate love relationships.

The action takes place in 1890, on the island of Sicily, in the morning of Easter. The opera starts with a touching Prelude called *Siciliana*, sung behind the curtain by Turiddu who is still in love with Lola. And he sings his heart out for her with these words:

*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!*

Santuzza, a village woman visits Mamma Lucia who is the mother of Santuzza's lover, the same Turiddu as above. By now you do sense what we are getting here: two women loving the same man! Santuzza asks Mamma Lucia where her son has gone. Santuzza knew that Turiddu had spent that previous night with Lola, Turiddu's former lover. Lola is married by now to Alfio, while Turiddu served in the army. Santuzza complains to Turiddu's mother, but Mamma Lucia cannot do anything to stop Turiddu. Santuzza goes to the church where she happens to see her lover, Turiddu. She asks him where he was last night. But, Turiddu refuses to answer. On the contrary, he attempts to enter the church with Lola who has just arrived. Santuzza clings to him, but he pushes her away.

Then, when Alfio, Lola's husband, arrives, Santuzza decides to reveal to him everything about his wife. Alfio becomes infuriated and he swears revenge to Turiddu. By now Santuzza regrets telling him, but it is too late now, and is now worried about Turiddu.

Returning from the church the villagers gather at Mamma Lucia's tavern. Turiddu leads them in a drinking song, but the atmosphere becomes tense when Alfio appears. He refuses Turiddu's offer of wine and instead challenges him to a knife fight. Turiddu admits his guilt but is determined to go through with the fight, for Santuzza's sake as well as for his own honor. The two men agree to meet outside the village. Alone with his mother, Turiddu begs her to take care of Santuzza if he doesn't come back, then runs off to the fight. As Mamma Lucia waits anxiously, shouts are heard in the distance. A woman runs in screaming that Turiddu has been killed! Lucia and Santuzza faint upon hearing that. And the curtain falls quickly, bringing this steamy opera to its end.

\*\*\*\*\*

This rendition of Cavalleria Rusticana is a Metropolitan Opera recording of a live performance back in 1978, with the tenor Placido Domingo in the role of Turiddu, the baritone Vern Shinnall in the role of Alfio, the mezzo-soprano Tatiana Troyanos as Santuzza and the mezzo-soprano Isola Jones as Lola. Mamma Lucia is sung by the alto Jean Kraft.

The conductor is James Levine. Duration: 1:10

O Lola! Placido Domingo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0J3WGd2KQg>

Film Zeffirelli <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arqnoxvtzZ4>



Mascagni in 1890  
when the opera was premiered



Plaque dedicated to Mascagni in Rome  
*"Pietro Mascagni chose in 1890 to stay at this hotel with auspicious name, on the anxious eve of the yearned-for recognition that marked the triumph of Cavalleria Rusticana."*  
The Senate and People of Rome  
December 7, 1963 - Centenary of the musician's birth"

