

## PAGLIACCI – AN OPERA BY RUGGERO LEONCAVALLO

*Pagliacci* (in English: *Clowns*) is an Italian opera with a prologue and two acts, with both the music and the libretto by Ruggero Leoncavallo. Opera companies have frequently staged *Pagliacci* together with *Cavalleria rusticana* by Mascagni, a double bill known colloquially as 'Cav and Pag'. Ruggero Leoncavallo, a son of a judge, was born on 1857 in Naples. He studied at the Naples Conservatory and then moved to Paris to try there a musical career but he got only so far as playing in cafés and giving piano and singing lessons. The only positive aspect of his time in Paris was that during this time he met a young lady, Berthe Rambaud, a "preferred student" of his, so much preferred that she became his wife. He also composed around this time a symphonic poem "La nuit de mai" (English: 'A Night in May'), which premiered to critical acclaim. With this success and now with enough accumulated money, Leoncavallo and his wife returned to Milan to try his luck there as an opera composer. He spent some years teaching and attempting ineffectively to obtain the production of another of his operas. Then in 1890, at age 33, he saw the enormous success of Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and wasted no time in producing in only five months, his own verismo work, *Pagliacci*.

As the *Cavalleria*, which we heard last Sunday, this is also a quintessentially verismo opera, a genre that is oriented toward the lives of average contemporary man and woman and their problems, generally of a romantic, sexual, or violent nature, instead of dealing with gods, mythological figures, or kings and queens.

Leoncavallo said that he based the story of *Pagliacci* on a real life incident in his childhood, namely a murder, the victim of which was a Leoncavallo family servant, Gaetano. The incident resulted from a series of perceived romantic entanglements involving Gaetano, an other villager and a village girl with whom both men were infatuated. Leoncavallo's father, a judge, was the presiding magistrate over the criminal investigation.

Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci* was premiered in Milan in 1892, and in the pit was the 25 years old Arturo Toscanini, the soon to become one of the greatest conductors of all times. It was an immediate success! Despite the

fact that he composed also other operas, today *Pagliacci* is the only work by Leoncavallo in the standard operatic repertory. A number of later works achieved only passing success. For most of his operas Leoncavallo was his own librettist and he showed a distinct literary ability and a flair for theatrical effect.

In 1907, *Pagliacci* became the first opera to be recorded in its entirety and in 1931 it became the first complete opera to be filmed with sound.

Most and foremost, the opera *Pagliacci* became famous for its most touching tenor aria "Vesti la giubba" (In English "Put on the costume") sung at the conclusion of the first act, when Canio, the clown, discovers his wife's infidelity, but must nevertheless prepare for his performance as the clown Pagliaccio, because "the show must go on".

This aria was recorded by Enrico Caruso in 1902 and conquered the entire world becoming the world's first record to sell a million copies of the 78-rpm era.

Ruggero Leoncavallo died in 1919 in Montecatini Terme, Tuscany, a famous spa, near Florence, where he lived. His funeral in Florence was attended by hundreds, including fellow composers Pietro Mascagni of the *Cavalleria* fame and his long time rival Giacomo Puccini, the composer of *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Turandot*, *La Bohème*, to name a few.

Synopsis.

### Prologue

Before the opera begins, a member of the small theatrical road company, Tonio, dressed as a clown, steps out alone in the front of the curtain. He tells the audience that a clown is also a man, so a clown can feel sorrow and pity just like any other man.

He starts out singing his beautiful baritone aria "*Si può? Si può? Signore! Signori! Scusatemi*" (in English: Please? Please? Will you allow me? Ladies! Gentlemen! Excuse me if I appear thus alone but I am the Prologue.). He sings out his heart about the fact that clowns are also men made of "*di carne e d'ossa*" – of flesh and bone.

At the end of his supplication, the curtain goes up for Act 1.

### Act 1

In the latter half of the 19th century, in Calabria in the south of Italy, the small theatrical road company whose manager is Canio, has arrived in the village. Canio's wife is the main actress of the company, Nedda. But she is getting sick of her husband, because he is so deeply jealous. So that Nedda has another man, Silvio. Nedda and Silvio promise to each other to elope. A member of the company, Tonio, overheard this promise, and he informs Canio about it. Canio appears, but Silvio runs away. Canio is infuriated; he asks his wife, "Who was that?" But, Nedda refuses to answer.

By now it was time to start the performance. Back in his dressing room, Canio cries out and sings to himself the most important and the most tragic aria of the opera, "Vesti la giubba", which starts with: "*Tu se' Pagliaccio! Vesti la giubba e la faccia infarina.*" (In English: You are Pagliaccio! Put on the costume, the powder and the paint; the people paid and want to laugh.) Canio must play a clown in spite of his painful condition, and must make the audience laugh. He must try to convince himself of his role. This tenor aria, which concludes with the words "*Ridi, Pagliaccio, sul tuo amore infranto! Ridi del duol, che t'avvelena il cor!*" (in English: Laugh, clown, at your broken love! Laugh at the grief that poisons your heart!), aria that expresses so much pain, that it moves even the most cynic listener.

### Act 2

Many villagers gather, and the performance by the company starts. The story is similar to Canio's own reality. It is in fact a "story within a story." Canio confuses the reality and the story within a story itself. The woman, who is played by Nedda, meets her lover while her husband, who is played by Canio, is absent, but then her husband soon comes home. Canio is by now out of his senses. In the middle of his play, he forcefully asks, "*Il nome! Il nome!*" (In English: "His name! his name!"), but his wife refuses to answer. The audience is excited by their realistic acting. Finally, Canio, totally out of his mind and convulsed with rage stabs Nedda to death with a knife. The audience screams in horror. Before her death, Nedda cried, "*Soccorso... Silvio! - Help me, Silvio!*"

Silvio appears in the audience, but then he attempts to run away. Canio runs after him, turns in anger like a beast, leaps on Silvio and stabs him too. Silvio collapses to the floor. And then Canio, stupefied and motionless, lets his knife slip to the floor. He tells his audience “*La commedia è finita!*” (In English: “The comedy has ended.”)

This recording of *Pagliacci* was produced by the Metropolitan Opera from a live telecast performance back in 1978, with the following cast: Sherrill Milnes in the role of Tonio, baritone, Placido Domingo, in the role of Canio, tenor, the wonderful Canadian soprano Teresa Stratas in the role of Nedda. Our passionate conductor is again James Levine.

Duration: 1:15



Ruggero Leoncavallo



Ruggero Leoncavallo in 1910