

Cavalleria rusticana

Music by Pietro Mascagni
Libretto by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci

Study Guide to the Opera



The villagers sing an Easter Hymn, joined by Santuzza. Production photo by Ken Howard for Lyric Opera of Kansas City.

Rustic Chivalry Wins the Contest

In 1888 the Milanese music publisher Edoardo Sonzogno announced a competition open to young Italian composers who had not yet had an opera performed on stage. They were invited to submit a one-act opera that would be judged by a jury of five prominent Italian critics and composers. The best three would be staged in Rome at Sonzogno's expense.



Pietro Mascagni
(1863–1945)

At the end of his life,
Mascagni said,
*It is a pity I wrote
Cavalleria first, for I
was crowned before
I became king.*

Pietro Mascagni, born in Livorno, Italy, had composed two operas already, but was enduring poverty and obscurity as a conductor and piano teacher. When he heard about the competition two months before the closing date, he asked his friend Targioni-Tozzetti to write a libretto based on *Cavalleria rusticana*, a popular short story (and play) by the Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga. The poet Targioni-Tozzetti and his colleague Guido Menasci composed the libretto, sending it to Mascagni in fragments, sometimes on a postcard.

Mascagni took two months to compose the work so he believed the opera was hastily written and not reflective of his best efforts. His courage deserted him and he placed the draft in a drawer, from where his wife, Marcellina Mascagni, removed it and submitted it on the last day that entries would be accepted.

Of the 73 operas submitted, Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (Italian for *Rustic Chivalry*) won First Prize. The audience at the world premiere at the Roman Teatro Costanzi on May 17, 1890, was sparse and initially skeptical about a work by a baker's son from Livorno, but excitement and enthusiasm grew by the minute. After the curtain, the audience erupted in enthusiastic jubilation to which there seemed to be no end, and Mascagni took more than 40 curtain calls. A gritty opera about everyday people caused one of the greatest sensations in opera and ushered in the *verismo* movement.

Cavalleria rusticana Synopsis

Place: A 19th-century Sicilian village Time: Easter morning

Before the action takes place, the young villager Turiddu returns from military service to learn that his fiancée Lola had married the carter Alfio while he was away. In revenge, Turiddu seduced Santuzza, a young woman in the village. As the opera begins, Lola, overcome by her jealousy of Santuzza, has begun an adulterous affair with Turiddu.



The visual image of Turiddu biting Alfio's ear captures the essence of the story—he is challenging him over a woman

Turiddu sings in the distance of his love for Lola, wife of the carter Alfio, "O Lola ch'ai di latti la cammisa" ("O Lola, you whose blouse is as white as milk"). On one side of the village main square is the church; on the other is Lucia's wine shop and the house where she lives with her son, Turiddu. The villagers sing of the beautiful spring day, "Gli aranci olezzano sui verdi margini" ("Oranges smell good on the green edges") and a hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some villagers enter the church, and others wander off.

Later in the morning, a distraught Santuzza approaches the tavern of Mamma Lucia, Turiddu's mother, who tells her that her son is away buying wine. But Santuzza knows that Turiddu has been seen during the night in the village. Alfio arrives with a group of men, boasting of his horses—and of Lola. He asks Mamma Lucia if she has any more of her good wine. When she says that Turiddu has gone to get more, Alfio replies that he saw him near his house that same morning. Lucia is surprised, but Santuzza tells her to keep quiet.

Inside the church, the choir sings "Regina coeli". Outside, the villagers sing an Easter Hymn, "Inneggiamo, il Signor non è morto" ("Let us sing hymns, the Lord is not dead"), joined by Santuzza. The villagers enter the church, while Santuzza and Mamma Lucia remain outside. Lucia asks Santuzza why she signaled her to remain silent when Alfio said that he had seen Turiddu that morning. Santuzza exclaims, "Voi lo sapete" ("You well know") and tells Lucia the story of her seduction by Turiddu and his affair with Lola. Santuzza feels she cannot enter the church, but begs Lucia to go inside herself and pray for Santuzza who stays behind to try to plead with Turiddu to leave Lola and return to her. The old woman expresses her pity, then also leaves for Mass.

Turiddu arrives in the piazza. When Santuzza confronts him about his affair with Lola, he denies her accusations. Just then Lola passes by on her way to church. She mocks Santuzza and Turiddu turns to follow her. Santuzza begs him to stay and begs him not to abandon her. She clings to him. He loosens her hands, throws her to the ground, and enters the church. Santuzza curses him. Alfio appears, late for Mass. Santuzza tells him that Lola went to church with Turiddu and reveals that she has been cheating on him. Alfio swears to take *vendetta* (revenge) which causes Santuzza to repent for having disclosed the affair and begs Alfio to stop, but to no avail.

Returning from the church, the villagers gather at Mamma Lucia's tavern. Turiddu is in high spirits because he is with Lola and Santuzza appears to have gone. He invites his friends to his mother's wine shop where he sings a drinking song, "Viva, il vino spumeggiante" ("Hail to the bubbling wine!"). Alfio joins them. Turiddu offers him wine, but he refuses it. All understand that trouble is in the air. The women leave, taking Lola with them. In a brief exchange of words, Alfio challenges Turiddu to a duel, who admits his guilt but is determined to go through with the fight, for Santuzza's sake as well as for his honor. Following Sicilian custom, the two men embrace, and Turiddu, in a token of acceptance, bites Alfio's ear, drawing blood which signifies a fight to the death. The two men agree to meet outside the village

Alfio leaves and Turiddu calls Lucia back. He tells her that he is going outside to get some air and asks that she be a kindly mother to Santuzza if he should not return: "Un bacio, mamma! Un altro bacio!—Addio!" ("One kiss, mother! One more kiss!—Farewell!"). Turiddu rushes out. Mamma Lucia, weeping, wanders aimlessly around outside her house. Santuzza approaches and throws her arms around her. The villagers start to crowd around. Voices are heard in the distance and a woman cries, "They have murdered Turiddu!" Santuzza faints and Lucia collapses in the arms of the women villagers.

Characters

Turiddu *tenor*
 [too-REED-doo]
 A young soldier

Santuzza *soprano*
 [sahn-TOOT-tsah]
 A village girl

Alfio *baritone*
 [AHL-fyoh]
 The village teamster

Lola *mezzo-soprano*
 [LOW-lah]
 His wife

Mamma Lucia *contralto*
 [MAH-mah loo-CHEE-ah]
 Turiddu's mother

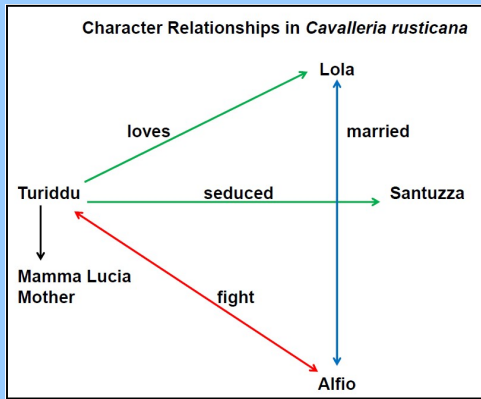


Cavalleria rusticana takes place in a Sicilian village, where Cypress trees and terracotta-roofed houses abound.

Memorable Orchestral Music

Cavalleria rusticana contains one of the most beautiful tunes in opera, the “Intermezzo”, a short piece played solely by the orchestra while the village square is empty between the eighth and ninth scenes. Mascagni connected the two parts of the opera—the exposition scenes and the drinking scene at the tavern—by composing an instrumental-only piece to denote the passage of time. The main theme of the “Intermezzo” is a hymn-like melody from an earlier scene and foreshadows the coming tragedy at the end of the opera. *Intermezzi* are similar to *entr'actes*, which connect two parts of an opera, such as in Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* or Bizet’s *Carmen*.

Mascagni’s “Intermezzo” has become famous outside the world of opera. Francis Ford Coppola used the “Intermezzo” in the final minutes of his 1972 *Godfather: Part III* film, when Michael Corleone remembers his daughter’s death and he dies alone at a Sicilian villa. Martin Scorsese chose the music to be played behind the opening credits of *Raging Bull*, his 1980 sports drama film. The “Intermezzo” depicts those poignant sequences perfectly with its emotional intensity.



“Intermezzo” from *Cavalleria rusticana*

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 Sonzogno
 di Piero Ostali,
 Via Bigli 11-
 20121,
 Milano
 in 1890.



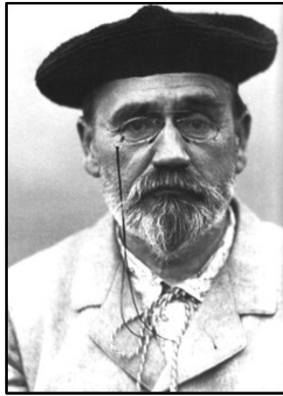
Verismo ideas influenced literature, art, and music

When Mascagni composed *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1890, the opera ushered in the *verismo* movement. What was happening in Italian opera in the 1800s? Why did opera pivot in an entirely new direction in 1890? To understand the significance of *Cavalleria's* premiere, reflect on the styles that pervaded Italian opera in the 1800s and the influences from other art forms:

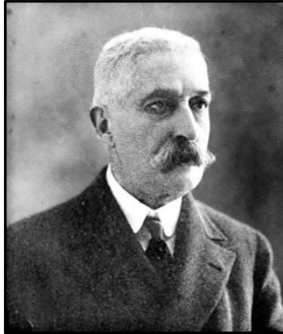
- Early in the century, *bel canto* operas used the beauty and dramatic power of the human voice to tell wildly melodramatic stories. In serious opera, tragic endings became fashionable. In comic opera (*opera buffa*), slapstick remained king.
- Later in the century, Verdi composed action-packed dramas with fascinating characters. Rather than a series of separate musical numbers, opera became a seamless whole in which the music flowed continuously. Verdi dominated Italian opera with large productions and grand stories.
- In the mid-1800s, the literary school of *naturalism* flourished in the works of French novelist Émile Zola, who rejected *romanticism* and embraced scientific objectivism, detachment, and social commentary. In Italy, Luigi Capuana (1839–1915) and Giovanni Verga published *realist* historical novels and wrote about provincial people. The authors sought to portray the world with greater realism and included subject matter that reflected the lives of the poor. In the visual arts, painters rejected exotic subject matter and portrayed real people, “warts and all”.

The *verismo* style of opera was not an aberration, but the result of the literary, artistic, and cultural *milieu*. When Mascagni based *Cavalleria rusticana* on Verga's play of the same name, the opera world was ready for something new and true and real. The composer's music is strong, passionate, and often conversational, a style that fits well within the context of *verismo* (Italian for realism, meaning true). Other composers followed suit: Ruggero Leoncavallo (*Pagliacci*), Umberto Giordano (*Andrea Chénier*), Francesco Cilea (*Adriana Lecouvreur*), and Giacomo Puccini (*Tosca*).

Mascagni's opera single-handedly turned from Verdi's dynasty at one performance in 1890 and ushered in the *verismo* movement. The genre peaked in the early 1900s and lingered into the 1920s. Opera will continue to grow and evolve, but it's fascinating to focus on several decades of opera that put gritty struggles of common people on stage.



Émile Zola (1840–1902)



Giovanni Verga (1840–1922)

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An Opera Sensation

Cavalleria rusticana opened on May 17, 1890 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome to a half empty house. It was a success from its opening notes, when audience members leapt to their feet with a thunderous applause not heard for many years. Mascagni's opera took First Prize in an opera contest, caused one of the greatest sensations in opera history, and ushered in the *verismo* movement.

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