

Pagliacci

Music and Libretto by Ruggero Leoncavallo

PITTSBURGH OPERA
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera



The audience is enthralled by the realism of the play when Canio becomes jealous.

Production photo by Ken Howard for Lyric Opera of Kansas City.

The Italian Line: Verdi, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Puccini

In 1890, Verdi had one more opera to compose—*Falstaff*—when an unknown Italian composer named Pietro Mascagni won a contest sponsored by music publisher Sonzogno. The winning opera was *Cavalleria rusticana*, which ushered in the *verismo* movement. Based on earlier literary *verismo* works that had been influenced by French naturalism, operatic *verismo* was marked by violent plots with characters drawn from everyday life, “warts and all.” Mascagni broke the rules about elevated opera plots and took opera “into the gutter” with his adaptation of a gritty short story depicting small town life and the tragic consequences of a single woman’s abandonment.



Ruggero Leoncavallo
(1857–1919)

Ruggero Leoncavallo, like other Italian composers, was jockeying for the attention of the opera-mad Italian public. He had dreamed of creating a Wagnerian epic cycle of operas based on Italian Renaissance history, but judging the market correctly, he wrote both the words and music for *Pagliacci* in 1892 in the new *verismo* style. He based the story of love and jealousy in a company of wandering players on a newspaper crime report. Leoncavallo used the curtain between the acts to make a clear distinction between the “real life” first part of the opera, and the second act “play-within-a-play”. Though Leoncavallo had written two other operas and collaborated with Puccini as a librettist, *Pagliacci* was his first work to be produced.

Soon after *Pagliacci*’s success, Leoncavallo was working on a libretto for Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, which Puccini was also adapting. Leoncavallo had the idea first, but Puccini beat him to the stage in 1896 and survived the test of time. The Italian public followed the operas written in *verismo* style with the fervor that we associate with sports championships. Who would inherit the one-man artistic dynasty of Giuseppe Verdi? Of his 10 operas and 10 operettas, *Pagliacci* remains Leoncavallo’s only work in the standard repertoire. Neither he nor Mascagni was able to move into the coveted position as Verdi’s heir—it was Puccini who won that throne.

Pagliacci Synopsis

Prologue

Tonio appears through the curtain and introduces himself as The Prologue. The author has sent him to explain that although it used to be the custom to explain to the audience that the tears the players shed were false, times have changed. The author has tried to depict a real slice of life, with truth as his inspiration. So prepare yourselves for what is to come: “true hatred and its bitter fruit”. And pity the poor players, who are just human beings after all, like you.

Act I

The village of Montalto, Calabria in August of 1865. Excited villagers rejoice as a *commedia dell'arte* traveling company drums up business for their evening performance. Canio, head of the troupe, describes the play: Pagliaccio will set a trap to avenge those who are cheating him. When a villager jokes that the hunchback Tonio wants to be alone with Canio's young wife, Nedda, Canio hints darkly that real life is not a play—he wouldn't tolerate Nedda being unfaithful. As bells call the women to Mass for the Feast of the Assumption, the men go to the tavern, leaving Nedda alone. Frightened by Canio's threats, she envies the freedom of the birds soaring overhead. Tonio appears and declares his love for Nedda, but she mocks him cruelly. Nedda slashes him in the face with a whip when he tries to force himself on her, and Tonio swears vengeance. Nedda's handsome young lover, Silvio, arrives and persuades her to run away with him at midnight. But Tonio, spying on them, runs off to tell Canio. Minutes later the enraged husband bursts in on the adulterers. Silvio barely escapes, and Nedda refuses to identify him, even when Canio threatens her with a knife. Beppe, another player, has to restrain Canio, and Tonio quietly advises him to wait until evening to catch Nedda's lover. Alone, Canio sobs that he must play the clown though his heart is breaking.

Act II

With great excitement, the villagers bustle in to see the play. In the absence of her husband, Colombina (Nedda) is serenaded by her lover Arlecchino (Beppe), who dismisses her amorous clod of a servant, Taddeo (Tonio). The sweet-hearts dine together and plot to give Pagliaccio, Colombina's husband, a sleeping potion. When Canio arrives, Arlecchino slips out the window. With pointed malice, Taddeo assures Pagliaccio of his wife's innocence, firing Canio's real-life jealousy. Losing his composure, Canio demands that Nedda reveal her lover's name. Terrified, she tries to continue with the play, while the audience applauds the realism of the acting. Maddened by her defiance, Canio stabs Nedda and then Silvio, who has rushed forward from the crowd to help her. Canio cries out that the comedy is ended.

An Unlikely Orchestra Star

In Mozart's time, the opera orchestra was quite small, with between 30–40 players. The orchestra included woodwind instruments in pairs, plus a trumpet, one or two horns, timpani, and a small string section. Throughout the 19th century, the orchestra grew to include piccolo, English horn, bass clarinets, contrabassoons, and an ever-expanding brass section. The string section grew to compensate, so orchestras picked up another 20–30 players. By the time of *Pagliacci's* premiere in 1892, 65–75 players were the norm for large opera houses.



The contrabass and the viola have different shapes and sound qualities.



The contrabass viol (also called string bass, bass) is the largest and lowest member of the strings. With sloping shoulders and thicker body, it is the sole representative of the ancient viol family.

In most orchestral music, the basses play the same music as the cellos one octave lower. But Leoncavallo gave the basses an unusual starring role in *Pagliacci*. Although the bass can play sweetly, Leoncavallo exploited its raspy quality in many solo passages. The most memorable comes at the end of Canio's famous “Vesti la giubba” aria, when the basses take over from the warmer cellos, producing a low muttering that tells us of the deep-seated menace in Canio's soul.

Characters

and their *commedia dell'arte* roles

Canio [KAH-nyoh] *dramatic tenor*

Pagliaccio [pahl-YAH-choh]
Older leader of the traveling players

Nedda [NED-dah] *soprano*

Colombina [koe-lohm-BEE-nah]
Canio's young wife who in love with Silvio

Tonio [TOE-nyoh] *baritone*

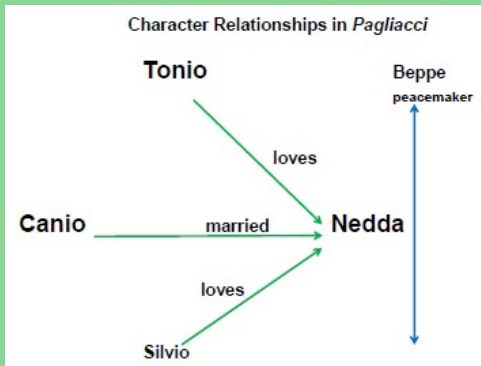
Taddeo [tah-DAY-oh]
Hunchback in love with Nedda

Beppe [BEP-peh] *lyric tenor*

Arlecchino [ar-lehk-KEE-noh]
The peacemaker among the players

Silvio [SEEL-vyoh] *baritone*

A young village man in love with Nedda



Other Pronunciations

Pagliacci [pahl-YAH-chee]
Rhymes with “mariachi.” Means “the clowns.”

Ruggiero Leoncavallo
[rude-JAIR-oh lay-on-ka-VAHL-loh]

Verismo
[vair-EEZ-moh] Means “true” in Italian.

Commedia dell'arte
[koe-MAY-dyah del-LAHR-teh]

Cav and Pag— Why the Double Bill?

Pagliacci is so often paired with Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* (as “Cav and Pag”) that most people assume they were always a double bill. However, when Arturo Toscanini conducted the premiere on May 21, 1892 in Milan’s Teatro del Verme, *Pagliacci* was the only opera on the program. *Cavalleria rusticana* had premiered two years earlier, and the two operas were never intended to be performed together. In fact, as two heavy-going dramas with revenge murders, they don’t make the most graceful couple.

So how did these two operas get hooked up? They became lockstep partners at the Metropolitan Opera in 1893, a year after the premiere in Italy. Why? So the society ladies could have a long intermission for their private parties! And what the Met joined together, no man could put asunder for a very long time.

Both operas belong to the Italian *verismo* opera era, when composers turned from Verdi’s dynasty and put gritty struggles of common people on the stage. *Cav and Pag* are the soap operas of the classical world with plots full of jealousy, revenge, violence, and tragedy.

Pagliacci in Popular Culture

“Ridi, Pagliaccio”, a phrase from Canio’s aria, is in countless cartoons, movies, and commercials. The “No more Rice Krispies” commercial from the 1960s spawned another tribute: Krusty the Clown singing the jingle in a *Simpsons* episode called “The Italian Bob.” In “The Opera” episode of *Seinfeld*, crazy Joe Divola dresses as Canio and wants to murder Elaine (whom he calls “Nedda”) for being unfaithful to him.



Crazy Joe Divola
(as Canio) tries to buy
a ticket from Kramer

Seinfeld photo courtesy TBS http://tbs.com/stories/story/0_69110.00.html

rit. con espressione
a piena voce, [straziante]

Ri - di Pa - gliac - cio, sul tuo a - mo - re in -

[con grande espressione] *rit.* *(singhiozzando)*

- fran - to! Ri - di del duol che t'av - ve - le - na il cor!

The most famous phrase in all of opera: “Laugh, clown, at your shattered love! Laugh at the sorrow that poisons your heart.” Leoncavallo specified “with expression at full voice” (*con espressione a piena voce*) and “sobbing” (*singhiozzando*).

Popular Stories, Popular Players, and Well-Worn Plot Devices



The son of the Neapolitan police magistrate, Ruggero Leoncavallo claimed that he based *Pagliacci* on a newspaper clipping about a case from his father's courtroom. After reading the libretto, French author Catulle Mendès sued Leoncavallo for plagiarism, citing the similarity in plot to his *La femme du tabarin* (1887). Leoncavallo responded with an article in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* on June 9, 1899. He said the incident had taken place in the Calabrian village of Montalto, and it was his father who had rendered judgment in the case. **Stories about murders committed in revenge for unfaithfulness were popular** at the time, so it would be difficult for anyone to claim originality for that idea.

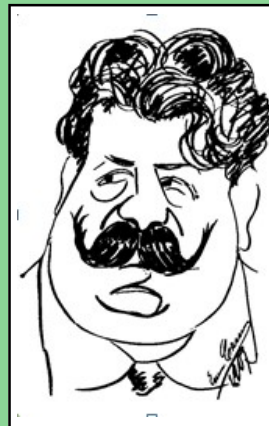
The traveling players in *Pagliacci* are practitioners of the **commedia dell'arte**. Like their ancestors in the Middle Ages, they traveled from town to town, presenting improvised comedies and popular songs. They would stay a few nights or even a few weeks in a region, sleeping in their caravan of wagons that contained their sets, costumes, props, and personal possessions. How long they stayed depended upon the number of tickets they sold. Their entry into town would be like a circus: a barker and the music of trumpet and drum would signal the townspeople that the traveling players would be putting on a show that evening.

The stock characters, or archetypes, of *commedia dell'arte* improvised on standard plot outlines. **Pagliaccio** (the clown) became the generic term for *commedia* performers: *pagliacci*. His flirtatious wife, **Colombina**, carried on affairs with other men, including **Alecchino** (Harlequin). **Zanni** (Venetian dialect for "Giovanni") was a threadbare old servant. He was the archetype for the later *commedia* servants. Eventually, his name referred to all *commedia* clowns. This is the origin of the word "zany." The *commedia's* physical comedy, pantomime, popular songs, and crude humor were the delight of audiences from all classes of society. The players belonged to professional acting guilds (hence *dell'arte*—"guild members").

The **play-within-a-play** device is also well-worn. Often referred to as a "story within a story" or an "embedded narrative", this literary device sometimes has multiple layers and may be nested inside other stories. For example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has a brief play within it, a movie may show characters watching a short film, and a novel may contain a short story. How long would the list be of creative frame stories nested inside books, films, and TV?

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Leoncavallo as drawn by Enrico Caruso, 1907. Caruso's spot-on caricatures of his colleagues and friends were highly treasured.

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