

Cavalleria Rusticana

“Rustic Chivalry”

Italian opera in one-act

by

Pietro Mascagni

Libretto by Guido Menasci
and Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti,
after a short story by Giovanni Verga (1880).

Premiere: 1890, Teatro Costanzi, Rome.

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Burton D. Fisher

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Story Synopsis

The tragic, fateful plot of *Cavalleria Rusticana* is driven by a love triangle: two women, Santuzza and Lola are rivals for Turiddu, a vain and foolish local dandy. The triangle becomes squared when Lola's husband, Alfio, learns about Turiddu's affair with his wife: in revenge, Alfio challenges Turiddu to mortal combat and kills him.

After serving in the army, Turiddu returned to find his love, Lola, married to the local carter, Alfio. Wounded in pride and vanity, he seduced the love of Santuzza: Lola became exasperated and lured him back, this time into an adulterous love affair.

Santuzza, betrayed by Turiddu, bore his child out of wedlock: she became ridden with guilt and sin, crazed with jealousy, and tormented in shame and dishonor; nevertheless, she was obsessed to win Turiddu back. She plead with Turiddu to reject Lola, but he spurned her. Sulking in defeat, she craved revenge, inflaming Alfio's dishonor by exposing his wife's infidelity. Alfio, now seized by jealousy and betrayal, vowed to kill Turiddu: Alfio became Santuzza's instrument for revenge against Turiddu.

To restore his honor, Alfio challenged Turiddu to a duel with knives. Before the fight, Turiddu, stricken by conscience, fear, and remorse, bid farewell to his mother, and went off to fight Alfio: Alfio killed Turiddu.

Cavalleria Rusticana's geometry of relationships progresses without regard to its fatal consequences: the character's intensely passionate and instinctive reactions to betrayal, rivalry, adultery, infidelity - and the loss of honor and pride – obsesses them to seek deadly revenge; tempers, emotions, and passions ultimately erupt and explode into irrational, savage, and violent confrontations in which the ultimate finality becomes death.

Principal Characters in the Opera

Santuzza, fiancée of Turiddu	Soprano
Turriddu, Mamma Lucia's son and fiancé of Santuzza	Tenor
Mamma Lucia, Turiddu's mother	Soprano
Alfio, a carter	Baritone
Lola, Alfio's wife	Soprano

TIME and PLACE:

Late 19th century. A village in Sicily on Easter Sunday.

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

Cavalleria Rusticana's prelude provides a musical portrait of *verismo* people, rural people from everyday life who become overpowered by emotions and passions that lead to fatal consequences.

The first music heard conveys warmth and naturalness, and association with the serenity of a Sicilian village at dawn on Easter Sunday.

Andante sostenuto



The music quickly animates, becoming rash and harsh: it is the music that later underscores the bitter and tempestuous confrontation between the spurned and jealous Santuzza, and the cruel and dispassionate Turiddu.

Molto animato



One must imagine that Turiddu and Lola have just consummated an evening of passionate love while Lola's husband, Alfio, was away. Lola languishes in voluptuous recollections after her tryst with Turiddu: from outside, the triumphant Turiddu serenades her before he departs.

Turiddu sings the *Siciliana*, sung from off-stage and in Sicilian dialect to convey a sense of realism: his serenade attests to Lola's beauty and his eternal love for her, together with his vow that if he were to die and go to heaven, he would refuse to enter if she were not present.

Turiddu: Siciliana

Andante
TURRIDU

O Lo - la, bianca co - me fior di spi - no,
O Lola, your lips are like crimson berries,

Alfio, returning home, sees Turiddu near his house: suspicions of distrust and doubt become aroused in him. Likewise, Santuzza, who was wandering in the fields at dawn, sees her fiancé, Turiddu. She becomes terrified, instinctively and intuitively sensing his betrayal: Turiddu has taken up with Lola again. Santuzza becomes bitter and anguished, suddenly seized by passions of jealousy.

As the curtain rises, church bells awaken the Sicilian village to announce Easter morning. A carefree crowd in a mood of holiday joy gathers in the square outside the church awaiting Easter Mass. Some villagers enter the church while others disperse through the village.

As their voices fade into the distance, the square becomes deserted except for Santuzza, appearing visibly agitated and apprehensive. She rushes toward the tavern opposite the church, the tavern of Mamma Lucia, Turiddu's mother.

Santuzza's agony:

Santuzza presses Mamma Lucia to know the whereabouts of her son; suspecting his betrayal, she is anxious to talk to him. Mamma Lucia responds evasively, attempting to avoid involvement in her son's quarrelsome affairs. Nevertheless, Santuzza's sense of urgency compels her to be truthful: she reveals that Turiddu went to Francofonte to fetch wine for the tavern.

Santuzza refutes her, boldly revealing that she saw Turiddu in the village this very morning. Mamma Lucia intuitively senses Santuzza's despair, and shows compassion for the distraught woman by inviting her into the tavern. Santuzza refuses, explaining that she cannot cross her threshold: she is woman in sin: excommunicated for her actions.

Just as Santuzza is about to reveal to Mamma Lucia the reasons for her torment, sounds of beating whips and jingling bells interrupt them: the familiar sound of the village's jolly carter, Alfio.

Alfio boasts with pride about the joys of his trade. He describes his high spirits on this Easter morning, because he is about to return home to his beloved wife, Lola, who awaits him with love, comfort, and fidelity: *M'aspetta casa Lola*, "Lola awaits me at home"; Alfio's praise of Lola's virtues are voiced ironically against sinister sounding musical harmonies.

Alfio: Il cavallo scalpita

Il cav- al-lo scalpita, i sonagli squillano, schiocchi la frusta. Ehi là!
Proudly and merrily the carter goes along and cracks his whip

Alfio greets Mamma Lucia and requests some of her fine wine for the holiday, but she tells him that she has none right now; Turiddu has gone to Francofonte to fetch a fresh supply. Alfio becomes perplexed and bewildered: he saw Turiddu this morning near his home. Mamma Lucia duly expresses surprise, but she is restrained from conversing with Alfio by Santuzza, who signals her to be silent. Alfio departs in a state of skepticism and confusion, his suspicions aroused.

Organ music accompanies a choir heard singing a devotional hymn from inside the church: *Regina Coeli*, “Queen of Heaven.”

Regina Coeli



The townsfolk outside the church respond to the prayer, echoing “Hallelujahs.” All kneel in prayer and join Santuzza in a hymn extolling the Resurrection: *Innegiamo, il Signor non è morto*, “Let us offer praise, our God is not dead”: the ecstasy and powerful spiritual promise of the Easter prayer represents an ironic and stark contrast to the brutal and violent passions that are poised to explode.

Santuzza: Innegiamo, il Signor

Largo maestoso
SANTUZZA



The remaining villagers enter the church for Easter Mass: Mamma Lucia and Santuzza converse. Mamma Lucia asks Santuzza why she urged her to silence when Alfio mentioned that

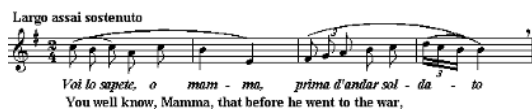
he had seen Turiddu in the village. Santuzza explains that she was exercising judicious caution: if she revealed the truth, Alfio would become distressed and alarmed.

Santuzza exposes her inner torment and dilemma to Mamma Lucia. She reminds her that Turiddu was engaged to Lola before he went into the army, but Lola did not wait for his return and married Alfio; when Turiddu learned that she had betrayed him, he turned to despair. To console his anguish and grief, he wooed Santuzza and seduced her with solemn promises of marriage. Santuzza, enraptured by her new love, gave him her virtue. (In Verga's original, Santuzza feared her four brothers who would have killed her if they knew that she was pregnant out of wedlock.)

Turiddu betrayed Santuzza and returned to Lola, who was not only tired of Alfio, but lured him back because she was jealous and envious of Santuzza; during Alfio's frequent absences, their adulterous affair blossomed.

As Santuzza finishes her story, she explodes into shrieks of agonized despair: Lola stole Turiddu from her, and she is now a grieving, abandoned woman: accursed, betrayed, and damned.

Santuzza: Voi lo sapete



Mamma Lucia, visibly shocked and disturbed by Santuzza's anguished revelations, senses omens of evil on this holy Easter day. Santuzza implores Mamma Lucia to go to Mass, pray for her soul, and beg Turiddu to be faithful to her.

Turiddu arrives, surprised to find Santuzza in his mother's tavern. Santuzza, jealous and

enraged, confronts him and asks him where he has been. He explains that he went to Francofonte to fetch wine, but Santuzza refutes him and accuses him of lying, because he was seen this morning near Alfio's house. Santuzza then explodes into a jealous rage, and accuses Turiddu of betraying their love by returning to Lola: if Alfio discovers their adulterous affair, he will kill him.

Turiddu denies Santuzza's accusations, screaming in defiance that he will not be a slave to her raging jealousy. Santuzza, her tears mixed with love and desperation, offers to forgive Turiddu if he gives up Lola and returns to her.

Suddenly, their quarrel is interrupted by the voice of Santuzza's rival, Lola, the heartless coquette singing a serenade about love and pretty flowers on her way to church.

Lola: Fior di giaggiolo



Lola stops to greet Santuzza and Turiddu. She taunts Santuzza contemptuously, the two rivals exchanging hostile words imbedded with irony and innuendo. Lola invites Turiddu to join her in church, but he hesitates. Then she jeers Turiddu, sarcastically suggesting that he might possibly prefer to remain with Santuzza. Turiddu, unable to control his instincts, starts to follow Lola, but Santuzza forcefully blocks his way. Lola departs, flirtatiously throwing Turiddu a rose before entering the church.

Santuzza and Turiddu resume their quarrel that now erupts with renewed vigor and uncontrollable frenzy. Santuzza, raging with bitterness and anguish, pleads with Turiddu not to abandon her, that he should return to her with love. Turiddu, suffocating from her

possessiveness, tries to flee from her. Santuzza implores him to remain, but defiantly he leaves, savagely hurling her to the floor, and denouncing the stupidity of her obsessive jealousy.

Turiddu and Santuzza: No! Turiddu, rimani, rimani ancora

Andante appassionato

SANTUZZA

No, no! Tu - rid - du, ri - ma - ni, ri - ma - ni an - co - ra. abban - do - nar - mi dun - que tu vo - li?

No, no! Turiddu, stay, do not leave me
Why do you want to abandon me?

Santuzza, embittered, rejected, and despairing, furiously curses Turiddu as he departs: *Una Mala Pasqua*, “A cursed Easter.”

Alone, dazed and helpless, Santuzza sobs frantically: she has been repudiated, and she has lost her honor. Her passions of love for Turiddu have transformed into hatred: she has now become obsessed with vengeance and decides to expose Turiddu’s affair with Lola to Alfio; he will become her instrument for revenge.

Alfio appears. Santuzza pours out her soul to him, explaining that Turiddu abandoned her, and destroyed her honor.

Santuzza: Turiddu mi tolse

Largo

SANTUZZA

Tu - rid - du mi tol - se, mi tol - se l'o - no - re,

Turiddu betrayed me, betrayed my honor,

Immediately, she plants the seeds of jealousy in Alfio, telling him that soon he will see Lola leave the church with Turiddu, and that he is a cuckolded husband: his wife is faithless and having an affair with Turiddu.

Alfio, his honor ravaged, explodes into

rage, and savagely vows revenge: he will kill his rival this very day. The Passion celebrated on this Easter Sunday has transformed into passions of violent hatred: Santuzza and Alfio, spurned and betrayed lovers, their honor lost, have become allies in vengeance, obsessed with retribution and justice. Through Santuzza's revelations, Alfio has become a monster of hatred, but Santuzza is in terror, overcome with remorse and torn by guilt, and powerless to stop the raging Alfio, who storms away shrieking *Vendetta!*, "Vengeance."

A peaceful Intermezzo, conveying a sense of spirituality and holiness as it recalls the hymn, *Regina Coeli*, provides an ironic contrast to the seething, violent passions that have been aroused on this Easter Sunday. The Intermezzo's devotional music intensifies and becomes more fervent: it conveys spiritual contentment, but then rises to equal the furious passions of the mundane world; the serenity of this holy day of celebration will be consumed by brutal and violent passions.

Intermezzo:

Andante sostenuto

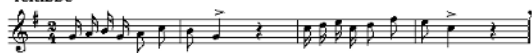


Crowds emerge from the church, and villagers cluster about the square, some assembling before Mamma Lucia's tavern.

Turiddu exits the church arm-in-arm with Lola. In a recklessly gay mood, he invites friends to drink with him at his mother's tavern, his infectious song invoking the magical wonders of sparkling wine.

Turridu: Viva il vino spumeggiante,

Larghetto
TURIDDU



Viva il vino spumeg-gian-te, nel bicchiere scintil-lan-te
 All the crowd will sing, sparkling wine, sparkling wine.

Alfio arrives. He is greeted cordially by the

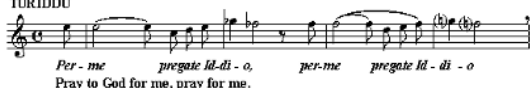
crowd, but is aloof and unfriendly, visibly fuming with inner rage. Turiddu, warm and hospitable, offers Alfio a drink, but he angrily and gruffly refuses, snarling vehemently that “I would rather not. I might be poisoned!” Turiddu responds, “At your pleasure,” and empties the glass to the ground. Lola, observing their bitter interchange, becomes overcome with fear; friends, equally sensing danger, lead her away.

Turiddu and Alfio exchange harsh and hostile insults. Alfio is unable to suppress his rage, and immediately accuses Turiddu of adultery. Alfio challenges Turiddu to a duel with knives: following ancient Sicilian customs, they embrace; Turiddu accepts by viciously biting Alfio’s ear. The villagers, sensing horror, disperse.

Turiddu remains alone, suddenly overcome with fear and remorse. He has drunk too much wine and feels slightly inebriated. Overcome by anxiety and angst, he calls for his mother, pours out his love for her, and asks forgiveness for his sins; if he should die, he implores her to care for Santuzza as a daughter.

Turiddu: Per me pregate Iddio

Con anima
TURIDDU



After Turiddu’s sobbing farewell to Mamma Lucia, he runs off for his duel with Alfio. Mamma Lucia, bewildered, confused, and sensing disaster, calls out to him in vain, her only comfort, the returning Santuzza.

The square in front of the church fills, the returning crowd murmuring nervously and anxiously. A woman’s shrill cry is heard in the distance: *Hanno amazzato compar Turiddu*, “They have killed Turiddu.”

Santuzza shrieks wildly with anguish and then

collapses. Women rush to Mamma Lucia, who has fainted, traumatized with disbelief and despair. The crowd stands in silence, stupefied and horrified by Turiddu's murder, a grim and tragic conclusion to an Easter Sunday in a Sicilian village: Alfio redeemed his honor; he has exacted justice and retribution: "Rustic Chivalry."

Mascagni.....and Cavalleria Rusticana

Pietro Mascagni was born in Leghorn, Italy, in 1863: he died in 1945. As a youth, he yearned for a career in music, but his parents wanted him to become a lawyer: the family friction was resolved when, unable to subdue his passion, he studied music secretly. Subsequently, together with the intervention of a sympathetic uncle and sponsorship from a wealthy amateur musician, Mascagni eventually enrolled at the Conservatory of Milan where his great promise was nurtured by his renowned teacher, Amilcare Ponchielli, the composer of *La Gioconda* (1876). Nevertheless, he was discontented and unable to cope with scholastic disciplines: the required studies of harmony, and counterpoint: he discontinued his studies and ran away from school.

Afterwards, Mascagni married and settled down in Cerignola, Italy, eking out a living as a music teacher and, occasionally, as a conductor. Mascagni heard that the music publisher, Eduardo Sonzogno, was sponsoring a one-act opera competition which offered a substantial prize: he began composing *Cavalleria Rusticana*, based on Verga's poignant story about passionate conflicts in the lives of 19th century Sicilian peasantry. It was Sonzogno's second one-act competition: in the first, Puccini had entered *Le Villi*, which failed to gain even honorable mention.

Mascagni was insecure and dissatisfied with the quality of his score. He sent it to Giacomo Puccini, his best friend and former roommate at the Conservatory of Milan, who quickly denounced it, and concluded that it did not have one iota of a chance to win the competition. Afterwards, Puccini sent the score to Ricordi, his own publisher and Sonzogno's rival, but it was rejected as worthless. However, Mascagni's wife had stronger faith in the score than its composer: she secretly mailed it to Sonzogno and it was accepted

and entered into the competition. In 1890, at the age 27, Mascagni's one-act opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, decisively won first prize over 72 rivals in Sonzogno's competition.

Cavalleria Rusticana achieved an unbelievable immediate success. The opera not only reaped a fortune for Sonzogno's publishing firm, but it also catapulted both composer and opera to overnight fame: medals were struck in his honor; the city of Cerignola greeted him with torchlight processions; and the King bestowed the Order of the Crown of Italy upon him. More importantly, a young, unknown composer had suddenly emerged to the forefront of Italy's avant-garde, the *giovanni scuola*, or the "young school" of *verismo* composers. His rise unveiled a new chapter in Italian opera: a new genre appeared which combined rich melody with pulsating and extremely dramatic passions that portrayed sex, adultery, betrayal, revenge, and murder.

Mascagni never composed an opera remotely approaching this first success: 14 more operas followed, each with minor acclaim, among the more popular, *L'Amico Fritz* (1891), *Iris* (1898), and *Isabeau* (1911), the latter the story about Lady Godiva whose naked ride through the streets was incapable of redeeming the opera. Mascagni himself commented sadly that "it was pity I wrote *Cavalleria Rusticana* first": the composer never looked back, but never looked forward either; the spirit of his unrepeatable masterpiece haunted him for the rest of his life.

Mascagni spent most of his career as a conductor, succeeding Toscanini at La Scala in 1929, and later composing music scores for silent films. Before World War II, he became an ardent fascist, composing the opera, *Nerone* (1935), an historic pageant glorifying Mussolini and fascism. After the war, he was held in contempt by his countrymen for his avowed fascist sympathies, and spent his last years in obscurity, poverty, and disgrace.

The Realism, or *verismo* genre in opera, evolved during the latter part of the 19th century: it was a backlash to its predecessor, Romanticism. A century earlier, the Enlightenment was a monumental battle for the soul of humanity, its ideals espousing freedom and human dignity embodied in the works of Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, and Jefferson. Those ideals eventually became the fuel that fired the American and French Revolutions, momentous transitional events in Western history. Enlightenment principles and ideals ennobled man's great gift for logic and reason: they represented a philosophical path to universal truth that was reflected in music's Classical era, which adapted its underlying principles of logic and reason: Classicism emphasized clarity, rigidity, and adherence to structural formulae.

As the 19th century unfolded, the Romantic movement reacted adversely to the Enlightenment: the Reign of Terror and the carnage emanating from Napoleon's pursuit of empire were perceived as the Enlightenment's greatest failures. In contrast, the new genre of Romanticism opposed reason and conceived that humanity could achieve its ultimate fulfillment through a passionate sense of feeling. As such, Romanticism idealized love and the nature of love; it glorified sentiments and virtues; it was sympathetic and compassionate of man's foibles; and in the human tension between desire and fulfillment, it exalted the redeeming power of sacrifice.

Romanticism's acute sense of freedom and feeling were aptly expressed by the French champion of the human spirit, Jean Jacque Rousseau, who said: "I felt before I thought." Likewise, the German writer, Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, espoused his conception of Romanticism in his *Sorrows of Young Werther*, an exaltation of sentiment to justify suicide as an escape from unrequited love.

The first Romantic opera, Beethoven's "rescue" opera, *Fidelio* (1805), idealized freedom from oppression with its deep sense of human struggle and triumph over tyranny that the composer seems to have musically hammered into every note. And by the mid-19th century, the towering icons of operatic Romanticism, Verdi and Wagner, epitomized the "Golden Age of Opera" with monumental works containing political and social messages that expressed their idealistic vision of a more perfect world.

But during the 19th century, many conflicting cultural, political, and social forces were kindling the eruption of revolutions against European autocracy: society was demanding fulfillment of its utopian frustrations, the promise of democracy, and human progress. Dramatic ideological and scientific discoveries - Marx, Darwin, and Freud - were transforming previously held perceptions, and as the Industrial Revolution flowered to maturity, society faced paradoxes which confounded the old order: colonialism, socialism, and materialism.

As the second half of the 19th century unfolded and approached its *fin du siecle*, the old foundations of society came into question. The era became spiritually unsettled, and man became self-questioning, acutely aware of a cultural decadence that was pervading society. Nietzsche, the quintessential cultural pessimist of the century, said it was a time of "the transvaluation of values," in effect, his recognition of spiritual deterioration and decadence.

In art, an acute sense of realism evolved: the time had arrived to peer into humanity's soul and seek truth. Romanticism had dominated most of the 19th century, but its artificial sentiment began to be viewed as a contradiction of universal truth. Art shifted its focus to a more realistic portrayal of common man and his everyday, personal life drama, and even, his degeneracy: art transformed its representations into a profound sense of human truth and realism.

The new “truth” in art, the genre called realism, was labeled *verismo* by the Italians, and *verisme* by the French, an artistic style that championed the concept that in art and literature, ugly and vulgar aspects of humanity earned their right to representation based upon their inherent truthful values. Over the course of a thousand years, Western civilization progressed from the god-centered Middle Ages, in which man lived on the precipice between hell and damnation, to Enlightenment reason, to Romanticism’s freedom and feeling, to realism with the latter proposing the ultimate idea that man was merely a creature of instinct.

Realism began in literature as *naturalism*, a genre which probed deeply into every aspect of the human experience. In 1845, Prosper Mérimée wrote his novella, *Carmen*, a short story immortalized in Bizet’s opera, that dealt with extreme passions involving sex, betrayal, rivalry, vengeance, and murder. Later, Emile Zola, recognized by many as the founder of literary *naturalism*, wrote novels which portrayed the underbelly of life: he brought human passions to the surface and documented every social ill, every obscenity, and every criminality, no matter how politically sensitive; *The Dram Shop* (1877) about alcoholism; *Nana* (1880) about prostitution and the demimonde. Similarly, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) portrayed the romantically motivated adulteries of a married woman whose pathetically overblown love affairs end in her suicide. And in England, Charles Dickens presented the problems of the industrial age poor in his portrayal of moral degeneracy in the new industrial age slums.

Realism essentially had no philosophical foundation: its object was simply to portray the human condition without superficiality; human passions became the subject of the action; no subject was too mundane, no subject too harsh, and no subject too ugly. As the antithesis of

Romanticism, realism avoided artificiality and sentimentalism, and averted affectations with historical personalities or portrayals of chivalry and heroism.

Realism's objective was to search for the underlying truth in man's existence, and thus, reveal man's true nature. As such, it brought violent and savage passions to artistic expression and representation, becoming obsessed with violence, passion, and death. Realism portrayed human nature in the raw, the barbarian side of man, man with uninhibited spontaneity, man with courage, energy, and vitality, and in effect, the latent animal within the human soul; what is at times called the "noble savage." Realism ennobled primitive and unspoiled man, because he was true to his natural inclinations, and not stifled by the hypocrisy of society's conventions and the presumptions of civilized values which became justified by reason and morality. Realism perceived that beneath that veneer and façade called civilization, lurk dark, irrational mysterious forces that become manifested in brutal and cruel human passions, acts of violence, and bestiality: those forces of unreason and violence are sinister and fatal powers that become equated with death; in Realism, death becomes the supreme consummation of desire.

Prosper Mérimée, the literary creator of *Carmen*, perfectly captured the essence of *naturalism* when he commented: "I am one of those who has a strong liking for bandits, not that I have any desire to meet them on my travels, but the energy of these men, at war with the whole society, wrings from me an admiration of which I am ashamed."

Mérimée, like so many of his French contemporary *naturalist* writers, turned to

exotic locales for artistic inspiration. Spain, a close neighbor just to the southwest, bore a special fascination, particularly the character of its arcane gypsy culture. Those gypsies, considered sorcerers, witches, and occultists, were the traditional enemy of the Church, and were almost always stereotyped as an ethnic group of bandits and social outcasts dominated by loose morality. From the comfort of distance, Mérimée told fascinating picaresque tales about gypsy ethos and culture, in a moralistic sense, using their presumed evils, loose morals, and bizarre idiosyncrasies, to imply to the reader a spiritual decadence that was to serve as a guide to renewal and redemption.

Mérimée's particular *verisme* was his obsession with man's propensity for extreme and violent passions that ultimately became fatal. In his tragedy of *Carmen*, he presents those forces of violence, cruelty, immorality, irrationality, and erotic love, as sinister fatal powers: in Mérimée's *verisme*, man is a crazed brute, and certainly, good does not necessarily triumph over evil.

Bizet himself found his muse and inspiration for *Carmen* in realism's truthful representation of humanity. He commented: "As a musician, I tell you that if you were to suppress hatred, adultery, fanaticism, or evil, it would no longer be possible to write a single note of music." In 1875, Bizet's *Carmen* heralded the arrival of realism to the opera stage: *verisme*.

In Italy, Realism is generally considered to have arrived on the opera stage with Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in 1890. Nevertheless, other than *Carmen*, many precursors to realism were simmering during the 19th century at midpoint.

During his career, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) had a virtual monopoly on Italian opera: his

works dominated the lyric stage for most of the 19th century. As the 1850s and his “middle period” unfolded, his genius arrived at a turning point in terms of its artistic maturity. He was satisfied that he had achieved his patriotic objectives, and it had become time to abandon the heroic pathos and nationalistic themes of his early operas: Italian independence and unification occurred in the *Risorgimento* of the 1860s, the historic revolutionary event that established the modern Italian nation.

Verdi began to seek more profound operatic subjects: subjects that would be bold to the extreme; subjects with greater dramatic and psychological depth; subjects that accented spiritual values, intimate humanity and tender emotions. From the 1850s onward, Verdi would be ceaseless in his goal to create an expressiveness and acute delineation of the human soul that had never before been realized on the opera stage.

During that defining moment in his career, Verdi’s operas began to contain heretofore unknown dramatic qualities and intensities, profound characterizations, as well as an exceptional lyricism. In the process of his artistic evolution and maturity, Verdi may have inadvertently established the precursors for the Italian *verismo* genre that would flower almost a half-century later: two of his most memorable characterizations were the ambivalent, hunchbacked title character in *Rigoletto* (1851), and the haggard, avenging gypsy mother, Azucena, in *Il Trovatore* (1853).

The *Rigoletto* character was adapted from Victor Hugo who had conceived a new type of character for the stage, what he labeled “grotesque” characters. *Rigoletto*, the court jester, became one of those quintessential “grotesque” characters: he is complex, ambivalent, and possesses two souls; on the one hand, he is physically ugly and deformed, morally evil,

sadistic, and wicked, but simultaneously, he is kind, gentle, and an intensely compassionate man when he is showering unbounded love on his beloved daughter, Gilda. If the essence of *verismo* was to portray the truth in man's natural propensity for violence and brutality, the Rigoletto character was indeed one of its most prominent ancestors, if not its forebear.

Likewise, in *Il Trovatore* (1853), the opera could not exist without its keystone character, the haggard and bizarre old gypsy, Azucena. She represents the engine of vengeance, driving the story with her two great passions: her filial and maternal love for her surrogate son, Manrico, and her obsession to avenge her mother's execution. Azucena is an ominous, evil character, frightening as she recounts the vivid horror of her mother's brutal execution: she is another forbear of the true *verismo* character, relentless and consumed by her obsession for vengeance.

Azucena is the counterpart of Rigoletto: both are physically grotesque and repulsive outsiders. In many respects, they were shocking forces to Verdi's 19th century audiences, who, in the tradition of Romanticism, demanded beautiful heroines and handsome heroes onstage: villains could be ugly, but they were expected to be presented as secondary figures. Nevertheless, Verdi was willing to go quite far in his search for the bizarre, and insisted on making Rigoletto and Azucena protagonists: they were *verismo*-type characters in their time.

In both characters, the mocked, cynical, hunchbacked jester Rigoletto, and the reviled, stereotypically ugly gypsy Azucena, the mainsprings of their actions involve violence: Rigoletto is obsessed with revenge, which unwittingly and tragically brings about the death of his own daughter, stabbed by the assassin he hired to murder the Duke, and similarly, Azucena's avenging obsessions cause the death of Manrico, the surrogate son she adores, first by claiming

under torture that she is his mother, and secondly and more importantly, by hiding from her enemy, Count di Luna, the fact that he and Manrico are actually brothers.

In this *verismo* context, Rigoletto and Azucena are the male and female faces of revenge that become defeated: ironically, their violent passions for revenge become unfulfilled and ultimately bring about fatal injustice and tragedy. The final horror for both Rigoletto and Azucena is that they believe they are striking a blow for justice. Rigoletto proclaims: *Egli è delitto, punizion so io*, “He is crime, I am punishment.” Azucena repeatedly pronounces her dying mother’s command: *Mi vendica*, “Avenge me.” Nevertheless, in these tragedies, which are driven by possessed human beings, both protagonists see their treasured children lying dead; Rigoletto may live on in his agony, but Azucena will surely die at the stake as did her mother.

Rigoletto and Azucena were not by any stretch of the imagination Romanticism’s typical lofty historic personalities. These protagonists were new types of characters who portrayed the extremes of human passion, a “truth” Verdi introduced to his opera stage almost a half-century before Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

With Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* in 1890, *verismo* formally reached the Italian opera stage: the genre flourished at a time when Italian opera was perceived to be in decline and degeneration; its portrayal of real, earthy people who expressed vigorous passions served to rejuvenate the art form.

Verismo bred a new school of avant-garde composers: the *giovanne scuola*, or “young school,” first represented in full force by Mascagni, and among others, Ruggiero

Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (1892), Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* (1896) and *Fedora* (1897), Francesco Cilèa's *Adriana Lecouvreur* (1902), and eventually, Puccini's *Tosca* (1900) and *Il Tabarro* (1918).

However, the great legacy of Italian *verismo* archetypes belongs to those two Siamese twins of opera, affectionately known as “Cav” and “Pag”: it is said that “Cav” is the “flesh and bones” of *verismo*; “Pag” is its “soul.”

The libretto for *Cavalleria Rusticana* evolved from a story- turned-play by Giovanni Verga (1840-1922). Verga was an influential late 19th century novelist, a short-story writer and playwright, who – perhaps following the guidelines of Emile Zola in France – introduced the *naturalism* movement to Italian literature and the theater.

Verga lived in Catania, Sicily: his stories depicted the raw, earthy lives of poor Sicilian farmers, fishermen, and the peasantry, which he portrayed in a dramatic, and sometimes violent, brutal, and starkly realistic manner. His short novel, *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1880), became a stage version featuring the renowned Italian actress of the era, Eleonora Duse, also known for her portrayal of another *verismo* role, Sardou's *La Tosca*, later adapted by Puccini for his opera.

The characterizations in Verga's play and Mascagni's opera are in opposition and conflict with each other. Verga once wrote to a German producer, recommending that his characters demonstrate a restrained behavior, pointing out that Sicilians, like Orientals, are outwardly passive and calm, and, therefore, not apt to show extroverted emotion. In particular, Verga cited that Alfio, when he learns about his wife's infidelity, should not display visible emotion. Nevertheless, Mascagni's opera portrays Verga's characters possessing exploding passions; his opera endowed Verga's story with the full power of sound and fury.

The plots of both *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* run in parallel grooves and share many similarities. Both take place on Christian holy days, respectively Easter Sunday and the Feast of Assumption. Both timelines are the latter part of the 19th century, and both venues are villages in the southern part of Italy; *Cavalleria* in Sicily, and *Pagliacci* in Calabria.

Both operas are driven by the classic husband-wife-lover triangles: the husbands, Alfio (*Cavalleria*), and Canio (*Pagliacci*), are cuckolds deceived by their wives. In *Pagliacci*, the husband, Canio, discovers his unfaithful wife, Nedda, with her lover, Silvio; Canio's revenge results in a double murder of passion. In *Cavalleria*, a fourth person squares the triangle: Lola's husband, Alfio. Santuzza, jealous and seeking revenge because Lola lured Turiddu from her, exposes their adultery to Alfio: Alfio becomes Santuzza's instrument for revenge who eventually kills Turiddu.

In each opera, the betrayed lover becomes the informer who stimulates the outraged husband to violence: in *Cavalleria*, Santuzza, spurned by Turiddu, enlightens Alfio; in *Pagliacci*, it is the hunchbacked clown, Tonio, rejected by Nedda, who enlightens Canio.

Both music dramas portray exploding human passions resulting from adultery, jealousy, revenge, and then murder. In both operas, the characters portray the underlying essence of *verismo*: raw human nature and primitive instincts that erupt into brutal, violent, and cruel actions.

Cavalleria Rusticana's title literally means "rustic chivalry," more specifically, "rustic honor." The central core of the story concerns defeated honor, pride, and dignity. Santuzza and Alfio, injured and shamed, are the victims in the story, their honor destroyed respectively by an unfaithful lover and a faithless wife. Santuzza, seduced by Turiddu, becomes a spurned woman,

abandoned and betrayed by him. She describes her torment to Alfio in terms of honor: *Turiddu mi tolse*, “Turiddu took my honor.” Likewise, Alfio has lost his honor: he bears the shame of a cuckolded husband. *Cavalleria Rusticana* is a classic melodrama in which the extravagant theatricality of plot and physical action dominate characterization. The entire plot is driven by Santuzza and Alfio, both possessed by vengeance because they have lost their honor: in *verismo*, their actions – true to melodrama – prompt explosions of stormy emotions and unbridled passions, all of which lead to unabashed violence. In *verismo*’s “truth,” above all, human character is irrational: when man is overcome by emotion and passion, his reason has failed; he is then a victim of uncontrollable forces, and is driven to cruelty, brutality, and violence.

The story is embedded with irony in which the powerful forces of the spiritual and profane collide. Easter celebrates the Passion, the sufferings of Christ between the Last Supper and His death, and ultimately Resurrection. Likewise, *Cavalleria*’s characters suffer from passions; uncontrollable forces which possess them, and ultimately lead to death.

Cavalleria’s conflicting worlds of the sacred and the profane continuously alternate: they throb back and forth, collide, and then clash. Glorious devotional hymns are saturated with spiritual emotion – *Regina Coeli* and *Innegiamo Signor* – and evoke purity, goodness, virtue, morality, human salvation, and redemption, but they quickly revert to the mundane world’s “truth” in which raw passion and vulgar emotion dominate.

The loss of honor is *the* theme of the story. Its loss demands immediate justice and retribution: there is no Christian forgiveness, and no turning of the other cheek: *Cavalleria*’s world is an eye-for-an-eye “frontier justice,” a rustic implementation of justice transplanted to the

Sicilian outback. There is no reconciliation because in this irrational world the resolution of conflict can only be manifested through violence and murder. In *Cavalleria*, profane conquers the sacred: irrational man overpowers reasonable man: man is protean, primitive, nihilistic, and instinctive, his savage and fatal passions erupting into madness.

Santuzza pours her heart out to Mamma Lucia in the aria, *Voi lo sapete, o mamma*. A passionate theme underscoring her words, *Priva dell'onor mio, dell'onor mio rimango*, "I have been robbed of my honor."

The final music of the opera recalls Santuzza's theme, its prominence confirming that the engine driving this melodrama is indeed honor. The music thunderously explodes with that music at the conclusion of the opera, an agonizing confirmation that the soul of *verismo* is death: the consummation of desire.

