

I Pagliacci

“The Clowns”

**Italian music drama
with a prologue and two acts
by
Ruggiero Leoncavallo**

Libretto by Ruggiero Leoncavallo.

**Premiere:
Teatro Dal Verme, Milan, May 1892.**

**Adapted from the
Opera Journeys Lecture Series
by
Burton D. Fisher**

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Opera Journeys *Mini Guide Series*

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Story Synopsis

A traveling troupe of acting-clowns arrives at a small village in Calabria, Italy, to perform a *commedia dell'arte* play: it is the holiday celebrating the Feast of the Assumption.

In a prologue, Tonio, a hunchbacked actor in the troupe, appears before the curtain to advise the audience that the play they are about to see may appear to be theatrical illusion, but they should not be deluded: the play will portray reality and profound human conflict, performed by people who will reveal their inner souls; in the play, life and art, and illusion and reality, will become fused.

Canio, leader of the troupe, advises the villagers that their play begins that evening at 2300 hours. Canio and another player, Beppe, accept the villagers' invitation and join them at a tavern. Tonio remains behind and confronts Canio's wife, Nedda, pleading vainly for her love. She rejects him and lashes him with a whip: Tonio swears revenge.

Nedda rendezvous with her secret lover, Silvio, a local villager. While they are engrossed in romantic passions, Tonio spies on them: he rushes to find Canio so he can behold his wife's infidelity. Canio surprises the lovers, and Silvio escapes. Canio dresses for the performance that evening, broken-hearted and despairing.

In the second act, the troupe's *commedia dell'arte* play is performed, its scenario, a mirror of the exact real-life events which took place earlier: Beppe (Harlequin) romances Nedda (Columbine) and is caught unexpectedly by the returning Canio (Pagliaccio). The play breaks down as illusion quickly transforms into reality: Canio, insane with jealousy, murders Nedda, and then her lover, Silvio.

A final theme represents the clandestine, adulterous love affair between Canio's wife, Nedda, and the local villager, Silvio.

Stolen love:

Cantabile
sostenuto
assai



The play curtain parts, and the actor Tonio, crippled, deformed, and hunchbacked, begs the audience's permission to introduce their play: *Si puo?*, "Please allow me a word." Tonio is the "prologue": he introduces and prepares the audience for the evening's theatrical event.

Tonio explains that their play may seem to be illusion, but on the contrary, its author has presented *uno squarcio di vita*, a realistic "slice of life." Beneath the actors' makeup and costumes, there are real human souls; creatures like the audience themselves who possess ambivalence and paradox, possess virtue and vice, good and evil, noble passions of love, but also bitter hatred, cynicism, grief, and rage.

Tonio admonishes his audience not to separate art from life: they will witness actors' emotions, sighs and tears, and grief and sorrow; real human passions, not make-believe illusion. He begs the audience to feel the actors' pain, because it reflects the anguish of all humanity: he begs the audience to suffer with them and not consider their costumes, but only their souls. Tonio concludes, satisfied that he has prepared his audience for an evening of realism rather than illusion: *E voi. Incominciamo!* "So let's go on with the show!"

Tonio: The Prologue

Andante cantabile



E vo - i, piuto - sto che le nostre povere gabane d'istrio - ni
And you must not consider our costumes so much.....

Act I: A village in Calabria, Italy, on the holiday of the Feast of Assumption. It is 3 o'clock on a bright, sunlit afternoon. A makeshift stage has been erected. Villagers, dressed for the holiday, congregate excitedly around the arriving troupe of actor-clowns.

Local villagers welcome the *pagliacci*, the traveling troupe of clown-actors who have come to entertain them: Canio, the leader of the troupe, his wife Nedda, Beppe, the drum playing clown, and the hunchback, Tonio.

Canio, standing in front of the small makeshift outdoor theater, urges the villagers to attend their performance that evening, announcing that it will begin at 2300 hours.

The villagers are in cheerful holiday spirits, and invite the *pagliacci* to drink with them at a local tavern. Canio bids Tonio join them, but he excuses himself, explaining that he must remain behind to rubdown their donkey. With presumed jest, a villager suggests that Tonio is being deceptive, preferring to remain behind so he can make love to Canio's beautiful wife, Nedda.

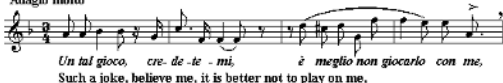
Canio's jovial mood suddenly turns anxious, menacing, and sinister. He responds to the villager's innuendo with feigned respect, delivering a candid lecture about marital infidelity: his words - and the underlying music - become profoundly grave: *un tal gioco, credetimi*, "Such jokes, believe me, should not be made."

Canio explains that a play is illusion, but life is reality: in the comedy of their *commedia dell'arte* stage, when a husband surprises his adulterous wife, he thrashes her lover, and the audience laughs. But life is not art, nor is it comedy: if anyone should covet his wife, Nedda, he had better beware because he will become the victim of his vicious retribution. Canio concludes his sermon, kisses Nedda, and as he departs to join the villagers at the tavern, he and

Nedda exchange threatening looks, an ominous sign indicating suspicion and mistrust.

Canio: *Un tal gioco, credetemi,*

Adagio molto



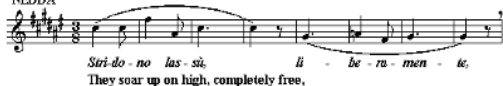
Nedda has just witnessed a jealous fire in her husband's eyes. She becomes fearful and seized by anxiety: What if Canio discovers her adulterous affair with Silvio? Nedda shudders, realizing that she would become a victim of his outrage, a murderous and savage fury, brutal and violent.

Nedda is unhappy: she is caged, trapped by her life-style, and yearns to be free. She looks to the sky and watches with envy as the birds fly in freedom and with complete abandon. The birds are Nedda's metaphor, a symbol of her longing to escape from her prison and follow her desire and bliss: *Stridono lassù, liberamente.*

Nedda: *Stridono lassù, liberamente*

Vivace

NEDDA



Tonio, the crippled, hunchbacked clown of the troupe, has been hiding and has overheard Nedda reveal her yearning desires. Tonio confronts Nedda and immediately expresses his lust for her. He explains that he may be a warped and deformed hunchback, perhaps even sexually repulsive to her, but he is human: he also has desires and yearnings. Tonio cannot control his passion for Nedda and cautions her not to ridicule him: yes, he is indeed a deformed clown, an object of laughter, but inside his soul, he is human, and like her, he craves love.

Tonio: So ben che difforme

Cantabile sostenuto

TONIO



So ben che difforme, contorto son io; che desto soltan - to lo scherno e l'orror
I know I am ugly, deformed and ungainly, and inspire horror and loathing

Tonio, overcome by his lechery, attempts to seduce Nedda, and begs her for a kiss. Nedda is repulsed by him: she derides him, mocks him, and orders him to go. But Tonio is unrelenting in his lust for her: when he attempts to clutch her, Nedda grabs a whip and lashes him across the face. Tonio screams in pain and agony, curses her, and as he departs, swears revenge.

Tonio's Revenge theme

Silvio arrives. He is a local villager whom Nedda met when the troupe previously visited the town: since then, Nedda and Silvio have become lovers. Nedda becomes fearful that they will be seen, but Silvio assures her that there is no danger: Canio and Beppe are at the tavern drinking with the villagers.

Nedda is agitated from her encounter with Tonio. She relates the event to Silvio, explaining that Tonio accosted her, and became crazed with passion and desire, but she pacified his ardor by lashing him with a whip. Silvio eases her anxiety with earnest and powerfully passionate outpourings of his love for her, begging her to flee with him tonight, start a new life with him, and free herself from her unhappiness with Canio and the clown-actors.

Silvio: Nedda, Nedda, rispondimi

Con anima

SILVIO



Ned-da, Nedda, ri - spon-dimi, s'è ver che Canio non amasti mai,
Nedda, Nedda, answer me, you know that you never loved Canio,

Nedda becomes equally impassioned, but fears that Canio would become violent in revenge. Nevertheless, she admits her weakness and vulnerability, and implores Silvio not to tempt her to flee.

Nedda: Non mi tentar

Andante appassionato
NEDDA



Silvio and Nedda forego discretion: they yield to their passions and the bliss of the moment, and ecstatically embrace each other. While they are lost in their ecstasy, they are unaware that Tonio has been spying on them, watching them, and overhearing their words of love. Tonio, seething with revenge against Nedda for spurning and lashing him, goes to fetch Canio.

Meanwhile, Nedda and Silvio dream of their future together, and intone their farewell to the past.

Nedda and Silvio: Tutto scordiam

Largo assai
NEDDA and SILVIO



Tonio has retrieved Canio and brought him to witness the lovers in their tryst. Canio overhears their parting words, Silvio's plan for Nedda's escape that night: *Ad alta notte laggiù mi terrò. Cauta discendi em mi ritoverai*, "Tonight at midnight I will be there. Come and be careful, and you will find me waiting."

Nedda responds to Silvio with eager anticipation: *A stanotte e per sempre tua sarò*, “Till tonight then and forever I will be yours!”

Canio, in horror and shock at what he hears, shrieks furiously as he emerges from hiding. Silvio is stunned and flees. Canio attempts to pursue him, but Nedda blocks his way. She struggles with him, and then Canio pushes her aside. As he pursues her lover, Nedda shouts at him scornfully: “May Heaven protect him now!”

Canio returns, unsuccessful in apprehending Nedda’s secret lover, physically exhausted, and trembling with anger and outrage. Tonio, victorious in achieving his revenge against Nedda, laughs cynically: Nedda, fearful of the repercussions because her secret love affair has been discovered, stands dumbfounded, shaken, and distraught.

Canio, raging with jealousy and inflamed with fury, has transformed into a killer: he lunges at Nedda with drawn knife, insults her, curses her infidelity, and demands that she reveal her lover’s name: Nedda, stoic and defiant, refuses to divulge his name.

Beppe restrains Canio and snatches the knife from him. He advises him that the show must go on: the townsfolk are leaving the church and it will soon be time for their performance. Beppe leads Nedda to the theater, while Canio fumes in disgrace and dishonor. Tonio urges him to be calm, assuring him that he will have his opportunity for revenge: Nedda’s lover will surely return, and they will succeed in discovering him.

Consumed with jealousy and revenge, Canio considers his horrible fate. In agony, he laments: *Recitar! Mentre preso dal delirio non so più quell che dico e quell que faccio!*, “To go on! While my head is whirling with madness,

not knowing what I am saying or what I am doing!”

With heart-rending pathos, Canio addresses his dilemma: he must clown tonight, heartbroken and anguished; he must laugh on the outside, but inside, his soul cries in agony.

Vesti la giubba e la faccia in farina

“Put your clown smock on now, smear your face with powder,”

La gente paga e rider vuole qua.

“The people pay you, and they must have their laughter.”

E se Arlecchino t’invola Colombina, ridi, Pagliaccio, e ognun applaudirà

“If Harlequin takes Colombine from you, Laugh loud, clown, and all will shout
“Well done!”

Tramuta in lazzi lo spasmo ed il pianto;

“Change your sights and weeping into laughter!”

In una smorfia il singhiozzo e’l dolor...Ah!

“And let you sobs and sadness play the part. Yes!”

Ridi, Pagliaccio, sul tuo amore infranto!

“Laugh, clown! Your love has been ruined!”

Ridi del duol t’avvelena il cor!

“Laugh for the pain, that now gnaws in your heart!”

Canio: Vesti la giubba

Adagio
CANIO



Put on your clown smock now, smear your face with powder.

Act 2: Evening, the same day

The second act of *I Pagliacci* is the play-within-a-play: Canio's troupe will perform a traditional *commedia dell'arte* play. Their play is a humorous and satirical story about a cuckolded husband who surprises his adulterous wife with her lover. The play is theatrical illusion, but its action ironically recalls all of the real-life events which had just transpired in Act I. As the *commedia dell'arte* play progresses, it collapses; its intended illusion transforms into harsh reality.

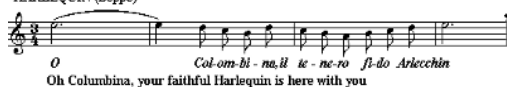
Nedda acts the part of Columbine, the unfaithful wife: she is alone, nervously awaiting her secret lover, Harlequin. She assures the audience that their tryst is not in danger of being discovered because her husband will not return home until late that evening.

Harlequin, portrayed by the clown Beppe, serenades Columbine.

Harlequin's serenade:

Allegretto un poco moderato

HARLEQUIN (Beppe)



Harlequin's romantic serenade is interrupted by Taddeo, acted by Tonio, who, with comic buffoonery, pretends to romance Columbine, an uncanny reminiscence of Tonio coveting Nedda in Act I. Harlequin interrupts Taddeo's amorous adventure, grabs his ear, and leads him away.

The *commedia dell'arte* lovers, Harlequin and Columbine, romance each other, accompanied by a stylized gavotte. Harlequin and Columbine plan to escape together - reminiscent of Silvio and Nedda in Act I - and he gives Columbine a vial to drug her husband, Pagliaccio.

Taddeo interrupts the lovers and warns them: “Be careful, Pagliaccio is coming and he is raging.” As Harlequin leaps out of the window, Columbine utters her farewell to him, the very same words that Nedda expressed to Silvio when they parted in Act I: *A sta notte e per sempre tuo sarò*, “Till tonight, then, and forever, I will be yours.”

Pagliaccio (Canio) arrives and hears those haunting words: he shudders, confused by the illusion of the play, and the reality of horrible earlier events: *Nome di Dio! Quelle stesse parole!*, “In the name of God! Those very same words!” Pagliaccio hesitates, builds his courage, and continues his role in the play..

Pagliaccio asks Columbine: “Who has been here with you? Tell me his name?” Columbine replies that no one has been there, diverting his questioning by accusing him of being drunk. Pagliaccio persists, but this time Columbine admits that Taddeo (Tonio) was dining with her. Taddeo responds to Pagliaccio with embittered irony as he attests to Columbine’s credibility and faithfulness: “Believe her, she is faithful! Ah, those lips could never lie!”

Aware of the deceit, the audience knowingly laughs. Pagliaccio erupts out of control: he no longer wants to act; he wants to be Canio; he vehemently demands Columbine’s (Nedda’s) lover’s name. Nedda, boldly continuing her role as Columbine, replies with impertinence: “Whose name?” Canio/Pagliaccio becomes infuriated, and claims his right to know her lover’s name, but Nedda again refuses, jokingly ridiculing him: *Pagliaccio, pagliaccio*, “Clown, clown.”

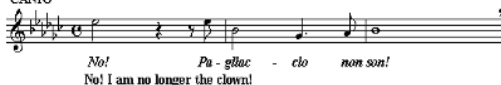
Canio/Pagliaccio, outraged, overcome with anger and jealousy, departs from the illusion of the play. He is no longer the play’s Pagliaccio; acting the cuckold, he is Canio, the real-life cuckolded husband, seething with revenge: *No*

Pagliaccio non son, “No, I am no longer the Pagliaccio.”

Canio explodes into an emotional tirade that expresses his horrible dilemma: his face has actor’s makeup but is pallid from shame, his features are twisted from agonies of vengeance, his heart is broken, and his honor is ravaged. He condemns himself for rescuing Nedda from poverty and hunger, that he was insane to have given her his ardent love, that he sacrificed his life for a worthless woman, and placed more faith in her than in god. He was blind to the evil dwelling in her heart: she is perfidious and unworthy of his grief. Canio, overcome with jealousy, shame, and dishonor, must have vengeance.

Canio: No! Pagliaccio non son!

Allegro moderato
CANIO



The audience, unaware that the make-believe illusion of the play has transformed into stark reality, becomes moved to tears by Canio’s convincing “acting”: they shout their “Bravos.”

Nedda, also unable to control her emotions, unmask herself and tells the agitated and fuming Canio that if he believes her vile, then he should send her away. Canio refuses: he will not free her to be with her lover, not until she reveals his name to him.

As the gavotte music plays again, Nedda, with forced smile, tries to resume the play. She assures Canio/Pagliaccio that the man who was with her was only the harmless Harlequin. The audience laughs, but hesitatingly senses that Canio/Pagliaccio’s savage fury seems too realistic to be make-believe theatrical illusion.

Canio, now even more crazed with anguish and jealousy, again demands her lover's name: this time, he vows that if she does not tell him, he will kill her. Nedda stands firm against his threat, boldly declaring that although faithless, she is not cowardly and fearful: she reveals that her soul has become emboldened by her new lover: "I will not speak, not even if you kill me."

However, Nedda senses Canio's increasing fury: she escapes from him and jumps from the stage into the audience. Canio chases her, seizes her, and in a violent impulse, plunges a dagger into her heart. With her last breath, she cries out "Help me, Silvio." Silvio comes forward, and finally, Canio has found her lover. Canio lunges at Silvio with his dagger and murders him. Stupefied by his incredulous act of passion, Canio lets the weapon fall and stands frozen and motionless.

Tonio, the "prologue" of the tragedy, becomes its "epilogue": he addresses the spectators with bitter irony; *La commedia é finita*, "The play is over."

Leoncavallo.....and I Pagliacci

Ruggiero Leoncavallo (1857-1919) began his musical education at the age of nine with studies in piano and composition, eventually enrolling in the Conservatory in Naples, and later, in Bologna University where he studied literature.

Chatterton (1877) was Leoncavallo's first youthful attempt at opera composition, a work for which he wrote both music and libretto that echoed strong Wagnerian influences. His ultimate dream was to compose an Italian opera epic similar to Wagner's *Ring*; a trilogy based on the history of the Renaissance Florentine family, the Medicis. However, the first installment, which was entitled *I Medici*, was rejected by his publisher, Ricordi, and a later stage production was deemed a monumental failure. Consequently, Leoncavallo never attempted to finish the other two portions of the trilogy.

Leoncavallo struggled to survive as a composer by touring Europe as an itinerant musician, managing to exist by teaching music and playing piano in cafés. In one instance, an attempt to produce an opera failed because the impresario ran away with the funds: the budding composer was left nearly penniless.

Frustrated by Ricordi's lack of enthusiasm in him after the debacle of *I Medici*, in a customary fit of temper and desperation, he transferred his allegiances to Sonzogno, Ricordi's rival. There was little love lost between Leoncavallo and Ricordi: he was originally part of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1894) libretto team, but a subsequent quarrel with Ricordi led to his dismissal.

I Pagliacci, a two-act opera, was ineligible for Sonzogno's one-act competition in 1890; nevertheless, Mascagni's sensational triumph with *Cavalleria Rusticana* inspired him.

Sonzogno became duly overwhelmed by *I Pagliacci*'s libretto, written by Leoncavallo himself, and entered the opera in his 1892 competition even before hearing the music. *I Pagliacci* ultimately won first prize, and ever since, has been one of the most popular operas in the standard repertory, a mainstay on international stages.

Leoncavallo's only other operas performed with occasional frequency are *La Bohème* (1897) and *Zazà* (1900). His *La Bohème*, like Puccini's *La Bohème*, which premiered one year before in 1896, was based on Murger's novel, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, "Scenes from Bohemian Life." Their virtually simultaneous composition of operas based on an identical story not only kindled a bitter rivalry between the two composers, but in the end, Leoncavallo became chagrined and disappointed when his opera became totally eclipsed by the Puccini version.

In retrospect, *I Pagliacci* became Leoncavallo's singular success: it made him rich and famous, and remains the sole, enduring testament to his operatic legacy.

Leoncavallo's father, Vincenzo, was a traveling Italian circuit court judge, and the underlying *I Pagliacci* story had its genesis from profound impressions made on his young son when he was a spectator in his father's court. In 1865, his father presided at the trial of an actor, Allesandro, in the Calabrian village of Montalto: the actor had become crazed with jealousy after he discovered his adulterous wife with her lover, and in an act of passion, murdered both.

Surprisingly, Vincenzo Leoncavallo was sympathetic to the accused, seriously considering acquitting him. However, his magnanimity was thwarted after the defendant, in an explosive outburst of passion, came forward before the court and vowed that if the

opportunity presented itself again, he would not hesitate to commit murder again. Allessandro was committed to a four year jail term: after his parole, he became a gardener for a wealthy countess whom he later married, and for the rest of his life, lived in affluence.

After *I Pagliacci's* premiere, Catulle Mendès, a French playwright, filed a lawsuit against Leoncavallo, alleging that the composer's opera story plagiarized his play, *La Femme du Tabarin* (1887): Mendès even secured a legal injunction to stop performances of the opera. No doubt, Leoncavallo was familiar with the Mendès drama, but it is more likely that his plot owes its provenance to theatrical trends of the era in which violent acts of revenge evolving from jealousy and betrayal were portrayed in the new *verismo* genre: *Carmen* (1875), *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), and even Verdi's great music-drama, *Otello* (1887). However, after the facts of the Montalto case were established, Leoncavallo's defense satisfactorily proved that his source story more likely emanated from the well-documented and publicly aired case he had witnessed in his father's courtroom, and Mendès's litigation was withdrawn.

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 was aptly expressed by the French champion of the human spirit, Jean Jacques 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, 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.

Prospér 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 which 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 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 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 theatre.

Verga lived in Catania, Sicily: his stories depicted the raw, earthy lives of poor Sicilian farmers, fishermen and the peasantry, portrayed in a dramatic, and sometimes violent, brutal, and starkly realistic manner. Mascagni's opera portrays Verga's characters with exploding passions; his opera endowed the story with the full power of sound and fury. *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 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 concluding 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 has lured Turiddu from her, exposes their adultery: Alfio becomes Santuzza's instrument for revenge and kills Turiddu.

In each opera, the betrayed lover becomes the informer who stimulates the outraged husband: 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 lead to 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.

I Pagliacci's dramatic uniqueness evolves from its structure as a play-within-a-play: its second act is the presentation of a traditional *commedia dell'arte* play by Canio's traveling troupe of clown-actors.

The *commedia dell'arte*, literally "comedy of masks," was an old theatrical convention that strolling groups of players had performed for centuries throughout Italy and matured to overwhelming popularity during the Renaissance. Their satire and irony clowned and ridiculed every aspect of society and its institutions with insults, frivolity, the characterizing of cunning servants, scheming doctors, duped masters, and the hypocritical world they lived in. The genre originated outdoors where it was performed in streets and marketplaces: actors traditionally wore exaggerated and comical costumes in order to draw attention to themselves, were competent in acrobatic skills, and donned masks to conceal their identities in order to protect themselves against punishment. In Italy, the *commedia dell'arte* characters became affectionately known as *zanni*, an apt description of their silliness and clowning buffoonery.

The *commedia dell'arte* and the *Intermezzi*, the latter performed between acts of dramas, were enormous influences on the development of the populist genre of *opera buffa*, or comic opera: the first great *opera buffa* was Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (1733), and the most acclaimed in the genre, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* (1816).

The most popular *commedia dell'arte* character was *Arlecchino* (Harlequin), a clown who was the master of disguises, extremely agile and acrobatic, and a master of slapstick as well as cunning and wit. The character *Pulchinello* was interchangeable with *pagliaccio*, generally the clown or buffoon who was a selfish, schizoid rascal with a dual personality: he would combine folly with cruelty, was quick witted, and also coarse, vulgar, obscene, dishonest, and debauched: a character without morals or scruples who would concoct outrageous schemes to satisfy his animal-like lust and gluttony. Columbine was the character often portrayed as a flirtatious and mischievous wench, not always the mirror of virtue, but charming, and always the object of *Arlecchino*'s romantic adventures.

In the traditional *commedia dell'arte* plot, a deceived husband surprises his adulterous wife, and then thrashes her lover, his outbursts, his revenge full of comedy and humor. *I Pagliacci*'s plot similarly deals with adultery, but it is saturated with irony. The first act deals with real-life events: Canio discovers his wife's infidelity. The second act is the play, a make-believe illusion performed in the *commedia dell'arte* style in which the husband likewise discovers his wife's infidelity. However, in the play, life and art become blurred, and reality and illusion become fused. Canio - the clown *Pagliaccio* - confronts the identical adultery scenario in the play that he had encountered in the real life events of Act I. Reality intervenes

and the actors are overcome with real emotions: the play collapses and they stop acting like comedians; the comic *commedia dell' arte* plot becomes a bloody tragedy in which illusion transforms into brutal reality.

I Pagliacci is a realistic drama about deep-seated human emotions and affairs of the heart: it is a tragedy about clowns who laugh externally, but within their inner souls, they cry.

In the prologue, Tonio appears before the curtain rises to anticipate and introduce the drama. Tonio admonishes the audience to separate illusion from reality. He announces that the play is make-believe, but under its surface, its story is about real life: under the actors' flimsy costumes, there are real flesh and blood humans who possess real emotions; love, anger, hatred, jealousy, pain, rage, and violence. Tonio promises that the play will present *uno squarcio di vita*, "a realistic slice of life."

In opera, the composer is the dramatist. The central theme of the opera concerns the difference between illusion and reality, and between the make-believe world of the theater and real life: Leoncavallo's magnificent musical inventions serve to translate that conflict and tension truthfully.

The story is embedded in irony: its dramatic action continually alternates and throbs between illusion and reality. Likewise, its music score portrays those contrasts and paradoxes: at times it is light-hearted to convey the make-believe world of illusion, and at times it boils over with spine-tingling music that truthfully expresses its *verismo* passions.

In the first act, Canio and the actors are invited to drink with the local villagers, but Tonio opts to stay behind, presumably to wash down a donkey. A villager suggests that Tonio has

ulterior motives: he wants to be alone to woo Canio's wife, Nedda. Canio responds with a sermon about marital fidelity: *Un tal gioco credetemi*, "Do not play such a joke, believe me."

Canio's words are dramatically translated by the underlying music. Canio explains that the theater is illusion and make-believe, so when a clown-actor catches his wife in adultery, he thrashes her lover with comic adroitness: that part of Canio's sermon is accompanied by light and humorous dance-type music; he speaks about a capricious world of unreality and illusion. Then Canio speaks about infidelity in real life: it is a grave transgression, and underscoring his weighty words, the music turns profound and solemn. At this moment, Canio unmasks the clown: the music translates the stark contrast between the comic world of illusion and make-believe, and the starkness of reality.

A similar musical contrast occurs when the deformed Tonio pours his heart out to Nedda: Tonio's lovesick brooding is accompanied by music reflecting genuine passion; *So ben che difforme*, "I know well that I am deformed." In contrast, Nedda laughs him off and urges him to save his passions for the stage that night: her cruel and callous rejection of Tonio is delivered with comic lightness: *Hai tempo ridirmelo stasera, se brami*, "You will have time to embrace me tonight." The dramatic contrast, the blend of the serious with the comic, is provided by the music.

In the Act II *commedia dell'arte* play-within-a-play, the background music provides a magnificent contrast: its light minuet and charming gavotte quite naturally suggests a harmless comedy. But Canio bursts in, his voice trembling and explosive, and adds a profound contrast and tension to the quaint elegance of the gavotte: *No! Pagiaccio non son!*, "No I am no longer a clown," an outburst of anguish and terror from a man driven to insanity by jealousy

and dishonor and craving revenge.

Nedda tries to calm Canio, her accompanying dance-tune music an attempt to return to the *commedia dell'arte* scenario, a return to the world of make-believe and illusion. Nedda fails, and the play transforms to reality, that irrational *verismo* world in which instinctive, cruel, and savage emotions overpower reason.

I Pagliacci is a sublime prototype of the *verismo* genre in which a horrible “truth” in man’s soul is exposed: man’s capacity for evil and brutality. In *verismo*, man is irrational, a creature of instinct: death becomes the consummation of his desires.

Leoncavallo never succeeded in duplicating the success of this singular masterpiece, *I Pagliacci*: the irony for the composer, that his infamous words at the conclusion of this music drama, *la comedia è finita*, “the play is over,” became an ominous forecast for the composer’s career; *I Pagliacci* became Leoncavallo’s sole claim to operatic immortality.

