Mascagni

Cavalleria Rusticana

Violetta Urmana *sop* (Santuzza), Vincenzo La Scola *ten* (Turiddu), Dragana Jugovic *mezzo* (Lola), Viorica Cortez *contr* (Lucia), Marco di Felice *bar* (Alfio)

Leoncavallo

Pagliacci

Vladimir Galouzine *ten* (Canio), Maria Bayo *sop* (Nedda), Carlo Guelfi *bar* (Tonio), Antonio Gandia *ten* (Beppe), Ángel Ódena *bar* (Silvio)

Chorus and Orchestra of the Teatro Real (Madrid)
Jesús López Cobos *cond*

Opus Arte OA 0983 D (Digital surround: 2 DVD set: 201 minutes)
Sung in Italian with subtitles in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian.

Giancarlo Del Monaco's 2007 production of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* intertwines the two works even more closely than historical tradition encourages. As most opera-goers know, the works were composed only two years apart, at a time when the trend of *verismo* was at its height in Italy; the operas therefore feature similarities that have promoted their pairing in a full evening's programme. Del Monaco not only puts the two operas side-by-side, but intersperses the performance of *Cavalleria* with that of *Pagliacci*: the entertainment begins with the prologue to the latter work, but then cuts to *Cavalleria*, at the end of which the action returns back without break to the continuation of *Pagliacci*. This reinforces the standard view of the two works as sides of the same aesthetic coin by allowing listeners to hear passages of the music in a new configuration; similarities in the music, for example, are detected more easily by hearing passages from the *Pagliacci* prologue and the opening of *Cavalleria* at close distance. At the same time, however, Del Monaco seems to work against pointing up similitude in his conception, for he gives the operas radically different settings. *Cavalleria* is presented in a timeless, colourless limbo of geometrical lines and shapes, while *Pagliacci* is relocated to a 1950s cinema-inspired backdrop. Ultimately, these settings seem to obscure, rather than illuminate, both the relationships implied by Del Monaco's interweaving and the strengths of each work.

Cavalleria is set on an entirely white stage, with the characters dressed uniformly in black; the set consists of large blocks or boulders that appear to ascend, as if the action is set halfway up a glacier. The female characters wear prominent crosses and mantles, with the men in non-specific black trousers, shirts and working-men's caps. The lack of colour stimulates a sense of coldness seemingly opposed to the hotness of the Sicilian setting, and the starkness of the geometrical lines created by the boulders forms a visual contrast to the soft lushness of much of the musical setting (think of the harp- and string-dominated orchestral passages). We are cast here not in a specific town square – the centre of human action for the Italy of the late nineteenth century – but rather to a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transitory location, a place between places. Perhaps this is an apt metaphor for the position of the leading character Santuzza, at a pivotal moment in her life; Del Monaco repeatedly emphasizes the idea of transition by having the chorus periodically process cyclically along an ascending platform at the back of the stage. The barrenness of the stage set, what is more, has the benefit of allowing small gestures to take on larger significance. When Turiddu, in his drinking song, throws wine on the floor, its symbolic red is the first colour that stains the black-and-white canvas. Alfio's stripping Lola of her cross necklace, a movement that could seem both trite and small, instead seems like a mammoth gesture. The positions of the characters also seem to gain in importance on the empty stage; most significantly, Santuzza remains primarily in the centre, as if she is the stone on which all rests.

While the abstractness of the setting perhaps allows a greater focus on the inner lives of the characters, such a vision of the work raises a number of issues problematic for the listener. Not least of these is how to reconcile the many specific locational references in the text with the new backdrop – comments such as 'I just arrived in the square', for example, simply don't make much sense. While this is hardly a new problem for opera directors wanting to change a work's setting, and while it is possible to hand such passing jarring moments over to artistic licence, the nature of *Cavalleria*'s aesthetic engages this staging issue on a more fundamental level. For *verismo* is founded on the highlighting of colour – the aesthetic came into being as an extreme incarnation of artistic *couleur locale* at a time when interest in 'foreign' locations such as Southern Italy was at a height, and the South was depicted in novels, portraits, magazines and newspapers in images dependent for their effect on vibrancy, contrast and vigour.[1] *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* constituted the operatic equivalent of technicolor depictions of this Southern world, with colourful descriptions permeating their text ('oranges on green vines', 'golden ears', 'red lips', and so on). Specific local colour is reflected in the music, which provides constant musical cues and gestures for the visual elements: church organ and bells, pastoral oboes, peasant dance topoi and so on. The absence of visible corollaries in Del Monaco's staging, along with its lack of visual tensions and climaxes, presents constant problems for the credibility of the stage setting, as well as the audience's understanding of the action. To put this another way, the symbols in *Cavalleria* are, perhaps, too specific to sustain such an abstract setting (unlike other kinds of opera – one thinks, of course, of Wagner). The vehement denial of the opera's *couleur locale*, what is more, serves to expose the extent to which the effect of the work relies on its location, leaving the audience to perceive all the more the extreme thinness of the plot and its premise.

Del Monaco connects *Cavalleria* to *Pagliacci* with the bearing of the dead Silvio across the stage, now set for the next work. The scene for this work at first seems more specific, with a 1950s setting clearly signified by the gentlemen's hats and braces, and the women's hairdos. Yet many staging choices seem to undermine or contradict this setting. Nedda, for example, is dressed in boyish clothing with a very un-1950s-like pixie haircut, and the main characters are dressed in less historically specific leather jackets and jeans. The geographical location remains

[1] See John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860–1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), and Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); also my 'Masks, Minuets and Murder: Images of Italy in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 133/1 (2008): 32–68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unidentified, with the action taking place in front of two massive black-and-white photographs – outlined in theatrical bulb lighting – of a woman stretching out her hand. As in *Cavalleria*, the setting exposes the weaknesses of the opera, rather than reinforcing its strengths. The lack of specific costumes and locale works against establishing a sense of personality for the characters, and it is difficult to grasp what motivates them, leaving the audience only with the mechanisms of the plot – a plot that in this setting seems very thin on the ground. In the context of this seemingly characterless setting, certain local-level staging choices, such as those for Nedda's recitative and aria 'Qual fiamma avea il guardo … Stridono lassù', seem arbitrary. Nedda, one of many spirited late-Romantic exotic women ('exotic' because from the unfamiliar South), is required to sing her radiant soprano lines decked out in jaded men's clothing, inexplicably braced for most of the aria halfway up a ladder. The shimmering sensuality underlying the role is transformed into harsher sexual images, the most extreme being her lying on the ground touching herself while singing the line 'glowing with hidden desire'. Del Monaco seems determined to place Nedda in an explicitly compromised position: her duet with Tonio is made into a rough physical tussle, and that with Silvio sung with him lying on top of her before they are caught *in flagrante delicto*.

In an interview included in the DVD disk set, Del Monaco provides a clue to the rationale behind these severe sexual depictions, and indeed the bleakness of the setting as a whole: in describing the setting of *Pagliacci*, he refers to the influence of neo-realist cinema, commenting that 'on [the opera's] surface we have a homage to *La dolce vita*, underneath we have *La strada*'. He looked away from late nineteenth-century *verismo*, he explains, towards post-war cinema, choosing for *Pagliacci* a setting meant to portray a 'pre-industrial area in the '50s or '60s'. For *Cavalleria*, conversely, he looked back towards Greek tragedy, gaining inspiration from a marble quarry near Carrara. Rather than indicating late nineteenth-century Sicily in specific visual terms, he felt a 'profound need' to transpose the work on to a more symbolic level, '[escaping] into the archaic, back into Greek tragedy', using 'archaic colours, the colour of marble, the colour of salt' ('in the middle of Sicily we have black and white'). In Del Monaco's conception, *Cavalleria rusticana* 'is, on the popular level, the same story as *Medea* – a *Medea* for the people' – a tale in which a woman is loved, abandoned, comes to a new place and, 'on a mythological level, destroys and leaves'. Yet while both conceptions – *Cavalleria* as Greek tragedy, *Pagliacci* as post-war cinema – offer stimulating avenues for interpretation, the bleak vision they offer cannot but jar with the sparkling music and colour that is so integral to the works. The 'slices of life' offered in both works rely on dynamic, vital scenarios ill-suited to the monochrome representations here. The glowing performances of the singers, in particular the powerful lyricism of Marìa Bayo's (Nedda, for whose luminescent recitative 'Qual fiamma avea il guardo' it is worth watching the rest of the performance), point up this discrepancy all the more. Perhaps the disjunction demonstrates the problems of transposing features of other theatrical modes into the genre of opera; in any case, the musical performance cannot fully mitigate the effect of the visual setting. For this viewer, at least, the challenges of choosing such settings for these particular works remain unresolved.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003256 Published online by Cambridge University Press