

# VOX IMAGO

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LEONCAVALLO  
PAGLIACCI

DANIEL HARDING  
MARIO MARTONE  
TEATRO ALLA SCALA



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## PAGLIACCI

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### PAGLIACCI BY LEONCAVALLO: LISTENING GUIDE

Philip Gossett

*Pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo is often spoken of as an “Opera Verista,” in the light of the success of the opera with which it has traditionally been paired in opera houses throughout the world, Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana*. To my mind this is an error. What is most remarkable about Leoncavallo’s work is not its simple presentation of a story from “real life,” but rather the way it integrates two stories: one that could be happening as the opera was written, the other a theatrical presentation drawing on figures from the *Commedia dell’Arte*. Indeed, the composer *claimed* the first story really did happen in the way he presents it, but we know for certain (as Federico Fornoni demonstrates in his essay) that the events he describes were by no means the same as events that occurred in Calabria some decades before May 21, 1892, when *Pagliacci* was first performed under the baton of Arturo Toscanini at the Teatro Dal Verme in Milan, at least as these events were described in official documents. Further, it cannot be excluded (although Leoncavallo strenuously denied it) that he had actually borrowed his story from a previous work by Catulle Mendès. Still, what Leoncavallo succeeds so beautifully in doing in his *Pagliacci* is drawing parallels between “real life” and the *Commedia dell’Arte* presentation. When Colombina (Nedda) is killed in the last minutes of the opera, we remain shocked. We do not expect the jealousy of Pagliaccio (Canio) to reach that point, since we are immersed in the theatrical presentation of the *Commedia dell’Arte* and it requires a moment of adaptation to realize, with Colombina (Nedda), that we have returned to “real life,” where Canio’s passion is all too powerful and capable in the end of the murder of both Nedda and her lover, Silvio. But of course Leoncavallo gives us every hint that this will happen, both dramaturgically and musically.

Leoncavallo combines in a brilliant fashion, too, a harmonic vocabulary that is constantly surprising and a natural gift for simple melody. We see this already in the first measures of his Prologue, where the orchestra alone plays a melody that will dominate the Prologue (although not exclusively), but will not be heard again in this form. After a simple C major chord in the first measure, Leoncavallo adds a seventh degree (B flat) in the second measure, but does not treat the new chord as a dominant seventh, as would have been normal in the harmonic vocabulary of his time, with a resolution to F major; instead he treats the sonority as a new color, able to stand on its own. These two measures are answered by a different figure, scalar motion in sixteenth notes, concluding with the interval of a fifth, in C major, in the upper voices, and then all four measures are repeated. Leoncavallo then leaps to an A flat major chord, and takes it through a series of harmonically unexpected degrees before cadencing in E-flat major. This leads him to repeat the initial four measures, but down a tone in B major. As he continues, the pattern of his artistry becomes clear: the composer uses simple harmonic degrees (including diminished seventh chords) here and throughout his opera, but does so freely, in a sequence determined by his harmonic will, not by rules. His is not a highly chromatic tonal vocabulary, *à la* Wagner, but rather a simple harmonic and melodic language used with enormous flexibility.

The opening theme is not the only one employed in the Prologue. Before Tonio (the baritone) welcomes us into the theater, the orchestra announces first (*Lento assai*) Canio’s “Ridi Pagliaccio” motive (Canio is a tenor) with which the act will conclude, then (*Cantabile sostenuto assai*) the motive Leoncavallo will use throughout both acts when he wants to refer to the power of Love (not only for Canio, but also for his wife, the soprano Nedda, and her lover, the baritone Silvio). Although the chromatic melody is very brief (two measures, when the composer doesn’t reduce it to its first measure alone), it is heard twice, first in E major, then up a tone in F-sharp major. This harmonic sleight-of-hand will recur often when the composer presents the Love theme. After a return to the opening melody, Tonio pokes his head through the curtain and begins the text of the Prologue, with its “Si può?... Si può?...” He relates, beginning in a highly expressive *arioso*, his function as “the Prologue.” (While a device of this kind is not typical in Italian opera, it occurs frequently in the spoken theater: Leoncavallo may well have known some of the Shakespearian examples, as in *Pericles* or *Henry V*.) This passage was particularly identified with the original Tonio, the French baritone Victor Maurel, who was also Verdi’s original Iago in *Otello* (1887) and his first Falstaff (1893). Apparently the Prologue was added fairly late in the compositional history of *Pagliacci*, when Maurel realized that his part was rather small when compared with that of the tenor. After introducing himself, Tonio speaks of the author’s aim, which is “pingervi uno squarcio di vita. | Eglì

ha per massima sol | che l'artista è un uom | e che per gli uomini scrivere ei deve. | Ed al vero ispiravasi" ("to paint a slice of life. His only rule is that the artist is a man, and that he must write for men, and draw his inspiration from truth"). Thus, the composer (who wrote his own libretto) announces himself a "Verista," even if his opera offers more than a simple Veristic story. Near the end of the opera, the chorus will emphasize this idea, when it sings "Par vera questa scena!" ("This scene seems real"). Then he grows even more explicit: what is the author trying to represent? As the music becomes more lyrical, he tells us that what will be presented is "Un nido di memorie" ("A nest of memories") and, as the orchestra intones the Love theme, he tells the audience that they will see how human beings love, their hatreds and sorrows. The music continues with a menacing theme to be heard again several times during the opera, at the moment when Canio says what might happen if Nedda were truly unfaithful to him, for example, and later when he actually discovers his wife's infidelity. Tonio's lyricism concludes with a particularly beautiful melody (*Andante cantabile*), "E voi, piuttosto:" though we will not hear it again until the Intermezzo between the acts, it stays with us as the summation of all that Tonio has said in this Prologue. "Andiam," then, "Incominciate!" The Prologue closes with the same orchestral music heard at its beginning, cadencing clearly in C major, where it began.

As the curtain rises on the first scene of Act I a solo trumpet and the bass drum announce the arrival of the troupe of players. Again, the music is harmonically flexible, going from B minor directly to C major, then hovering on F-sharp (dominant of B minor or major). The chorus comes running, overjoyed that the players have returned, and they welcome in particular "Pagliaccio" (Canio) -a great favorite, whom they call "il principe dei Pagliacci," ("the prince of clowns") as the music gyrates between B-flat major and B major. It is, in fact, Canio who greets the crowd and, in a lyrical but simple melody, invites them to the show, which will begin "a ventitré ore," a few hours after sunset. He anticipates the story they will hear of the "smanie del bravo Pagliaccio" ("the sufferings of good Pagliaccio") and the revenge he will take. And members of the chorus first repeat his words and then assure him that they will be there.

Meanwhile, a peasant invites several members of the troupe, including Canio and Peppe, the "Arlecchino" who will be Nedda's lover in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, to have a drink with them in the local tavern. They go off, leaving Tonio with Nedda. When another peasant warns Canio that Tonio stays behind only to "far la corte a Nedda!" ("pay court to Nedda!") Canio responds with a beautiful and revelatory *Cantabile* ("Un tal gioco, credetemi"), in which he differentiates the jests of the *Commedia dell'Arte* from real life, where he would never permit such behaviour. His warning ("Ma se Nedda sul serio sorprendessi...") is delivered to menacing music first heard in the Prologue; it will recur many times as the opera develops. And he concludes with the words "Adoro la mia sposa!..." as the chorus hears the church bells and the pipers, and go off *en masse* to church, singing a "Coro delle Campane," in part derived from a pseudo-Spanish melody by Emmanuel Chabrier in his *España*. It is not clear why Leoncavallo felt it necessary to quote Chabrier (perhaps he did not realize he was doing it), but he clearly wanted a popular, tuneful chorus to conclude the first scene.

They leave the stage free for the second scene of Act I, in which we begin to see the "real life" behaviour of members of the troupe. First we are introduced to Nedda, who reacts with fear and dignity to Canio's threats, singing a beautiful "Ballatella," a bird song her mother used to entertain her with when she was a child. It gives Leoncavallo another opportunity to write a gorgeous, popular melody, in F-sharp major, in which Nedda simultaneously gets to show off her art and proclaims her free spirit. She is heard by Tonio, the deformed baritone, who loves her and tries to court her, using the Love motive from the Prologue. She will have none of it and laughs at him. It's all right for him to do this in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, but in real life she has no interest. He menaces her (using the same tune Canio employed for his warning), but when he insists on having a kiss, she whips him across the face and, offended as much as hurt, he vows revenge. She insults him: his soul, as his body, is "difforme... lurido!..." We will see in the second act where Tonio abandons the distinction between his play-acting and his "real" feelings. He will ultimately switch from *Commedia dell'Arte* music to a quotation of his music from Act I, and it is Tonio who will precipitate the denouement by informing Canio of his wife's actions.

Although she thinks Tonio has disappeared, he has only hidden in order to observe her more closely, but now Nedda's real lover, Silvio, appears in the third scene of Act I. This gives rise to the love scene for Silvio and Nedda, with Tonio lurking in the background, ready to do whatever he must to have revenge, even informing Canio of his wife's behaviour. Much of the love scene is built on the Love motive we heard in the Prologue, freely moving from one key to the next. Silvio cannot bear the idea that the travelling players must depart after the show that night and begs Nedda to run off with him. The music reaches its climax on the words "Non mi tentar!..." sung by Nedda, first in D major, then, as we have witnessed many times, a half tone higher in E-flat major. (Leoncavallo wrote the theme twice, first for Nedda alone, then for Nedda accompanied by Silvio, a kind of "cabaletta" design, but he himself suggested a cut of the first appearance of the material, and that suggestion is accepted by Daniel Harding in the La Scala performance.) Finally, she admits her love for him and promises to escape with him, intoning the fatal

words “A stanotte e per sempre tua sarò” on the pitch A, as the orchestra plays the Love theme in D major and as Tonio brings Canio on stage to witness this moment.

With their arrival the last scene of the Act, the great Finale, begins. Nedda begs Silvio to escape, while Canio tries (without success) to follow him, as the orchestra plays an excited version of his menacing theme. Canio tries to get Nedda to say the name of her lover, but she refuses. The music continues to be based largely on the menacing theme. Canio draws a dagger, but Peppe restrains him, insisting that their public is waiting for the formal performance that they have been promised. Tonio agrees to tell Canio when the lover returns, as he surely will. And so Canio prepares for the performance, singing the recitative and “arioso” that close the act, one of the most famous tenor solos (justifiably) in the entire operatic repertory, “Recitar! Mentre preso dal delirio” and “Vesti la giubba” to a melody which has already been heard in the Prologue. The piece is in E minor, but the orchestra closes the Act in a transformation of the melody into E major. The melody could not be simpler, but once again Leoncavallo emphasizes non-chordal tones to give it a particular character, the D sharp for “[Ve]-sti [la giubba]” in the first two measures and the A sharp for “[e la fac]-cia in-[farina].” Notice, too, how the simple E minor harmony is enriched by motion to the flatted seventh degree (F major) and to the flatted fourth degree (A-flat major). These are the tricks that Leoncavallo plays to give his music the dramatic edge it requires. This same alternation of E minor and E major is heard in the following orchestral Intermezzo. (Leoncavallo could hardly have avoided writing an “Intermezzo” after Mascagni’s success in *Cavalleria rusticana*.) It features several melodies from the Prologue, including “Un nido di memorie” and the concluding melody of Tonio, now heard again for the first and only time in the opera, along with hints of “Vesti la giubba,” first as counterpoints to the melody from the Prologue, then in their own right.

As the curtain rises on Act II, we again see the crowd, but now it has come for the performance. The music resembles the music at the beginning of Act I (with the B minor trumpet solo and the bass drum), but now it is in part higher (the alternation of B-flat major and B major of Act I has become the alternation of B major and C major). A new melody is heard in A major (three measures plus three measures, with a continuation for flute of two additional measures), as the crowd gathers. Tonio invites the audience to take its seats (with his “Avanti, avanti”). Silvio is in the audience and says a few words to Nedda, promising to meet her after the show. And then the crowd settles down, the choral introduction comes to a close in E major and the curtain goes up. All is silence.

The “Commedia” is scored largely for strings alone, very different from the sound of the remainder of the opera, which employs the entire orchestra. It also has a melodic vocabulary (beginning with a *Tempo di Minuetto*, an aristocratic dance) that seeks to duplicate eighteenth-century Commedia dell’Arte style, while not losing touch with its late nineteenth century roots. So, the opening idea is a leap from one C major chord to another, but over the span of three octaves, and then a scale upwards of some eleven notes, hardly a typical phrase for the eighteenth century. Still, this difference in sound worlds is fundamental to Leoncavallo’s artistic aims. He must be able to differentiate in the mind of the audience in the opera house the worlds of the Commedia dell’Arte and “real life.” His ability to do this so well is at the heart of the success of *Pagliacci*. The situation in the Commedia dell’Arte parallels almost precisely the world of “real life.” Nedda (as Colombina) is found alone, awaiting the arrival of her lover, Arlecchino (Peppe in “real life”). She doesn’t expect her husband Pagliaccio (Canio) until late, but she does wonder why Tonio (as the servant, Taddeo, who courts her also in the *commedia*) has not yet appeared. Arlecchino is heard off-stage, singing a simple melody in a barely inflected A minor (“O Colombina, il tenero fido Arlecchin...”), accompanied by string pizzicatos (which make the accompaniment sound as if it were being played on a guitar), with lovely echoes from the flutes and oboe. Colombina is delighted to hear that he has almost arrived, and the music reprises the *Tempo di Minuetto*. But, before Arlecchino, now it is time for Taddeo (Tonio) to enter, and he has what Leoncavallo describes as a “Scena comica” with Nedda/Colombina, in which, as in “real life,” he expresses his love for Colombina (Nedda). Much of the music is in the Commedia dell’Arte style (notice the exaggerated way he takes about how “bella” she is and notice also the comic cadence at “vergin divina”). At one point, however, “So che sei pura,” he quotes ironically the material he sang in the first act, so that Leoncavallo shows Taddeo (Tonio) crossing from playacting to his “real” self. This is hardly a “comic” effect, despite Leoncavallo’s description of the scene. Instead of Nedda’s whip, as in the first act, however, Taddeo must receive only a kick from Arlecchino, as he exits the stage.

Now a Duetto follows for Arlecchino and Colombina in a *Tempo di Gavotta*, an elegant Commedia dell’Arte number in which they sing of their love. Arlecchino tells Colombina to put a narcotic in the drink of Pagliaccio, so he will not know what she does. She agrees, then declaims the same music she used in the first act to Silvio (“A stanotte... E per sempre io sarò tua!”), but now a half note higher, not on A, but on B flat. This is too much for Canio who has been led back to watch the scene by Tonio, as he was in the first act. He struggles to remain in his part, but cannot, as he asks her to reveal her lover’s name. She pretends they are still play-acting and calls him “Pagliaccio,” but Canio breaks out of his part and sings “No! Pagliaccio non son” to a passionate phrase, over which he sings of having rescued Nedda from the

gutter and asking for her, if not love, then at least pity. The audience approves (“Comare, mi fa piangere!” and “Par vera questa scena”), but they do not yet understand that this is no longer play-acting. Again he menacingly asks her to tell him the name of her lover. She tries to deflect the situation by returning to the style of the *commedia*, singing to the *Tempo di Gavotta*, “Suvvia, così terribile davvero non ti credeo.”

But he remains firm in his anger and calls again for the name of her lover. To the Love theme she again refuses to reveal it (“a costo de la morte”), and Leoncavallo builds the scene into a short ensemble, with the chorus as well. Nedda insists (“Di quel tuo sdegno è l’amor mio più forte”), now singing the Love motive, but she refuses to name her lover. Canio, furious and abandoning completely any pretense of being “Pagliaccio,” takes up the knife and stabs her to death. In her dying agony she calls to “Silvio,” who comes forward too late to protect his beloved. Canio stabs him too, as the orchestra intones the threatening melody that Canio sang in his earlier “Un tal gioco, credetemi.” In the original opera, Tonio pronounced the final words of the opera, “La commedia è finita!” (a kind of Epilogue to the Prologue he had sung earlier), but by the time of the first edition, the phrase had already been appropriated by Canio. The horrified audience seeks to disarm Canio, as the orchestra concludes by singing out again “Vesti la giubba” (in a perfectly appropriate reminiscence of the conclusion of Act I; *Pagliacci* is not an opera in which the orchestra intones any melody that comes into its mind) and the curtain falls. The music comes to rest in E minor, to which Leoncavallo had returned again and again (either in minor or major), including at the end of the first act and in the Intermezzo.