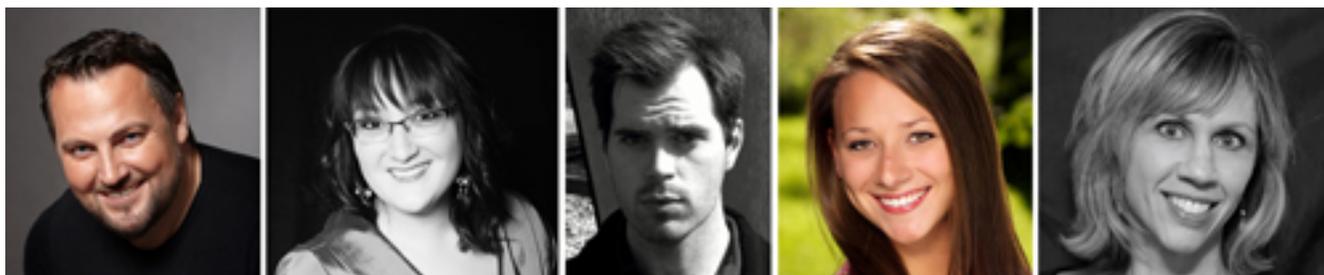


Opera Circle to stage Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* at First Baptist

by Daniel Hathaway



One of the most popular of all opera titles came about through a contest. 27-year-old Pietro Mascagni barely made the deadline for a new opera competition set up by Milanese publisher Edoardo Sonzogno in 1888, but won out over 72 other aspiring young Italian composers who fulfilled the entrance criteria of never before having had an opera staged. His winning entry, the one-act opera *Cavalleria rusticana* received its premiere in Rome in 1890.

Although Mascagni lived until 1945 and penned fourteen other stage works, none ever received the attention that “Cav” attracted. Cleveland's Opera Circle, having previously produced Mascagni's second opera, *L'amico Fritz*, will mount two staged performances of *Cavalleria rusticana* on Friday evening, November 21 and Sunday afternoon, November 23, at First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights.

The cast includes Mihail Urusov as Turiddu, Rachel Morrison as Santuzza, Christopher Aldrich as Alfio, Katie Fowler as Lola and Laura Avdey as Lucia. The Opera Circle Choral Ensemble will form the chorus and a reduction of the orchestration will be played by Jacek Sobieski, conducting from the piano, violinist Hristo Popov and cellist Kent Collier.

We spoke briefly with Opera Circle's executive director, Dorota Sobieska, stage director Philip Formes and music director Jacek Sobieski to get some of their insights into the upcoming production.

“Phil’s and my idea is that the main character of the whole story is the village, and the mother who represents the village is the central character,” Sobieska told us. “It took us a long time to work that out because so many big name singers take on *Cavalleria rusticana*. That puts the focus on the soloists rather than the chorus. But if you don’t put the chorus in the foreground, the opera becomes very thin, like a prelude to something else.”

Formes agrees, and has developed his staging of the opera around the chorus. “In a chamber production with no set and no large orchestra, you try to use the chorus as the scenery.” There are challenges that come with that. “Everybody has to become actors. Many choristers are afraid to move onstage, so I’ve set up some theatrical games to help them create a visual scene. The chorus shouldn’t sing to the audience, but engage with each other. I have to help them develop their bravery to create characters with each other.”

The chorus in Opera Circle’s productions has served another important role: generating soloists for future productions. While tenor Mihail Urusov, who recently arrived in Northeast Ohio from Moscow, came to his role through an artist representative, some of the soloists in *Cav* started out as chorus members. “Rachel Morrison and Katie Fowler both came up through the chorus,” Sobieska said. “It gives you an opportunity to be heard, to work with the company and prove yourself.”

Philip Formes also sang in the chorus for previous Opera Circle productions. After studying at the New England Conservatory and doing musical theater at CCM in Cincinnati, Formes toured with road shows and ended up singing in New Orleans Opera. Hurricane Katrina inspired his move to Ohio. “I took the backdoor route to stage directing,” he said, “but it’s great fun for me. I’ve had lots of experience being directed, and as a singer, you always have your opinions about how it could be done better. And now here I am.”

Part of the charm of producing *Cavalleria rusticana* in a church is that the opera takes place on Easter morning outside a church, so the performance space is already part of the plot. “We have embraced that environment to give emotional impact to the meaning of the text,” Formes said. “Using the Greek theater principle that good characters come from the right and evil ones from the left, stage left will represent the inn where Lucia runs her wine shop, and stage right will represent the church. Santuzza, Lola and Lucia will enter from stage left. Then we’ll try to use the church beyond the sanctuary, managing critical elements of the plot by spacing characters throughout the church for dimension and distance.”

Though there will be a full complement of singers onstage, the instrumental accompaniment to the opera will be minimal in the extreme. Dorota Sobieska says not to

worry. “There will be more music coming from our three musicians than from many orchestras.”

Music director Jacek Sobieski has had hands-on experience with chamber orchestrations of operas, having performed Massenet’s *Werther* with the same trio of musicians in 2011. “The combination worked well, and we have fabulous players. I will play from the piano vocal score and Hristo and Kent will play from their orchestra parts, but we will decide on doublings and solos. We will make a lot of adjustments.”

Sobieski thinks that the Mascagni will be even more attractive as a pared-down orchestration. “It’s maybe easier for audiences. The music is complex, but Italian music is very melodious. Massenet composed his music on the piano but Mascagni conceived his music first for the orchestra.”

Cavalleria rusticana is usually performed on a double-bill with another one-act opera, *Pagliacci* being its most frequent companion. Dorota Sobieska and Opera Circle have decided to let it stand alone on this occasion. “We were thinking of doing a second title, but we thought, why not try it with just one? Things are changing,” she said. “We considered peoples’ time and thought they might prefer something shorter but focused and concentrated. The amount of beautiful music in this opera should be sufficient.”

And speaking of beautiful music, why didn’t Mascagni’s other works catch on in the same way *Cavalleria rusticana* did? “I love *L’Amico Fritz* with my whole heart,” Sobieska said. “But nobody gets killed. It’s a pastoral opera about good people who end up getting married and having a family. That’s out of whack with the rest of opera. People don’t know how to react to it.”

Jacek Sobieski agrees. “People like the criminal element, the tension, murder and blood. But in the case of *Cavalleria rusticana*, there’s a nice balance between crime and beautiful choruses.”

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