

Send in the Clowns

Excerpts from a survey of complete recordings of Pagliacci written for The Opera Quarterly (Spring 1993), by David McKee

[Editor's note: McKee's survey of 20 recordings of Pagliacci celebrated the centenary of Leoncavallo's 1892 opera, and what follows is this editor's idiosyncratic magpie's choice of highlights cobbled from the original densely-packed 16 pages. A few lines are even rewritten to sustain the cuts, always to the detriment of the original; thus consider this merely an introduction to the full article. The essay by Laura Homonnay-Demilio, elsewhere in this issue, was inspired by McKee's survey and is intended to complement it.]

Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* is often treated as a clone of its perpetual harness-mate, Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, and it does share a common dramatic form: an amatory betrayal leads to homicide on a hot Mediterranean day, the sanguinary denouement delayed long enough for the orchestra to play a melting intermezzo. Leoncavallo's opera, however, is of a more cosmopolitan stripe than *Cavalleria*, which has a certain hot-from-the-griddle crudity of gesture and craft.

If anything, *Pagliacci* suggests Richard Wagner writ small and recast in an Italian theatrical sensibility. Tonio's schemings (evoked by bassoons and lower strings) musically link him



Stockholm, 1936

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the traditional interpolated A flat). He is better still in the rest of the role, displaying a wide range of colors and a constant involvement in the character's changing moods. As Silvio, Carl-Axel Hallgren also has a manly voice which proves a little short on top. He sounds sincere but hardly suave in the (much-truncated) duet with Nedda. Ruth Moberg, who like Sundquist and Hallgren sang for many years at the Stockholm Opera, does not have a remarkable timbre, and her vibrato is sometimes intrusive on sustained notes in the middle register, but she appears very well suited to the role of Nedda: the voice is flexible and responds with ever-changing inflections to the evolving drama. Arne Ohlson – who was (as we are told in the useful booklet notes) the only singer to have ever received lessons from Jussi Björling – has a more robust voice than is often the case for Beppe/Arlecchino,

but his phrasing is persuasive throughout and the timbre not unattractive.

When Canio first appears one is struck by how different Björling sounds in this role, compared to his Turiddu. It is partly due, of course, to the less open vowel sounds of the Swedish language, but also to a clear understanding of the profound psychological differences between the extroverted Turiddu and the older, introverted Canio. Björling immediately conveys the psychological tension that characterizes Canio even in his apparently light-hearted moments, and even those who don't speak Swedish (like this writer) cannot help noticing the uncommon variety of inflection in his projection of the text throughout. Whereas in the New York studio with Cellini his Canio appears vocally admirable but sometimes lacking in inner fire, here his singing is remarkable both in purely vocal terms

(many of the high G's and A's sound more ringing and incisive in the theater) and for its emotional commitment. "Vesti la giubba" is sung more lyrically than in the official recording, and gains in inwardness of expression, and the final scene is phrased with a nobility (particularly in "Sperai, tanto il delirio") that keeps our sympathies evenly balanced right to the end between the murderer and his victims.

Anna-Lisa Björling (who heard Jussi sing more than anyone else) states in her autobiography that this was the performance that she loved best of all: certainly in no other part does Björling reveal such a sustained expression of deep suffering, and his achievement in this live performance makes one regret all the more the fact that he never sang Verdi's *Otello*, which surely would not have proved more vocally and emotionally testing than this Verismo double bill.

to Alberich; the love duet of Nedda and Silvio paints them as Calabrian Wälsungs; and the big choral scenes suggest an earnest study of *Die Meistersinger*. Sure enough, Leoncavallo was an adherent of Wagner (as was Pagliacci's first conductor, Arturo Toscanini), and youthfully contemplated a tetralogy entitled *Crepusculo (Twilight)*. Only the first opera of this cycle, *I Medici*, was ever completed. Today, it has sunk without a trace—unlike the ineradicable Pagliacci. Even though *Pagliacci* is a “mere” century old, it has accrued a number of questions involving performing choices and traditions. While the opera clocks in at seventy minutes or so in length, more often than not it is performed with several substantial cuts.

The three traditional snips usually encountered are:

- 21 bars of the opening choral ensemble,
- 46 measures of the Nedda/Silvio duet (essentially a second verse of “Non mi tentar”), and
- 59 bars of the chorus preceding the act 2 play-within-a-play.

All of these changes hurt, and they only reinforce the point that justification of a cut should fall on those making the cut, not those wanting to restore it. That second strophe to “Non mi tentar” shows Nedda in a far less sluttish light, conceding that she fears fate may be against her and Silvio. The two redactions in the choral scenes seriously diminish what are (when played uncut) carefully crafted buildups, composed with a high level of skill.

Though Leoncavallo wrote a number of optional high notes into his score, certain unwritten ones have by now become more or less de rigueur. One is the high A-flat that baritones insert at “al pari di voi spiriamo l’aere” in the Prologue. Another is the B-flat that Canio is expected to deliver on his

final “a ventitre ore.” Then, of course, there is the question of who gets to say “La commedia è finita.” Does Tonio ring down the curtain with this line (as Leoncavallo originally intended) or does Canio (as quickly became traditional)? [No leading tenor worth his salt is likely to be willing] to forgo such a choice histrionic moment, [but then] the alienation effect prescribed by Leoncavallo's original direction [tends to get lost]. However, Leonard Warren's powerful reappropriation of the moment in the old RCA recording (now on EMI/Angel) shows that the composer knew exactly what he was after. As Lorenzo Arruga notes, “by restoring the epilogue to Tonio, who sang the Prologue, the opera is brought full circle.”

EMI'S 1934 immortalization of Beniamino Gigli's Canio offers ripe verismo style. The excess sob creeps in here and there but even Gigli's vivid histrionics during the act I coda ... do not match the excesses of his successors. On the whole, the tenor delivers poised vocalism, with the hint of a threat ever behind his equable tone. He ranges impressively from the charm of his opening address to the subsequent furious rages, without ever compromising the liquid, *cantabile* quality of his instrument...Iva Pacetti is an earthy Nedda, wickedly taunting Tonio and soaring gloriously in moments of passion...Franco Ghione builds the drama expertly....

It has taken the Germans to give us the model performance of *Pagliacci*. Leoncavallo might well have been pleased to hear his work sung in the language of Wagner, but the end result tends to tickle one's funny bone. Every line seems to contain twenty extra syllables, and when the cry of “I zampognari!” becomes “Die Musikanten!” one expects Hans Sachs to turn up at any moment.

The 1943 performance, however, is

no laughing matter.... Helge Rosvaenge sets the tone with a Canio of rough nobility and vivid expression. Sample the fierce animal laugh that punctuates “Jetzt spielen” (sorry, “Recitar”), the grand voicing of “Vestila giubba” / “Hüll dich in Tand nur,” or the exemplary account of “Scherzet immer” / “Un tal gioco.” Rosvaenge's voice flashes like indomitable steel, but is tempered with ductility, pathos, and an expressive throb.

Although the role of Tonio lies slightly high for Hahn, whose “official” Fach included Daland, Kecal, and Basilio, he sings it with an orotund manner that pleases, and his solid lower extension is well employed at his “veglio su voi” in the playlet, where—most Tonios poop out. The sensual Hilde Scheppan (Nedda) beguiles with her silken legato and aching sense of yearning. Karl Schmitt-Walter brings a sweet, lyric baritone and Italianate style to Silvio. Together with Scheppan, he serves up an unexpected bonus with the uncut love duet.



If you seek leathery *verismo* rasping, the legendary RCA set (now on EMI/Angel) is not for you. The party line on this recording is “beautiful but tame.” This listener must register a vehement dissent: the assembled all-stars have, generally, looked to the score and found valid answers, rather than falling back on stale choices. Drama and expression are drawn from within the music and text, not externally applied. Perhaps there's some tortured reason why Canio cannot have the dignity of Otello, but I found myself encoring passage after passage in this recording—a circumstance that occurred but infrequently during this survey.

Canio here rejoices in a voice of incomparable beauty: Jussi Björling at the top of his game. Phrase after

phrase is gorgeously turned, with soaring top notes. When conveying fury, Björling's voice has the focused heat of an acetylene torch (with no loss of tonal sheen), though he is more distressed than angry in the play-within-a-play. His "Un tal gioco" should be a model for all aspiring Canios, and the Swedish tenor offers the noblest "Vesti la giubba," with but a hint of a sob.

Victoria de los Angeles as Nedda lacks nothing in bite of diction, which is combined with velvety legato and that uniquely personal phrasing. Leonard Warren enchants with his plangent tone and deep musicality. He displays confessional vulnerability in his duet with Nedda, and later emerges as a smooth, *mezza-voce* intriguer.

Though Robert Merrill has a beauty of voice to match Warren's, his Robert Mitchum-style casualness (one can almost see the drooping cigarette and eyelids at half-mast) makes Silvio more of a stick than need be. Much-maligned conductor Renato Cellini exemplifies what might be called "good routine." His direction has snap, and tends to be efficient rather than revelatory; the really strong ideas emanate from the stage rather than from the pit.



Even though Maria Callas and Giuseppe di Stefano were new to their roles when they recorded them for EMI, the result still exudes a satisfyingly theatrical flavor. Di Stefano's is essentially a lyric tenor's Canio, more sorrowful than enraged. "Vesti la giubba" gets robust expression, though di Stefano always maintains a balance between passion and musical poise.

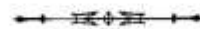
Callas's wonted chemistry with Gobbi drives their duet, and she delivers a sweet and lilting "Ballatella" (though the voice sears at high A and beyond). Tears are implicit in the voice of Tito

Gobbi (Tonio) but he never descends into bathos. His musical and eloquent portrayal always keeps the stage visible in the mind's eye.

Mario del Monaco headlines a surprisingly uninteresting London/Decca version, which finds the tenor in clarion voice but often under pitch. His unrelentingly steely tone and black-browed aspect give Canio little purchase on our sympathy. Gabriella Tucci is the prosaic Nedda, whose fishwifery aspect is magnified by her rasping top notes and incipient wobble. Though Cornell MacNeil (Tonio) has the instincts, the ingratiating manner, and the superb, oaken voice for the part—complete with a clarion upper register—his performance fails to catch fire. (Note: this 1959 recording was del Monaco's second for London/Decca, the first in 1953 was conducted by Alberto Erede and featured Clara Petrella and Afro Poli.)



Even Italians can mess up *Pagliacci*. Just check out the 1960 Philips recording from the Teatro San Carlo. Ugo Rapalò conducts the opera as if he hated it, pounding out the job with a rigid, perfunctory tread. Gianni Poggi is a poker-faced Canio whose singing might be characterized as a white Italian whine. Aldo Protti (Tonio) is rough and charmless. Some will quail from the acidic timbre of Aureliana Beltrami (Nedda), a real spitfire with resinous diction, good high notes, and appealing phrasing. (And the chorus and sound are good.)



Greatness is tantalizingly within reach for the Scala forces under Lovro von Matacic, in a sizzling 1960 recording. The Czech conductor's reading of

the opera has snap and zest, with the passionate ebb and flow of Leoncavallo's melodies finely achieved. Matacic deploys a knowing sense of rubato, and gets spirited results from the orchestra. Franco Corelli (Canio) gives a performance that's all about Italian tenor emoting and has little or nothing to do with Pagliacci. I'm afraid that what I usually hear from him is sloppy musicianship, slobby emotionalism, and a grasp of character that's vague, at best.

True, one can rejoice in the juicy sounds captured here—when Corelli latches onto a B-flat, he stays with it until the cows come home. The tenor aspirates like crazy ("A ventitre h-ore"), and "Vesti la giubba" descends into slushiness. Corelli regroupes for the tensions of the playlet, but the sobs have come out in full force by the time "No, Pagliaccio non son!" is reached.

A pity, since the supporting cast is very fine: Gobbi (Tonio) changes vocal masks like the great actor he was, and can feather his voice down for the finest effects, including a trill. His tone has become increasingly wooden (and white above the staff), and he takes the traditional high A in the Prologue only by the skin of his teeth. But the man could still sing warmly and poetically, portraying a Tonio who is harshly lustful and expert at sowing discord. He also gets to deliver "La commedia è finita," with sad finality.

The trusty Lucine Amara gives her well-practiced Nedda, the sound only slightly less plush than before, her voice moving gracefully up the staff and beyond, with splendid trills before the "Ballatella." That number is a bit staid, but once this Nedda is engaged in conflict or love, it's warm work. Amara's exchanges with Gobbi have bite and venom, and there is genuine heat to the love duet. Her Silvio is Mario Zanasi, an ideal singer for this music. His baritone is light, but hand-

some and rich, with an unusually uncovered top. The recording rises to heights of theatrical intensity in the play-within-a-play, and were it not for Corelli's self-indulgent performance, this set could be a first choice.



There's no such weak link on DG's 1965 recording, whose Canio (Carlo Bergonzi) could forget more about singing and Italian operatic style than most tenors will ever learn. (He had already recorded this role in 1951 for Cetra-Soria, shortly after his conversion from baritone.) Though Bergonzi knows how to play to the gallery, he depicts a Canio who is tailored to his own lyrical strengths and poetic diction, eschewing *tenore di forza* shouting. Thus, "Un tal gioco" is rueful and inward (ending with a *mesa di voce*).

Bergonzi savors the bitter irony of Canio's plight, singing "Vesti la giubba" with grand, arching phrasing and equally big emotions. The clown's inner struggle in the harlequinade is manifested here as nowhere else, with Bergonzi cutting loose for a passionate "No, *Pagliaccio non son!*" sweeping irresistibly to melodic climaxes. The tenor's customarily suave legato is on display, and who could chastise him for the glowing B-flat he inserts on "a ventitre ore"?

Giuseppe Taddei as Tonio is heard here at less than his best, but he compensates with some poised piano vocalism, as in his direct and poignant pre-curtain number. Although a last-minute substitute, Joan Carlyle is a most serendipitous choice whose Nedda reaches us with immediacy. She's palpably terrified in the climactic scene, and thanks to supportive conducting, sings a "Ballatella" that seems to hang, suspended in the thick summer air.

You haven't heard *Pagliacci* until

you've heard Herbert von Karajan's interpretation. No conductor is more *col canto*, but with a tensile strength underpinning the elastic tempi and the unusually free delivery accorded the singers. The love duet (cut, as usual) has a Tristanesque expansiveness, while the Tonio/Nedda encounter breathes fire. What Conrad L. Osborne said of Karajan's oversight *Cavalleria* [in a famous 1979 *High Fidelity* essay, "Diary of a Cavpag madman"] holds true for *Pagliacci*, in that the recording is "like viewing a primitive rural scene painted by a sensitive, sophisticated urban artist who sees it from his time and place and therefore discovers in it much that the inhabitants would be slow to recognize."



RCA's 1971 recording doesn't quite deserve its evil reputation. Plácido Domingo delivers Canio's music in exciting, liquid voice, solid all the way up to B-flat. He is smooth, but not personal, with his inflections sounding externalized: he hasn't lived the part yet, and "Vesti la giubba" is facilely lachrymose. MMontserrat Caballé's Nedda has been much belabored, but the actual performance is persuasive, with Caballé shifting gears convincingly from spitfire to seductress. Her sound is easy and ravishingly inflected, with the top notes unfurling brilliantly. She is strangely partnered with the nice, overtaxed Bach baritone of Barry McDaniell. With these two, the Nedda/Silvio duet sounds like an encounter between a worldly older woman and her coltish young swain.

Sherrill Milnes brings the strongest taste of theater to the set. He offers a sensitive Prologue and ferocity elsewhere, singing with richness and grateful legato, plus a secure top. With all this talent, the recording should

take wing—if only there were a conductor on the premises. Instead, we're stuck with Nello Santi, who has nice ideas about phrasing and rubato but no concept of structure. When Leoncavallo marks a passage *Deciso* (p. 15, score), Santi beats it out in a manner best described as *Indeciso*. Basically, he is led around by the singers, and his torpor adds minutes to the opera's length (compare his 76:41 to Cellini's 69:23).

Another somnolent *Pagliacci* with an all-star cast focuses on the Canio of Luciano Pavarotti, who had not as yet sung the role onstage. Giuseppe Patané's conducting is plodding, passive, slow on the uptake, deferential to the singers. The performance clocks in at a mind-boggling 77:59, and it seems longer still. The most winning performance is the Tonio of Ingvar Wixell, a touching study, executed with cultivated legato and bardic delivery (especially in the Prologue). Improbable, but it works, though Wixell's high notes are perilously "open." Mirella Freni's Nedda fails: her manner is too heavy and oversung throughout.

As for the big P, he sings with dispatch and sunny tone, but his earnest reading remains on the surface, the interpretative touches just a garnish. He blatantly disregards the instruction to end "Un tal gioco" in a vein of sarcasm, and gives the frequent impression of being incompletely coached in the part. In short, a dog.

Riccardo Muti's 1979 *Pagliacci* drew attention for its reversion to Leoncavallo's manuscript as the authoritative text. As a rule, when Leoncavallo provides two alternatives for a singer, Muti opts for the lower one. No unwritten high note, no matter how traditional, is allowed, and Tonio reclaims the last words, "La commedia è finita." These alterations occasionally pay off. For instance, Canio's final "a ventitre

ore” sounds far more ominous without the customary B-flat (and as pointed by Muti and José Carreras).

Like the young Tucker and Domingo, Carreras found himself recording Canio before he had really absorbed the part. He is sincere (though the “expression” in “Vesti la giubba” is affected), and very much in the lineage of di Stefano, right down to the raw and open *passaggio*. Carreras makes an agreeable, sometimes fervid sound, but there is a beat in sustained notes above the staff, and the impression of callowness is never shaken.

Another recording featuring Domingo is the 1983 soundtrack to Zeffirelli’s film, which hopscoches between studio takes and passages recorded live on the set of the film. This accounts for the canned sound of Domingo’s first lines (he is heard in three separate acoustics within the first three minutes of his music). Still, Domingo is in firm, ringing voice, though his occasional resort to sobbiness strips Canio of dignity.

[Editor’s note: In a Spring 1996 updating of his original article, David McKee evaluates the 1992 Philips recording of Pagliacci, conducted by Riccardo Muti and starring “Mr. P,” Daniela Dessi, and Juan Pons, with Riccardo Muti conducting the longest, slowest of all Pagliaccis. McKee continues: Perhaps because he has the Philadelphia Orchestra at his disposal, Muti dawdles over Leoncavallo’s “intermezzo sinfonica” as if it was a Mahler adagio.... Muti’s own foibles are compounded by those of his cast. Much as the combination of Muti and Pavarotti seems like a contradiction in terms, the supertenor is on his best behavior here. His innate sense of phrasing, knack for pointing a melodic climax, bright and reliable top, and intermittent improvements on his first recording (as in “Un tal gioco”) deserve our gratitude.

That said, Pavarotti’s voice functions well here only in a muscular, “held” state; efforts to float tone on the breath bring a dire wobble, especially in the lower register.... “Recitar!” is mechanical and “Vesti la giubba” is roared, its climax betraying uncharacteristic tonal rawness. After a strangely sloppy “No! Pagliaccio non son,” Pavarotti redeems himself in the cantabile passage and proves gripping in the final pages....]



If there is any operative fallacy at work in most performances of *Pagliacci*, it is that because the opera is about hardscrabble, illiterate people of primal emotions, it should be sung with a high degree of crudeness. Yet those performances in which the singers most loudly vent their sorrows, maul

their vocal cords, and tear passion to tatters are often the ones that leave an ultimately unsatisfying aftertaste.

If one performance seems to jump out from a distinguished pack, it is Karajan’s, and the listener gets a most individual *Cavalleria* in the bargain. Among the other *Cav/Pag* pairings, Serafin’s offers the next most cohesive performance.

The *Pagliaccis* that stand alone are Cellini’s (with Björling et al.), a performance of great beauty and human truth, and Ghione’s. The latter does not rival the former’s sheer musical impact, but Gigli’s Canio and the set’s stylistic immediacy compel attention. The Preiser recording (Rosvaenge et al.) is on a plane of greatness equal to that of the Karajan and Cellini versions and, German language or not, is an essential *Pagliacci/Bajazzo*.

With Maestro Leif Segerstam on the shore of Lake Saimaa.

