

Author's note: During this unprecedented time I have kept busy by writing down episodes from my career. There are many, but I thought to share the following excerpt from a collection of musical adventures entitled **Memories for My Boys**. I hope you enjoy. Cal Stewart Kellogg, July 2020.

## Sing Herman! Sing!

For the 1977 season opener, the New York City Opera presented the great Italian Verismo double bill: Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Ruggero Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. I was asked to conduct. So far I had an opera by Rota, one by Cimarosa, (*Il Matrimonio Segreto*) and one by Menotti under my belt. My experience in the opera pit was lacking, especially in the realm of verismo where liberties were taken at every turn and the music is rarely, if ever, performed the way it is written. After studying both scores, I purchased cassettes of La Scala renditions and was stunned by the way music looked on the page compared to the way it was performed. Maestro Ferrara listened to my concerns and said:

“Remember always, these composers were men of the theater. If a singer found a way to improve the impact of an aria, they were for it. Unfortunately, the scores were left as they were. Over time, traditional performance license has taken the upper hand. Be flexible and be ready for the unexpected. In opera it happens all the time”.

His words were more than proven true on that fateful opening night.

“Cav and Pag” have been side by side since their first performances. They are stunningly beautiful and in the case of *I Pagliacci*, unique. No one before or since Leoncavallo has brought the “play within a play” concept to the stage in such a striking manner. The composer's father was a judge and had once presided over an almost identical murder case known as “un diritto d'onore”, (a right of honor). The opera gives us a look at real life that becomes more and more unlivable when those involved in the situation find themselves imitating their actual life predicament on stage. It is fierce and brutal and so is *Cavalleria Rusticana* which usually precedes it. Both last about 70 minutes. Both are powerfully climatic. I was to find out that conducting these operas required physical pacing. At the time I had no idea how to do that. My approach was full out all the way. I came prepared to conduct both operas little expecting the need to reign myself in at times.

*Cavalleria* is an emotional battle between Santuzza, who is in love with and has given herself to, Turridu, who is in love with Lola. Lola is presently enjoying the attention of both Turiddu and Alfio, who happens to be her husband. Sicilian honor is at stake and when that is the case, somebody has to die. Santuzza spills the beans about Turiddu and Lola to Alfio. Alfio acts accordingly.

The lead singers in the City Opera Cav cast openly hated each other and would ask questions about the other person's performance directly to the stage director, and complain bitterly about where HE should stand or where SHE would fall after he pushes her to the ground. They never looked each other in the eye. There was a good reason that City Opera kept them performing this opera together. Their attitude made for great theater because the big duet is really a knock down drag out affair. For someone as involved in the drama as I was at the time, it was draining: exciting, but draining. On opening night, by the end of *Cavalleria* I was ready to hit the shower and go home. As I rested on the couch in the conductor's dressing room it dawned on me that I had Pag coming up in 15 minutes.

The cast of Pag was congenial, and they were all good colleagues who had performed this production many times before. Herman Malamud, singing the role of Canio, was known as one of the most

dependable singers in the business. Diana Soviero, who sang Nedda recalled a Pagliacci where Herman stepped in to save the show when a colleague fell ill shortly after the prologue of the opera. Diane met Herman on stage in costume. They relived that evening several times during rehearsals.

The telephone on the desk of the conductor's dressing room was ringing. It was the stage manager. "You may go the pit door now." Usually, by the time you had exited the dressing room and locked your door, the red light above the pit door had turned to green. That was your cue to open the door and take your place on the podium. This time however, the light remained red for what seemed to be a very long time. The door would not open while the light was red. I was about to go back to the dressing room and call upstairs when the light turned green and I heard the click indicating I could go in. I felt the fatigue of Cav in every step I took.

The audience was applauding, I had the orchestra join me in recognizing the applause and we all settled into performance mode. In the back of my mind I kept wondering if I could make it through the opera. I had exaggerated everything in Cav. Now I had to build the tension back up to drive the drama home. Why hadn't I given less in Cav? Pablo Elvira appeared on stage and sang the Prologue beautifully. He exited to thunderous applause.

We were on our way.

The clown troop enters the stage and Canio invites the township to the evening performance. At the end of this short scene the tenor sings his final line an octave higher than written. This was an example of one of many adjustments Maestro Ferrara had mentioned. Oddly enough though, Herman sang it where it was written. This seemed strange, but it was my first Pagliacci and maybe I wasn't hearing the voices on stage that well.

On we went.

Two scenes later Canio appears on stage in time to catch his wife embracing another man. AH ! Says Canio. Fuggi! (Get away!) Nedda says to her lover. All very dramatic although I could have sworn that the "AH!" Canio blared out was coming from somewhere else. But it was my first Pagliacci and I had enough on my plate.

On we went.

Canio re-enters and demands the name of the lover. Now, there was no mistake to be made. Herman was mouthing his part. The voice was coming from the pit. Sure enough, I looked to my right and in the back, behind the trombones, was a man holding a piano vocal score of *I Pagliacci*. Behind him was another man holding a flashlight. We were quickly nearing the most notable aria of the opera. Canio is about to sing "Vesti la giubba".

From somewhere in the first few rows of the audience a lady shrieked, "**Sing Herman, Sing.**" For a few bars two tenors were singing the aria. Well, to be fair, one was singing the other was trying to project his voice and failing miserably. It was apparent that Herman was going to try his luck with it, voice or no voice. I gave the man in the pit an extremely clear and somewhat violent cut off gesture and followed Herman as he set a world's record for the fastest Vesti la Guibba ever. I doubt if many in the theater heard it because his voice was now reduced to a whisper. Pag is in 2 acts but with the intermezzo following Canio's aria it is customary to couple the acts and make it one long act.

On we went.

The second act had Herman acting on stage while the voice was supplied by the mysterious man in the pit. I sensed some tentativeness, some uncertainty in his approach to the part so I looked at him and mimed the words: WATCH ME! From that point on there were no bumps.

As soon as the curtain came down, Julius Rudel, the General Director of the City Opera, took center stage with a microphone in hand. He was greeted by an equal amount of cheering and jeering. He brought out for a special bow, Herman and the man who lent his voice for most of the opera. Herman was around 6 feet tall. Kenneth Collins, the voice in the pit, was about 5 feet 5 inches. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Rudel began, "as you can see, we weren't properly equipped to suit up Mr. Collins. This seemed the only way to give you a performance tonight. If any of you want your money back, please proceed to the box office. Thank you all for coming. Good night."

As I went back to my dressing room it became apparent to me that the stage door remained closed while the audience was informed that Mr. Malamud was indisposed, but would try his best. I was the only one in the theater that didn't know what to expect. As the Maestro had said, "always expect the unexpected. In opera it happens all the time." AMEN.

Afterwards I learned that a fist fight had broken out a few rows from where my parents were sitting. It showed that some people have a sense of humor and others do not. That was the night I earned my wings. One reviewer said I handled a situation that would have taxed even more experienced colleagues. I just wanted to go home and sleep.