



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*. Rachvelishvili, Pretti, Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Muti. CSO Resound.

Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* ("Rustic Chivalry") was something of a one-hit wonder for the composer. He was only 26 years old when it was premiered in Rome in 1890, and although he spent the rest of his long life composing more operas as well as other musical forms, he never came close to equaling the success of the one-act pot boiler. It would have been hard to do so; the opera was an immediate sensation, championed by Mahler among many other musical luminaries, and has never left the basic operatic canon. It ushered in the age of *verismo*, in which every day characters populated the librettos, quickly inspiring the creation of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, another one-acter that it is regularly paired with, in a production known familiarly to opera lovers as *Cav/Pag*.

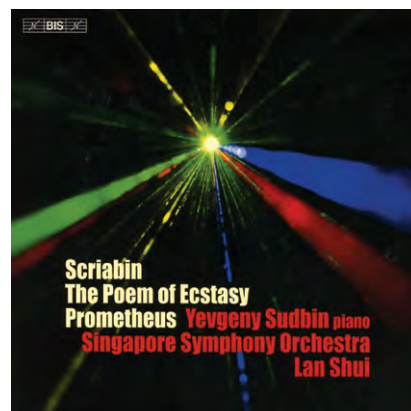
There have been well over one hundred recordings of *Cavalleria rusticana*, and the role of the peasant Turiddu has been a favorite of star tenors from Enrico Caruso to the present day. The Turiddu for this new concert version recording, Piero Pretti, is excellent, using his clear, sonorous voice to wring out every last bit of pathos from the score. His romantic rival, Alfio, is also vividly portrayed by fellow Italian Luca Salsi, a commanding baritone. The main attraction of this performance to opera fans, however, will be the rendition of Turiddu's scorned lover, Santuzza, by mezzo soprano Anita Rach-

velishvili, a native of Tbilisi, widely considered to be one of the most impressive singers of the core Italian repertoire in her generation. Her voice is sumptuous and technically secure, but her great appeal is in the emotional heft she brings to her characterizations. She is not an attention grabbing diva, but, rather, a true singing actress. A comparison to the legendary Leontyne Price, but at a slightly lower register, is not inappropriate. The chorus is essentially a character in this drama, representing the townspeople in faithful *verismo* ethos, and the Chicago singers echo that spirit with thrilling passion. Riccardo Muti has always had a propensity for taming the sentimentality in music that is overtly heart-on-sleeve, securing focused, alert playing from his orchestra and letting the score speak for itself. That is certainly the case here.

The production is not typical for current opera recordings. New recordings of complete operas are much less common than they used to be, far outnumbered by re-issues of classic performances. This *Cavalleria rusticana* is, indeed, a fresh take, featuring contemporary singers of great appeal, but it is a live recording (made in February of 2020) of a concert version of the opera rather than a staged or studio performance. The concert was made in Chicago's acoustically excellent Orchestra Hall by the CSO's in-house label, but the singers do not sound as if they are individually miked, so there is plenty of air around their voices, and the tonality is somewhat static (which is not necessarily a bad thing). Not surprisingly, the mighty Chicago band sounds superb. A nice and unusual bonus of this production is that it includes a complete libretto, as opposed to the more common practice these days of referring listeners to an online version.

PB

Further Listening: Leoncavallo: *Pagliacci* (Björling, De los Angeles/ RCA)



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Scriabin: *Poem of Ecstasy; Prometheus; Piano Sonata No. 5*. Yevgeny Sudbin, piano; Singapore Symphony, Lan Shui. BIS (SACD).

Poem of Ecstasy has fully earned every bit of its fame. The colors coaxed from the orchestra are brilliant yet always used in service of the music. Scriabin's main themes are easy to remember and recognize even as they make their peregrinations through the twists and turns of his chromaticism. And the heights of jubilant grandeur the piece reaches are surrounded by their own rare air. Shui and the Singapore Symphony are simultaneously polished, controlled, and invigorating, turning in a performance that ranks with the best. In the sonata, Sudbin wins every devilish challenge the composer throws his way, keeping the lines and rhythms clean while apparently having the time of his life. The miking makes the piano sound nearly psychedelic, with different parts of the keyboard coming from different places in the soundstage. It's like being inside the piano instead of just in the hall! *Prometheus* is a vivid tone poem depicting the evolution of the world and humankind from gritty chaos to "ultimate transcendence." Though parts of it feel like a less-inspired sequel to *Poem of Ecstasy*, it has more violent undertones and lurid orchestration. Again, a stellar performance in splendid sound. **SE**

Further Listening: Messiaen: *Éclairs sur l'au-delà* (Bastille Opera Orchestra, Myung-Whun Chung/Deutsche Grammophon)