

In early 1953 a roster of Metropolitan Opera stars gathered at the RCA studios in New York's Manhattan Center to record a pair of verismo operas, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. The star of both operas was the Swedish tenor Jussi Björling who sang a wide repertoire of roles in Stockholm before achieving international fame in the late 1930s. Björling's voice spanned the lyrical and spinto tenor roles, equally at home as Rodolfo and as Radames and many of his performances, both live and studio, can be found in the Pristine catalogue. Both *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* were in his stage repertoire, though at the Met he only sang a few performances of *Cavalleria*, and none of *Pagliacci*. Björling recorded *Cavalleria* twice, this 1953 version and a second time for Decca in 1957 with Renata Tebaldi in stereo. The recording of *Pagliacci* is the only one he made, and while both operas were issued on LP and subsequently on CD, the last reissue (by Naxos) was in 2004. Though some consider Björling's voice to be 'cool' he has plenty of Italianate vocal passion for these two fiery roles. His duet with Santuzza in *Cavalleria* is callousness personified, but the final plea to his mother is truly heartfelt. In *Pagliacci* Björling gives us a slightly darker tone, compared with *Cavalleria*, while maintaining his true legato line. His 'Vesti la giubba' is tragic rather than histrionic, no sobbing here, while the finale is much more cold fury than unhinged raving, and all the more powerful for it.

Zinka Milanov is Santuzza, a role she sang many times at the Met though only once with Björling (in 1959). The Croatian soprano made her Met debut in 1937 and gave more than 400 performances in a career that lasted until the old Met closed in 1966. The Met's large radio audience would have been very familiar with Milanov in this role, her expressive voice easily embodying the emotional turmoil the character endures while managing the vocal and dynamic range with ease. Robert Merrill is Alfio in *Cavalleria* and Silvio in *Pagliacci*. A Met stalwart and a frequent collaborator with Björling on record (their 1951 recording of *The Pearl Fishers* duet is still one of the most popular versions), Merrill was principally an excellent Verdi baritone, but appeared in a wide variety of Italian and French roles at the Met. Although he appeared as Tonio in *Pagliacci* many times, his first appearance in the opera was as Silvio, which he only sang that one time. Interestingly, he never sang Alfio at the Met. Leonard Warren sings Tonio in this recording, bringing true Iago-like malevolence to the role.

Victoria de Los Angeles is Nedda. The Spanish soprano enjoyed a long and distinguished international career with her beautiful voice and excellent technique that allowed her to sing roles as diverse as Mimi, Carmen and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*. Her duet with Silvio showcases the true beauty of her voice, and this must be one of the best sung Nedda's on disc. But she is also capable of a lovely lightness of touch as she tries to carry on the play in act two despite Canio's outbursts.

The operas are conducted by Italian-born Renato Cellini. Cellini spent most of his brief career in the US as the General Director of the New Orleans Opera for ten years after a short stint as a staff conductor at the Met. He was the conductor of the 1950 RCA recording of *Rigoletto* with Leonard Warren in the title role, and the 1952 RCA recording of *Il Trovatore* with Milanov, Björling, Warren and Barbieri.



disc one
(71:14)

MASCAGNI Cavalleria Rusticana

1. Prelude (7:40)
2. O Lola (7:20)
3. Gli aranci olezzano (4:41)
4. Dite, Mamma Lucia (2:05)
5. Il cavallo scalpita (7:03)
6. Regina coeli, laetare (5:50)
7. Perché m'hai fatto sogno... Voi lo sapete (3:32)
8. Tu qui, Santuzza? (3:07)
9. Fior di giaggiolo (5:44)
10. Ah! lo vedi... No, no Turiddu (4:59)
11. Oh! Il Signore vi manda (3:48)
12. A casa, a casa, amici (2:15)
13. Intanto, amici, qua... Viva il vino spumeggiante (2:45)
14. A voi tutti salute (4:44)
15. Mamma, quel vino è generoso (5:41)

disc two
(69:30)

LEONCAVALLO Pagliacci

1. Prologue - Si può? Si uò (7:48)
- act one, scene one
2. Son qua! (2:36)
3. Un grande spettacolo (2:34)
4. Un tal gioco, credetimi (4:23)
5. I zampognari! (2:37)
- act one, scene two
6. Qual fiamma avea nel guardo (4:38)
7. Sei là! (0:49)
8. So ben che di forme, contorto son io (3:45)
9. Nedda! Silvio! (1:15)
10. E fra quest'ansie (2:15)
11. Non mi tentar! (1:21)
12. E allor perché, di' (3:25)
13. Cammina adagio e li sorprenderai! (4:53)
14. Recitar! (0:54)
15. Vesti la giubba (3:05)
16. Intermezzo (3:02)
- act two
17. Presto, affrettiamoci (2:56)
- act two - commedia
18. Pagliaccio, mio marito (1:35)
19. Ah! Colombina (1:44)
20. Di fare il segno (3:57)
21. Arlecchin! (2:11)
22. Coraggio! (1:54)
23. No, Pagliaccio non son (3:14)
24. Suvvia così terribile (2:40)



PACO 209

CASTS

Cavalleria Rusticana

Turiddu - Jussi Björling
Santuzza - Zinka Milanov
Alfio - Robert Merrill
Mamma Lucia - Margaret Roggero
Lola - Carol Smith

Pagliacci

Canio - Jussi Björling
Nedda - Victoria de los Angeles
Tonio - Leonard Warren
Silvio - Robert Merrill
Beppe - Paul Franke

The Columbus Boychoir
The Robert Shaw Chorale
directed by Robert Shaw
RCA Victor Orchestra
conducted by Renato Cellini

XR remastered by Andrew Rose
Mascagni: Recorded 2 January
to 27 February 1953
Leoncavallo: Recorded 6 January
to 8 March 1953
Recorded Manhattan Center, New York
Cover artwork based on a photograph
of Jussi Björling

TOTAL DURATION: 2hr 20:44

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