

REVIEW – ‘Cavalleria Rusticana’ by Edinburgh Studio Opera

David Lewis reviews the latest production by Edinburgh Studio Opera (ESO), Edinburgh University’s student opera company.

Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* – ‘rustic chivalry’ – is a tale of lust, jealousy, betrayal and revenge, taking place in rural Sicily.

The opera is, like the short story by Giovanni Verga it is based upon, typically set in the early 19th century but ESO chose to instead adopt a generically timeless setting for their production; coloured (or rather, uncoloured) by the aesthetic of Film Noir. The essential premise is that the young man Turiddu returns home from war to find his beloved Lola has instead married a teamster, Alfio. Turiddu does the logical thing(!) and becomes betrothed to another local woman, Santuzza, only to then commence an affair with Lola.

Sounds like a classic opera plot? Well, in a narrative curveball Mascagni begins the opera *after* all this has happened – perhaps indicating that he cares less about the romance of the story and more about the fallout it causes on this insular community. A cynic might even call this a ‘gossip opera’. Equally radically, the opera begins with what seems to be a classic orchestral overture, building from pastoral

serenity to a dramatic intensity, only to be 'interrupted' by Turiddu, declaring that he shouldn't die happy until his love for Lola is consummated.

Following this the opera begins in earnest. The plot is wonderfully melodramatic: amidst the festivities of Easter Day Santuzza investigates her suspicions of Turiddu's affair. After talking to Lucia (Turiddu's mother) and Alfio she becomes convinced that Turiddu has snuck away to meet Lola. The stage is overwhelmed by the village procession to church and Santuzza, consumed by jealous despair, reveals her suspicions to Alfio, who vows 'vendetta' against Turiddu.

When evening falls the villagers cavort in Lucia's tavern, only for the raging Alfio to challenge Turiddu to a duel by biting his ear – in Sicilian culture signifying he desires a fight to the death (a slight change in that the original plot has Turiddu bite Alfio's ear). Following a solemn goodbye to his mother, including imploring her to take Santuzza as her daughter, Turiddu goes to his apparent death, which again happens off-stage. The opera concludes with mother and forsaken lover embracing; in ESO's production weeping over Turiddu's corpse. All this is accompanied by lush music by Mascagni which skirts the line between sung prose and poetry, without the pomp of Verdi or the craftsmanship of Puccini but instead thoroughly lyrical and honest in its conveyance of emotion.

Perhaps the genius of Mascagni's version of *Cavalleria Rusticana* is how he subverts the basic story. Verga's original written version paints a nostalgic picture of his native Sicily, with Turiddu's

character being almost tragic and Alfio unquestionably villainous. But Mascagni's version makes the title 'rustic chivalry' seem entirely ironic, focussing on the heartbreak, dishonesty and violence of the story and adding religious overtones by using the setting and even music of Easter ritual. He presents a primitive society in which piety and honour are the moral currency, perhaps the precursor of the superstitious rural community trope we find now in horror films and murder mysteries. ESO entirely leant into this ritualism with their production, the cast and chorus in entirely black-and-white costumes apart from occasional red flashes: the Bishop's crimson mitre, the *femme fatale* Lola's scarlet dress, the vermillion of blood from Turiddu's lacerated ear... although the somewhat pallid stage make-up was more 'Goth' than 'Noir'!

At around an hour and a quarter, this one-act opera is ideal for student productions with a sensational plot demanding a fairly small cast, each of which has a relatively small amount of music to sing but still a fair share of dramatic, lyrical and technically challenging moments. Tenor Cameron Mitchell made a convincing Turiddu, singing with youthful brightness and having a clear rapport with the audience, including a knowing glance before sneaking off stage with his mistress that roused a chorus of chuckling from the stalls. Similarly mezzo-soprano Debora Ruiz-Kordova embodied the role of the hysterical

Santuzza and seemed to effortlessly navigate the trickiest passages of music, although rather plummy vowels at times made it difficult to discern the words she was singing. Alto Hannah Legatt made an excellent 'named part' debut for the company, overcoming the constraints of the somewhat one-dimensional role of Mamma Lucia with great attention to dramatic nuance and a surprisingly clear brightness of tone for a contralto part.

However the stand-out performers for me had to be Rebecca Davies and Ed Birchinall as Lola and Alfio, respectively. Davies, a mezzo, made a seductive Lola and during her moments in the limelight entirely dominated the stage with razor-edged vocal clarity and agility, even at the extremes of register, and very confident acting skills. As the vengeful Alfio, bass-baritone Birchinall showed the advantages of his varied experience in both opera and choral music in that, while his was not the largest voice in the show, his crystal clear communication of both text and emotion more than compensated, with flawless diction making the audience hang on his every utterance. As a result his character's progression from jovial socialite to jealous murderer was all the more mesmerising.

A general point would be that, excepting from those I've just mentioned, the cast's diction had room for improvement – the decision to perform the opera in English without surtitles or a printed libretto leaves the

singers totally exposed in this regard and sadly a lot of the text was lost.

The chorus men were held back by similar diction problems and occasional tuning

issues, but the sopranos and altos performed with the strength and panache I

have come to expect from the ESO female chorus. Accompanied by the Edinburgh

University Chamber Orchestra, who were on excellent form, the full vocal

ensemble made a rich and intense sound, albeit occasionally hindered by scrappy

cut-offs. The music was stylishly directed

by the steady hand of conductor Will Conway.

In terms of production, director Jen McGregor's 'less is more' attitude worked well, with the 'natural' scenery of the Assembly Roxy (a

former church) presenting the atmosphere of a devout, rustic community at

Easter far better than any stage backdrop could. The 'Film Noir' aesthetic wasn't

entirely apparent without a note in the programme, but the carefully-considered

use of colour was deeply effective, particularly in the fateful vendetta scene.

While the Roxy's front-of-house seemed a little ill-prepared to deal with the

logistics of an opera performance the warm acoustic favoured both the intimate

solos and declamatory choruses and the company's use of the entire theatre

space, including the audience, made the performance feel far more personal and

involved.

In their latest production ESO have once again proven that

despite being a student ensemble they are quite capable of putting on an opera with plenty of the hallmarks of a professional production. But more importantly their whole method of performance exudes enthusiasm – these are clearly singers who love singing – something that really draws the audience into the narrative. Opera can so easily be viewed as the preserve of an out-of-touch elite, but the surprisingly millennial makeup of the audience for *Cavalleria Rusticana* would truly beg to differ. I am more and more convinced that Mascagni intended *Cavalleria Rusticana* to rebel against the epic opera culture of the day – it certainly must be the only opera I know of where all the major plot events happen off-stage – and on these terms, Mascagni couldn't have hoped for better advocates than Edinburgh Studio Opera.

Edinburgh Studio Opera's next production will be the premiere performance of 'The Orangery' by Filip Holacky, during the Edinburgh Fringe 2020. Visit <http://www.edinburghstudioopera.org/> for further details.



Rebecca Davies as Lola in ESO's Cavalleria Rusticana