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Pietro Mascagni: A Bio-Bibliography (review)

Robert Baxter

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*Pietro Mascagni: A Bio-Bibliography*

Roger Flury

Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001  
414 pages, \$72.50

The definitive biography of Pietro Mascagni remains unwritten, but any scholar who takes up the challenge will owe a large debt to Roger Flury. In *Pietro Mascagni: A Bio-Bibliography*, Flury amasses all the sources and pertinent information, from detailed lists of Mascagni's compositions and performances of his operas to a comprehensive bibliography and a meticulously detailed discography. This impressive book fills in many of the gaps in David Stivender's valiant attempt to compile an autobiography from Mascagni's own writings and also supplements Mario Morini's two-volume collection of Mascagniana.<sup>1</sup> During nearly seven years of research, the senior librarian with the National Library of New Zealand ferreted out a mass of information about Mascagni. Flury used the Internet to contact admirers around the world, who augmented his own research. A music student in Milan located rare articles and monographs that had escaped his grasp. The painstaking research produced a staggering collection of material that Flury has reduced by nearly half in this 414-page book. Despite misprints and spelling errors, Flury's exhaustive compilation remains a beacon that shines light on the life of a controversial composer, most of whose operas continue to be dismissed by many critics and musicologists.

In a brief preface, Flury confronts the Mascagni problem without flinching. Admitting that the composer of *Iris* and *Isabeau* lacked Puccini's "melodic genius, sure theatrical flair and the ability to breathe life into his characters," he argues Mascagni channeled his talent into "more experimental forms that required different skills" (p. xii). At the same time, Flury asserts Mascagni is "far from neglected" (p. xi). The bulging discography, performance annals, and bibliography prove his point. Nonetheless, the bulk of this book focuses on *Cavalleria rusticana*, not *Parisina*, *Il piccolo Marat*, *Guglielmo Ratcliff*, and other works that have been neglected for the better part of a century.

Flury also contends Mascagni is "under-appreciated and misunderstood" (p. xi). The composer's admirers will smile when they read Flury's quote from a critic who refers to them as a "besieged garrison" (p. xii). Flury supplies some of the ammunition fired against Mascagni. He quotes James Anderson's contemptuous dismissal from his *Dictionary of Opera and Operetta*: "Musically coarse, vulgar and bombastic and displaying almost no dramatic insight, Mascagni is perhaps the most overrated of all opera composers" (p. 178). No wonder Mascagni dismissed music criticism as a "venomous reptile" (p. 205). Flury even admits damning evidence supplied by the composer himself, recounting how Mascagni boasted he could write music "by the mile," and acknowledges the composer "had a finger in too many pies" (p. 13).

Flury opens his bio-bibliography with a succinct fifteen-page summary of Mascagni's life and career. He moves swiftly from the young composer's studies in Livorno and Milan (with Amilcare Ponchielli) to his sudden and decisive success with *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1890. He ties together brief but interesting comments about Mascagni's operas and his career as a conductor with a few details of his personal life. Mascagni began his career as an assistant conductor for a touring operetta company. On the road, he fell in love with Argenide Carbognani, the company soubrette. To escape from their contracts, Mascagni and the pregnant Carbognani went into hiding until the troupe moved on to the next engagement. Mascagni married the soprano and then launched his career with *Cavalleria*. By his early thirties, Mascagni was at the peak of his popularity. The British premiere of *I Rantzau* in 1893, featuring Fernando De Lucia and Nellie Melba, earned him a visit to Windsor Castle to perform his music for Queen Victoria. La Scala subsequently produced the premiere of *Guglielmo Ratcliff*. Mascagni suffered a disastrous setback in 1901 after *Le maschere* was simultaneously introduced in seven Italian opera houses but achieved lasting success in none. His career never regained its momentum.

Flury documents the high and low points of Mascagni's life but provides few details. He relates that the ill-fated North American tour of 1902–3 was beset with “union disputes, detention, legal threats, bankruptcy, the disintegration of his touring company and unscrupulous impresarios” (p. 12). Piqued by that provocative summary, the reader has only to jump forward to the bibliographical entry on p. 202 to find a reference to Allan Mallach's detailed account of the tour, published in *The Opera Quarterly*.<sup>2</sup> Flury provides brief but pungent comments about the operas. He judges the neglected *Amica* the Mascagni opera “most worthy of re-evaluation” (p. 12). Flury's wish for a modern recording of *Parisina* has already been realized. No apologist for Mascagni, Flury dismisses *Si* as “a charming if scarcely memorable” operetta. He laments the dearth of performances of *Il piccolo Marat*, the opera that “marks the end of Mascagni's major creative phase” (p. 16). After the premiere of *Marat* in 1921, Mascagni became entangled with the Fascists and Mussolini. Il Duce fulfilled Mascagni's nationalistic dreams, but the association stained his career. By the time he died in 1945, Mascagni was reduced to three luxuries: “a cigar, a Martini and a small electric stove” (p. 19).

The brief biography is followed by a 155-page catalogue of Mascagni's works, a 52-page bibliography, and a 100-page discography, supplemented by a list of works consulted and an appendix devoted to Mascagni's conducting career. This bio-bibliography is rounded out by an index of compositions and a general index. These chapters, neatly organized and clearly laid out, are loaded with factual detail. Flury lists operas in chronological order, followed by other music in the following categories: film, incidental, sacred, secular, choral, songs, orchestral, chamber and instrumental, piano, and miscellaneous. For the operas, Flury provides the title, principal characters, standard orchestrations, and a detailed synopsis. He also supplies information about editions of the scores, a list of films

and related operas, and lengthy chronologies of landmark productions, notable revivals, and performances by artists associated with Mascagni. The synopses, models of their kind, include titles of arias and important numbers.

Within this welter of information, the Mascagni fan will uncover fascinating facts that often lead to further discoveries. Flury cites Gustav Mahler as the conductor of the Budapest premiere of *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1890. A search for Mahler in the index points the reader to an entry for the Hamburg premiere of *L'amico Fritz* in 1893, also conducted by Mahler. The manuscript orchestral and vocal scores of *L'amico Fritz* are held in Stanford University's Memorial Library. Stanford also owns the manuscript score for *Cavalleria*. Flury provides an exhaustive list of fantasias and potpourris from *Cavalleria* written for band, piano, violin, mandolin, and cello along with extensive lists of arrangements made from musical highlights in Mascagni's score; arrangements for the *Intermezzo* fill more than four tightly knit pages.

Revelations appear on almost every page. One discovers Mascagni dedicated the unfortunate *Le maschere* "to myself with my distinguished consideration and unaltered esteem" (p. 109). Flury reveals the ill-fated opera's seventh premiere in Naples was postponed two days due to the illness of the tenor Giuseppe Anselmi. In the chronology for *Isabeau*, Flury tracks down a 1996 performance of the opera staged in Hackensack, N.J., by the New Jersey Association of Verismo Opera. He cites a review in the bibliography, but the performance itself is not found in the index. After meticulously documenting the operas, Flury lists operatic subjects that caught the composer's interest but never reached the stage. Among the more intriguing are Buddha, Charlotte Corday, and Cleopatra as well as Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Dostoyevsky's *From the House of the Dead*, and Giovanni Verga's *La lupa*.

In his bibliography, Flury supplies more than a mere list of books and articles. He gives succinct summaries for each entry. Some of his listings — such as articles by Vittorio Gui and Gianandrea Gavazzeni — whet the appetite for further reading. In the description of Gabriele D'Annunzio's scornful attack on Mascagni as musician and man published in 1892, Flury notes the two artists reconciled sixteen years later when they collaborated on *Parisina*. The entries document the growing interest in Mascagni during the last twenty years. A list of obituary notices rounds out this chapter.

The discography contains more fascinating material. *Cavalleria* looms large, of course. Flury cites 222 recordings of the opera, including pirated issues and private tapes as well as thirty-four commercial releases. If readers dig deeply enough, they discover the *Siciliana* was recorded by H. Leopold Spitalny and a whistler named Lesci. Flury also reveals that Frieda Hempel made the first recording of Lola's aria and that tenor Julius Patzak also recorded the piece. Flury lists twenty-six band arrangements of the *Intermezzo*, six for cornet solo, sixty-four for violin, and thirty-one for keyboard instruments along with additional recordings featuring mandolin, saxophone duet, accordion, panpipes, and marimba band.

Lurking in all the details are a number of misprints, misspelled words, and inconsistencies. One wonders if Flury was given the chance to proofread the final version of his book. The creator of Alfio — Gaudenzio Salassa — becomes Guadenzio in the listing of the world premiere (p. 33) and in the index (p. 402). Both the Brooklyn Academy and the Academy of Music in Philadelphia are listed as Accademy (p. 39). No hall is cited for the Metropolitan Opera's performance of *Cavalleria* in Philadelphia in 1907 (p. 40). Armida Parsi-Pettinella becomes Pettenella (p. 83 and also in the index). Sankt Gallen is referenced by its Italian name, San Gallo (p. 95). Hariclea Darclée has an accent shifted from the first to the second *e* in her last name in numerous references (p. 100 and elsewhere). Gavazzeni becomes Gavazzini (p. 108). A selection from the manuscript orchestral score of *Sì* is listed as *Coro Carnevalesco dele* (instead of *delle*) *serpentine* (p. 141). The Burgtheater in Vienna is cited as the Buergertheater (p. 142). Mario Filippeschi is spelled Filipeschi in the *Cavalleria* discography (p. 235). A television broadcast of *Cavalleria* in Hungary is credited to MTV (p. 244). Does that stand for Magyar TV? In the discography, the Melodiya label is abbreviated to Meldya., but the period is omitted in most references (p. 256 and elsewhere). The Sogno from *Guglielmo Ratcliff* is spelled *Songo* (p. 301). *Opera lirica* in the title of Giorgio Gualerzi's *50 anni di opera lirica alla RAI 1931–1980* is compressed into *operlirica* (p. 334).

Despite the lapses, this work will remain an enduring gold mine of information for all researchers digging into the life and music of Pietro Mascagni.

*Robert Baxter*

#### NOTES

1. David Stivender, *Mascagni: An Autobiography Compiled, Edited, and Translated from the Original Sources* (White Plains, N.Y.: Pro/Am Music Resources, 1988), and Mario Morini, *Pietro Mascagni* (Milan: Casa Musicale Sonzogno di Piero Ostali, 1964).

2. Allan Mallach, "The Mascagni Tour of 1902: An Italian Composer Confronts the American Musical World," *The Opera Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 4 (winter 1990–91), pp. 13–37.

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### *Catherine Hayes 1818–1861: The Hibernian Prima Donna*

Basil Walsh

Dublin: Irish Academic Press; Portland, Ore.: IBS, 2000  
390 pages, \$52.50

Before looking into Basil Walsh's biography of Catherine Hayes, I had come across her name principally in connection with an anecdote (not recounted there) involving William Makepeace Thackeray. In the April 1850 installment of the serially published *Pendennis*, the novelist made a passing reference to "the