

L'ARLESIANA

Opera in three acts by Francesco Cilea

libretto by Leopoldo Marengo

based on a story by Alphonse Daudet

Premiere 27 November 1897, Teatro Lirico di Milano

L'Arlesiana had its origins in a short story from Alphonse Daudet's collection of *Lettres de mon moulin*. The author himself later transformed it into a play, *L'Arlesienne*, for which Bizet wrote the well-known incidental music. From the play Leopoldo Marengo derived the libretto for Cilea's opera.

Act I

The opera opens with the old shepherd Baldassarre in the Castelletto farmyard telling a story to l'Innocente, younger son of the widow Rosa Mamai, owner of the farm. The aria "Come due tizzi accesi" describes how a poor little goat faces the attack of a hungry wolf and puts up a courageous but hopeless fight lasting all night long. With the break of dawn the goat collapses to the ground, as the sun kisses her and closes her eyes in death. This is the story referred to later in the famous *Lamento di Federico* ("E' la solita storia del pastore"), and it too was drawn from another short story in Daudet's same collection, *La chevre de M. Seguin*.

l'Innocente is called so because he is slightly retarded. Local superstition has it that an idiot child brings good luck to the household. Nevertheless, l'Innocente is neglected by everyone except Baldassarre.

Rosa Mamai is worried rather about her older son Federico, who has fallen madly in love with a woman from Arles, "l'Arlesiana" who never appears in the opera and who is never referred to by any other name. Rosa's brother Marco has been alerted to gather information about this unknown woman whom Federico wants to marry.

Rosa's goddaughter Vivetta arrives at the farm. She has always loved Federico and is disillusioned to learn of his obsession for l'Arlesiana. During the conversation between the two women, all of a sudden Rosa gives a start to see l'Innocente up on the edge of the window of the hayloft. Baldassarre reassures her from above as he pulls the child back, and Rosa shudders, "Se mai cadesse alcun da quell'altezza!" -- "If anyone should ever fall from that height!"

Federico enters exultant, followed shortly afterwards by his uncle bringing positive, though not very reliable, news about the woman from Arles. On the basis of Marco's favourable opinion, Rosa has no choice but to consent to the marriage plans. While everyone else is inside drinking a toast, Baldassarre out in the farmyard is approached by Metifio, a stable hand, who asks to speak to Rosa. She is called out and Metifio reveals to her that he has been the lover of l'Arlesiana: the girl's parents were aware of the liaison, but they abruptly kicked him out when the prospect of a more advantageous marriage with Federico arose. To prove his statements, he shows Rosa and

Baldassarre two letters, which he agrees to leave with them until the next day. As soon as he has left, Federico comes out and his mother has him read the letters. The first act ends with Federico in despair over the treachery of the woman he loves.

Act II

The second act, set on the banks of the Vacares pond in the Camargue region, begins with Rosa and Vivetta searching the countryside for Federico, who has disappeared from home since the previous day. Rosa tries to convince the demure Vivetta to behave more seductively with Federico, in the hope of distracting him from thoughts of l'Arlesiana; but the girl is shocked at the idea and runs off. Baldassarre and l'Innocente appear on the scene, and l'Innocente discovers Federico who has been hiding in the sheepfold to escape the attentions of the two women. In the pastoral aria "Vieni con me sui monti", Baldassarre urges Federico to seek forgetfulness by going to work with him in the pastures on the hills. After Baldassarre has gone off to tend the flock, Federico pulls out the letters of l'Arlesiana left by Metifio and contemplates them bitterly. L'Innocente, dozing off to sleep, repeats a line from the old shepherd's story about the goat, and that leads into Federico's lament.

Vivetta comes on the scene and awkwardly attempts to carry out Rosa's advice, candidly admitting that she loves Federico, but Federico rejects her. The girl's sobs draw Rosa to the site. Rather than go on watching her son eat his heart out, Rosa offers her consent to his marriage with l'Arlesiana. Federico is moved by his mother's sacrifice and refuses, swearing that he will only give his name to a woman worthy of it. With that, he calls back Vivetta and asks her to help him recover from his morbid passion.

Act III

Act III opens with the festive preparations for Federico and Vivetta's wedding. There follows a moonlight love duet between the two, in which Federico affirms that he now thinks only of Vivetta. Meanwhile, Metifio enters and runs into Baldassarre. He demands the return of his letters, and Baldassarre replies that he himself had delivered them to Metifio's father that very morning. Metifio hadn't received them yet because he had spent two nights at Arles. Metifio reveals that he plans to abduct l'Arlesiana: that night the furious gallop of a horse will be heard on the plain and l'Arlesiana will be clasped tight to Metifio in the saddle, her cries carried away by the wind. Federico, wandering nearby with Vivetta, hears these last words and is overcome with the old jealousy. Vivetta pleads with him to come away with her. Baldassarre advises Metifio not to ruin his life for an unworthy woman. All of this is combined in a stirring quartet which is one of the most thrilling moments in the opera. Federico attempts to assault Metifio with a sledgehammer, but the two are separated by Baldassarre and Rosa, who rushes in at the commotion.

With things quieted down again, Rosa remains alone and sings her aria "Esser madre è un inferno", a prayer in which she laments the trials of motherhood. L'Innocente awakes and enters to reassure his mother that she can go along to bed and he will keep watch over his brother. He announces that "scemi in casa non ce n'è più" -- there are no more idiots in the house. In fact, all of a sudden the child seems to have awakened

mentally. Rosa kisses him and caresses him as she never did before, but as she sends him back to bed she is filled with apprehension that this prodigious change might bring misfortune. There follows an orchestral lullaby as Rosa herself finally retires with the approach of dawn.

Federico stumbles in, half-delirious, repeating the last lines of the shepherd's story about the goat fighting with the wolf all night and falling dead with the first light of dawn. He is obsessed with visions of l'Arlesiana being carried off on Metifio's horse. Rosa comes running out, as Federico heads for the hayloft. He believes he hears the galloping and the cries of l'Arlesiana. As his mother tries desperately to stop him, he climbs up to the hayloft and, without further hesitation, hurls himself from the window.