A Musical Correlation:  
An Analysis of the Use of the  
Works of Pietro Mascagni in the  
Motion Picture *Raging Bull*  

Sean O’Connor  
MC 321  
Prof. Overbay  
May 6, 2014
Filmmaker Martin Scorsese (1942-present), from his early work in the 1970’s into the 21st century, has always been a director that many in his field look to for inspiration on using music in film. Almost exclusively, Scorsese uses pop songs of the era in which his films occur to add to the establishing of a time period, the intensity of a scene, or even helping to make up a film’s setting. His breakout film, Mean Streets (1973), featured music of the era ranging from the Ronettes to Eric Clapton to the Rolling Stones. In GoodFellas (1990), pop songs chronicle the thirty-year journey of gangster protagonist Henry Hill, starting with songs performed by Tony Bennett and Johnny Mathis and concluding with performances from the Stones, Clapton, and the Who. (This is an indication also that, like many actors in his films, Scorsese tends to use recurring musicians as well.) This trend continues with more recent work like The Departed (2006) and The Wolf of Wall Street (2013), using music by bands like the Dropkick Murphys and 7Horse, respectively, to not only create the appropriate atmosphere but also surround the story with music that fits from the setting and time period.

But in Scorsese’s Raging Bull (1980), which many critics and directors consider to be his masterpiece, he not only subtly incorporates popular songs of the story’s era into the soundtrack, but he also includes other pre-existing music: specifically, three selections from operas by Italian composer Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945). At first, Scorsese said that he was about to use a soundtrack comprised solely of pop songs for the film, but one day, producer Irwin Winkler and editor Thelma Schoonmaker juxtaposed the slow-motion boxing clip at the film’s opening credits sequence with Mascagni’s moving orchestra music. “And it was really very nice,” Scorsese said later on, “and we decided to go with that. …I just had a nice sense about it.” This may seem like a very arbitrary filmmaking choice, but the use of this music is incredibly effective. This may have to do with the music itself being very moving, but it may also have to do with the fact that this music is taken from tragic Italian operas. The narratives of these musical works and the betrayal, envy, and death that play out in them are juxtaposed with the film images of Robert


DeNiro as Jake LaMotta, whose story is also, in a sense, a great tragedy. Because of this combination of tragic narratives, *Raging Bull* not only is outstanding as a great American film, but it also contains one of the most outstanding soundtracks of pre-existing music in film history.

The first of three Mascagni selections used in *Raging Bull* is used at the film’s beginning and ending credits sequences. The accompanying music is the “Intermezzo” from *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), a one-act opera that was Mascagni’s first completed work, which was based on a short story and play by Giovanni Verga. The plot of the opera is as follows: Turiddu, whose former beloved Lola is now the wife of wine carter Alfio, laments of his lost love as his neglected beloved Santuzza looks for him at his mother Lucia’s house. It’s Easter morning, and as a congregation enters into mass, Turiddu goes in following Lola, prompting Santuzza to jealously tell Alfio of Lola’s unfaithfulness. After the mass, Alfio confronts Turiddu and challenges him to a duel with knives. Turiddu tells Lucia to take care of Santuzza if he does not return, and sure enough, the opera concludes with a woman crying out in the street that Turiddu has been killed.

*Cavalleria Rusticana* is a short opera, but tragic nonetheless. It begins very conventionally, with a traditional opening chorus and other musical selections that were common at that time. However, as the opera goes on, the music gets much more emotional, with Santuzza singing a brief but powerful *aria*, then some passionate duets, leading up to the melodramatic cry of Turiddu’s death that precedes the closing of the curtain. In the middle of all this is the “Intermezzo”, which plays as the congregation is in mass and the square is empty. The power of this one-act opera spread around the world very quickly. Critics have taken note of its emotional impact: “The opera begins with a serenade and ends with a scream; between them it presents in highly charged music a story of infidelity and vengeance in a sunbaked [sic] Sicilian town.” (Kupferberg, 110).
Cavalleria Rusticana turned out to be Mascagni’s most successful work, and to this day, it remains somewhat of a “one-hit wonder” for the composer, primarily because of the prominence of the “Intermezzo” at the beginning and ending of Raging Bull. Originally, Scorsese intended for the film’s “theme song” to be “Stone Cold Dead in the Market” performed by Louie Jordan and Ella Fitzgerald. Decades after the film’s release, this seems almost laughable, considering that Mascagni’s music, the “Intermezzo” in particular, adds so much more emotion to the film. However, both these musical choices say equally powerful things when juxtaposed with the man Jake LaMotta, his life as a whole, and the romances in his life that led in many ways to his downfall. As portrayed in Raging Bull by the Academy Award-winning DeNiro, LaMotta is already living with Irma (presumably LaMotta’s first wife, although there are very limited sources to confirm this), but then he meets Vicki (Cathy Moriarty), who he later marries, has children with, and begins to verbally and physically abuse (which is portrayed in the film several times), leading up to her divorce from him, taking their children with her.

These two choices of music, the Jordan/Fitzgerald song and the Mascagni “Intermezzo”, have two polarizing effects on this portrayal of Jake LaMotta. Starting and ending the film with “Stone Cold Dead in the Market” would not only possibly make the mood of the film very confused, with its upbeat tempo and consonant chords, but it would also be a much more explicit commentary on LaMotta’s life. As Ella Fitzgerald sings of killing her abusive husband, those lyrics would have echoed in viewers’ ears as they watched LaMotta beating up Vicki, his brother Joey (Joe Pesci), and even his opponents in the boxing ring. But what effect does the “Intermezzo” have instead? It is not only more ambiguous, with no lyrics so that a viewer unfamiliar with Mascagni can form their own views on the music, but it is also very haunting considering the story of Cavalleria Rusticana. This opera of infidelity, jealousy, violence, and tragedy completely relates to the story of Raging Bull: LaMotta’s infidelity with Vicki towards his first wife, his jealousy toward Vicki being around other men (including Joey), the violence
that he expresses in the ring and in his home because of this jealousy, and how he is ultimately left alone, overweight, and regretful. Both those musical choices would have had a strong effect, but Mascagni’s work prevailed. Scorsese, years after making the film, reflected on this choice: “Some critics have called it ‘lachrymose’… it made me feel a kind of sadness—not necessarily phony, it was just a sadness of people struggling to live, that’s all.”

The second Mascagni work used in Raging Bull is the “Barcarolle” (an Italian folk song) from his two-act opera Silvano (1895), based on a libretto by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti. Any synopsis or related information on Silvano is much harder to find than that of Cavalleria Rusticana, which has indeed proved to be Mascagni’s most recognizable work today. Nevertheless, historians have still taken note of it, and the plot is as follows: in the first act, a woman named Matilde confesses in prayer that, though she loves Silvano, a banished smuggler, she has had an affair with another man, Renzo. Suddenly, Silvano appears, pardoned for his crimes, and Matilde, still guilt-ridden, embraces him. Just then, Renzo appears, being lauded by villagers for his new fishing boat. Tension begins between Renzo and Silvano, and Matilde begs for Renzo to keep their affair a secret, confessing that she never really loved him but has always loved Silvano. Renzo threatens Matilde that he will kill Silvano if she does not meet him that night by the shore. She agrees, ending act one.

Act two begins on the shore, where Silvano arrives and hears that Renzo and Matilde are still there. When she meets Renzo, Matilde reinforces her love for Silvano and threatens to kill herself if Renzo tries to take her away. When Silvano finds them, Renzo hides, and Silvano suspiciously and violently asks Matilde if she is seeing another man. When Renzo reveals himself, Silvano shoots him with his pistol, and that concludes the opera. The “Barcarolle” used in Raging Bull, sung by the Silvano character, occurs around the opera’s midpoint, as a soft contrast to two much louder and more chaotic musical selections preceding and following it.
In *Raging Bull*, the selection from *Silvano* is used only once: during the film’s only montage, a series of re-enacted home movies of Jake LaMotta and his family, particularly of his and Joey’s weddings, and later their children interacting at home. This is a remarkable sequence in the film not only because it is the only sequence fully in color, but also because it is a rare feat for a “boxing film” to have only one montage of any kind, and that of *Raging Bull* is not even a boxing montage. But instead of having another pop song of the 1940’s and 1950’s to play underneath these images, Scorsese chooses the “Barcarolle”. And like the “Intermezzo” used at the beginning of the film, it sets a much more emotional tone for the film than any pop song could. The montage of home movies follows a scene where LaMotta loses a fight to Sugar Ray Robinson in 1943, and Jake tells Joey: “I’ve done a lot of bad things… maybe it’s coming back to me.” To follow this scene with a montage containing an upbeat song underneath it would possibly confuse the mood. In many Scorsese pictures, this kind of technique is used very effectively – a prominent example in his early work is the opening of *Mean Streets*, which follows a brief scene of the protagonist reflecting in his bedroom with a much louder sequence of characters’ home movies accompanied by The Ronettes’ “Be My Baby”.

But in *Raging Bull*, this transition from a character’s defeat to a montage of family events accompanied by this swelling orchestral music makes the moment much more reflective. Viewers who know *Silvano* and the “Barcarolle” can make a connection between the love triangle of Silvano, Matilde, and Renzo and the love affairs of the characters onscreen, especially when they lead up to Jake’s paranoia of an affair between Vicki and Joey. But even viewers unfamiliar with the music can still take in the moment, watch these images of love and marriage accompanied by this soft, consonant music, and not be distracted. Usually, in the opera, Silvano has a singing part during this piece, but the fact that it is instrumental here lets those unfamiliar viewers interpret the ambiguity. Schoonmaker herself has reflected on this, particularly that Scorsese chose to use a specific recording of the music, performed by the Orchestra of Bologna
Municop Thetra conducted by Arturo Basile: “[Scorsese] wanted a version that he had had all his life. The studio tried to talk him into using another recording of the same piece, but we listened to every possible version of it, and none of them had the emotional power that this particular recording did.”

The third and final selection of Mascagni used in Raging Bull comes from the composer’s tragic four-act opera Guglielmo Ratcliff (1895), which premiered a month earlier than Silvano and which Mascagni himself called his best opera (although it has recently become less of a staple in opera repertoire because of its demanding lead tenor part). The opera’s first act introduces us to the title character, along with Maria, the woman who rejected Ratcliff as a suitor; Count Douglas, Maria’s fiancé; and MacGregor, Maria’s father. After Douglas recounts being attacked by bandits and then saved by a mysterious knight, Maria faints, and MacGregor tells Douglas of Ratcliff, who challenged Maria’s previous suitors to a duel and killed them. Douglas is sent a letter to similarly duel with Ratcliff, who we see in the second act haunted by the ghosts of Maria’s past suitors, and who we also find out has a compulsion to kill Maria’s suitors since she has rejected him.

In the third act, Ratcliff and Douglas duel, and Douglas, though not killing him, is victorious over Ratcliff. This is where Raging Bull lifts some of the music of the opera, the “Intermezzo” from this third act. After Ratcliff lies wounded after his unsuccessful duel, he again sees the ghosts of Maria’s suitors coming back to haunt him. At the end of this “Intermezzo”, the Ratcliff character cries out asking for the (silent) voices he hears to identify themselves, but he receives no response. The final act shows Maria getting ready for her wedding with Ratcliff, when suddenly blood-covered Ratcliff stumbles in, kills Maria and MacGregor, and then commits suicide, crying out to Maria that he is coming for her.

The Act Three “Intermezzo” from Guglielmo Ratcliff is used more than once in Raging Bull. The first time it is heard is after LaMotta successfully fights Tony Janiro (a boxer who
Vicki believed was “good-looking”, according to a brief comment she made one day in the kitchen). LaMotta, as Joey puts it, knocks Janiro’s nose “from one side of his face to the other”, and shortly after the fight, we see Jake exercising in a smoky room, where he is sweating and yearning for water. But when he asks his trainer, he is refused, still needing to lose weight. The use of the “Intermezzo” here creates an effective transition from the brutal fight to the calmer training, but it also creates a strong subtext of Jake’s internal feelings. Since this music occurs when Ratcliff is being haunted by the men he killed out of jealousy for a woman, viewers familiar with the music can make a connection between his jealousy and Jake’s, a jealousy so strong that he beats Tony Janiro so fiercely that it is hard to watch.

The piece is heard again underneath a much different, much more active and violent scene, when Joey is beating up Salvy Batts (Frank Vincent) outside a restaurant because he suspects that he is having an affair with Vicki. This is a much more intense moment that, in many other Scorsese films, could have easily had an upbeat pop song to create a more ambiguous or even more intense mood. But the Mascagni underneath creates a huge contrast, with its soft string motifs accompanying the ferocity onscreen. Furthermore, taking the music’s context into consideration, the moment becomes even stronger: just as Jake LaMotta was jealous for Vicki to love him, that jealousy and anger has spread to his brother Joey, who knows that Jake (and probably the people around him) will not last long if Vicki is found with another man.

But the third time that the “Intermezzo” from Guglielmo Ratcliff is used is in an extended boxing sequence as Jake goes up against Marcel Cerdan for a shot at the middleweight title. The sequence begins with an extended Steadicam shot (which famously was Scorsese’s second choice for a take because the first was ruined in the film lab) starting in LaMotta’s dressing room, as he practices some punches with Joey. They start walking into the arena and to the ring, and as they do, the crowd (and the music) begin swelling. This is LaMotta’s moment of glory, and he is finally going to prove himself and win the title. The music continues for several
minutes, but it becomes unnoticeable as LaMotta starts punching, with the phenomenal sound design covering up some of the strings’ softer sections. However, when LaMotta beats Cerdan so hard that the fight has to be stopped, the film cuts to a quieter moment, even shot in slow motion, when the referee walks from Cerdan to LaMotta, raises Jake’s hand, and declares him the winner. For a short time, the swelling string music creates the foundation for the action onscreen, and as it builds to a strong E-flat major chord, which concludes the sequence that shows LaMotta with his belt getting photographed by seemingly dozens of reporters, the music helps make the moment triumphant for Jake LaMotta. Upon reflection, however, it may serve as a dark form of foreshadowing, as the scene following this victory finds Jake and Joey three years later, arguing about Vicki’s faithfulness, prompting Jake to brutally attack Vicki and Joey and create a separation between himself and his brother that will not be repaired for a long time.

Film critics and directors have noted *Raging Bull* for decades for its strong performances, powerful visual storytelling, and even its effective and extremely unique sound design. Very few, however, have made detailed commentary on its use of pre-existing music, but those who have acknowledge its power. As Douglas Brode writes reflecting on *Raging Bull* as one of the best, if not the best, film of its decade: “Scorsese took wild gambles, playing the gutwrenching [sic] fight sequences against symphonic music… resulting in an aesthetic tour de force masquerading as kitchen-sink melodrama.” (37) But perhaps the reason that many viewers do not consider the effect of the music, particularly the use of the works of Pietro Mascagni, is because that many are unfamiliar with it, especially Silvano or Guglielmo Ratcliff, whose popularity pales in comparison to that of *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

However, some critics have even taken note of this fact. “Precisely how audiences react to [the music] will depend on several factors: whether or not they realize that it pre-exists the film; knowing that, whether or not they know the source; and whether or not they know enough of the source to know the exact original context. Add to this the range of meanings which the
music might have ‘purely’ as a piece of music, and the ambiguity of the film’s use of Mascagni’s Intermezzo will be clear.” (Powrie & Stilwell, 23) Raging Bull is certainly not the first motion picture to use pre-existing classical music instead of an original score: films such as Brief Encounter, Letter From an Unknown Woman, and 2001: A Space Odyssey that came before it use music from Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and Strauss, respectively, to create a deeper subtext to their stories, even if they use only snippets of that music. Even today, the trend of using pre-existing music in film carries on, with modern critically acclaimed films like The Shawshank Redemption, There Will Be Blood, and The Tree of Life using music from Mozart, Brahms, and Couperin, respectively, to create that kind of subtext, as well as possibly introduce their audiences unfamiliar to that music to those scores. But these films use that music to their advantage by correlating the internal and external events onscreen with those in the musical expression.

Raging Bull certainly does this, comparing the love, jealousy, anger, and ultimate downfall of Jake LaMotta to the characters in the works of Pietro Mascagni. In those operas, we see men like Turiddu in Cavalleria Rusticana and the title characters of Silvano and Guglielmo Ratcliff get so envious of their beloved that they reach the point where they could kill for them, just as Jake LaMotta tells Joey: “If I hear anything [about Vicki], I swear on our mother, I’m gonna kill somebody.” And in a sense, he does: he kills the relationship between himself and Vicki, himself and Joey, and any sense of life within himself – not to mention all the men who take a beating from him in the boxing ring. And because of this beautiful juxtaposition of film and music, Raging Bull has risen through the decades to not only become a classic American motion picture, but it has also become a prominent example of how to effectively use classical music in a film.
Bibliography


Fear, David. “Martin Scorsese’s Music: An A to Z Guide to the Director’s Soundtracks.”


