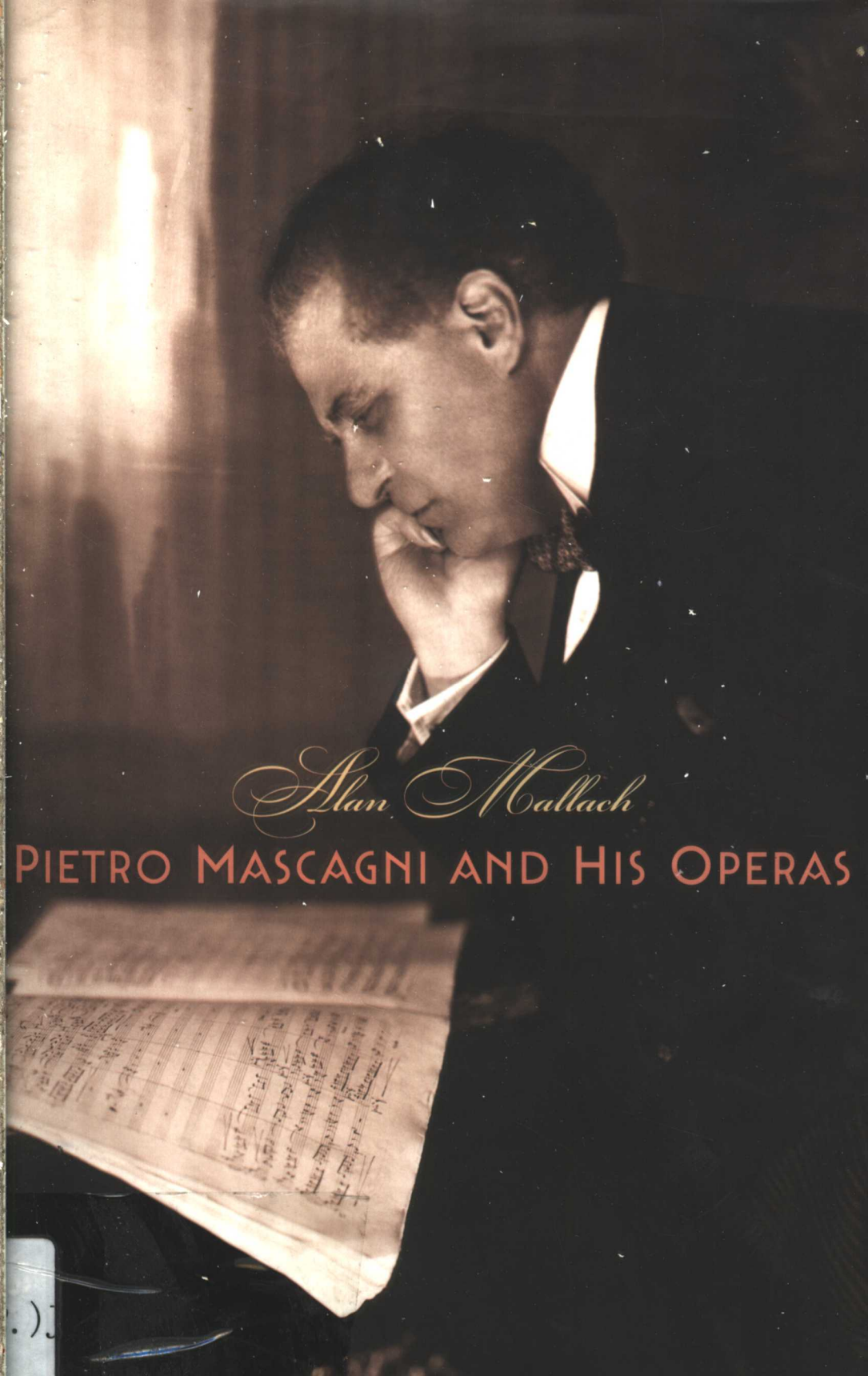

Alan Mallach

Pietro Mascagni and His Operas

PIETRO MASCAGNI AND HIS OPERAS

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Preface:
In Search of Pietro Mascagni

Browsing in a record store in Italy in 1984, my eye fell on a recording of an opera bearing the incongruous title of *Guglielmo Ratcliff*, by Pietro Mascagni, a composer I knew for his *Cavalleria rusticana* and little else. I had never heard of it. More out of curiosity than anything else, I brought it back with me to the United States and, once home, listened to it. What began with curiosity ended with awe. I was overwhelmed by *Ratcliff*, a grand romantic opera, thoroughly in the mainstream of late nineteenth-century romanticism yet imbued with a passionate voice all its own. Having listened to it, my curiosity now extended to his other operas and to Mascagni himself, the man who had written this magnificent work, clearly by the same composer as *Cavalleria* yet utterly different in spirit and character. Over the next few years I was able to familiarize myself with many of his other operas largely through private recordings, discovering a wealth of musical riches of which I had hardly been aware. The man behind the operas, however, remained a mystery.

Other than brief entries in opera guides and dictionaries and passing references in books devoted to Puccini or other aspects of Italian opera, Mascagni barely existed in the English opera literature. He is generally dismissed as having written a single effective but tawdry opera, and few writers have seen any need even to investigate his life or works beyond *Cavalleria*. More-

over, the accounts of his first twenty-six years leading up to the premiere of *Cavalleria*, which even the most disdainful writers acknowledged to be worth retelling, were wildly inconsistent. While most agreed on the broad outlines of the story, there were few details about which the sources could agree. As I learned more about Mascagni, I realized that most of the accounts of his life, even in the most authoritative publications, were riddled with simple factual errors, not to mention questionable and tendentious interpretations.

I then set about learning Italian, on the not unreasonable assumption that the literature on Mascagni in Italian would be more extensive, and that definitive information on his life and works would certainly be available in his native language. Those assumptions turned out to be only partially correct. It was true that there is a vast literature on Mascagni in Italian. There was, however, little that was definitive about it. Much of what was published during his lifetime in Italy fell into the category of hagiography, rather than either biography or criticism, while four decades after his death both Mascagni's life and his operas still had the ability to stir controversy in Italy. Perhaps the only significant exception, from the vantage point of 1985, was the work of Mario Morini, particularly his superb 1964 two-volume collection of essays and documents on the composer. To my surprise, however, in the forty years since his death, no Italian writer or scholar had ventured to write a biography of Mascagni. At some point during the mid-1980s, then, my interest in reading a biography of Mascagni gradually changed to a strangely persistent desire to write such a biography, and in the process come to understand, as best I could, a man who had come to intrigue me deeply.

Mascagni, I discovered, bred controversy and contention. During his lifetime, his fans were so many and so passionate in their devotion that the term *mascagnano* was recognized as a common noun by major Italian dictionaries. For fifty years after being propelled to worldwide fame by *Cavalleria*'s electrifying debut in 1890, he was an overpowering presence on the Italian musical scene. He was everywhere, composing operas, conducting, teaching, lecturing, fighting, and litigating. He rarely avoided a confrontation. With a strange and quixotic combination of integrity, innocence, and arrogance, he marched off time and again to do battle on behalf of his vision of Italian music and Italian art, and above all, what he saw as *italianità*, the elusive notion of what it meant to be Italian. Passionately patriotic, he was bitterly opposed to his country's involvement in both world wars; a political naïf, he was denounced as a Bolshevik in 1920 and as a Fascist in the aftermath of World War II.

He was quick to mount crusades against abuses and inequities—real or imaginary—in the musical world of his time, and with his sharp tongue and

caustic wit made as many enemies as he had admirers. Driven by the need to maintain his extravagant lifestyle and to support the many families dependent on him, he maintained a killing schedule of concert and operatic appearances into his late seventies, long after his contemporaries had died or gone into comfortable retirement. Drawn to opulence and display, to the end there remained a part of him that wanted nothing more than a simple plate of spaghetti, a glass of vermouth, and a card game with old friends in a haze of cigar smoke.

For all his frenetic activity in other spheres, though, being a composer was Mascagni's life work. More specifically, he was a composer of *operas*, who, once his student days were over, devoted little time or energy to music in any other form. To Mascagni, opera was an art form that made up, in some not entirely clear metaphysical sense, part of the spiritual essence of the Italian soul. Writing operas, therefore, was far more than a craft, more even than the expression of his creative spirit. It was a calling. That calling demanded that every opera he wrote was not only a personal challenge but also a battle on behalf of the Italian opera tradition. That battle became more pronounced from the 1910s onward, as his every new opera became part of a struggle on behalf of *italianità*, against the winds of modernism sweeping in from France and Germany, a never-ending attempt to prove that the tradition of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi was still a dynamic force in the world of music.

His combative, restless temperament meant that every new opera became a search to reinvent himself and his muse, a challenge to extend further the boundaries of his talent. For him, to repeat himself was a form of artistic death. His greatest years were between 1898 and 1913, when his creative spirit was at its most adventuresome. During those fifteen years, beginning with *Iris* and culminating with *Parisina*, through such varied works as the opera buffa *Le Maschere* and the mystical, expressionistic *Isabeau*, he exploited his gift to its fullest, taking Italian opera into new, barely explored territory. *Parisina*, the climax of his creative trajectory, although ultimately undone by its inordinate length and its paucity of dramatic action, is a work of rare power and poignancy. One of the most important Italian operas of the last hundred and more years, it inhabits a realm far removed from that of the operatic melodramas being written by his Italian contemporaries.

Drama in the conventional sense was of little interest to him. In contrast to Puccini, who commented after hearing *Parisina*, "In the theater one doesn't want words, one wants action," Mascagni needed words, not just any words, but the words through which he could find the music that would illuminate his characters and their innermost drives and motivations. It was the interplay between the characters that drove him, the desire to find the

moment in each work when drama, psychology, words, and music fused into a transcendent whole. For all his fundamentally Italian spirit, and the intensely Italian character of his musical language, his vision of opera placed him in many respects closer to composers from across the Alps—Wagner, whom Mascagni all but worshiped from his student days, Richard Strauss, and even the Debussy of *Pelléas et Mélisande*—than to his peers in the Italian opera world.

His works often fail to live up to his visionary aspirations. Mascagni's music is uneven. Even in his finest works, sandwiched between passages of great beauty and emotional power, one finds incongruous moments, awkward transitions, and effects that do not quite come off. He wrote in haste, like a man possessed, working all night, sleeping little if at all. His first drafts differ in only the most trivial details from his final, exquisitely calligraphic manuscripts. There is little doubt that Mascagni suffered all his life from a manic-depressive condition, and his operas are almost archetypal products of the manic state, their characteristics aptly, if cruelly, captured in one description from the psychological literature:

> *The driving energy of mania produces large-scale, intense, powerful, and sometimes crude work. Because mania is the enemy of restraint, the work often contains an excess of ideas and material, unnecessary elaboration, and elements that do not belong. The manic has a preference for exaggeration, overemphasis, and dramatic effects.*

Yet for all the exaggeration and overemphasis, Mascagni's music has a power and intensity that, along with the composer's extraordinary melodic gift, give it a unique place in Italian opera of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No Mascagni opera after *Cavalleria*, taken as a whole, can be said to work as well as do most of Puccini's, yet well into the 1930s, respectable voices in Italian musical criticism continued to maintain that, for all his defects, Mascagni was the greater composer. It is unlikely that anyone would still take that position today, but the fact that it was credibly argued should give today's critics pause.

In the late 1980s, as I was beginning the research that led to this book, a modest Mascagni revival can be said to have begun in Italy. Works such as *Guglielmo Ratcliff* and *Le Maschere*, hardly heard since the 1950s, were revived and began to gain a following, if not a place in the repertoire. The year 1985 saw the first of a continuing series of symposia on Mascagni held in Livorno under the sponsorship of the Casa Musicale Sonzogno, shedding fresh light not only on the familiar *Cavalleria* but also on neglected but important works such as *Iris* and *Il Piccolo Marat*. In 1987 a modest biography of the composer by Roberto Iovino appeared. While far from definitive, Iovino's was the first

book to bring to wider attention the story of the composer's thirty-five-year love affair with Anna Lolli, adding a remarkable and hitherto unknown romantic dimension to his life.

By 1989 I had come far in my search for Mascagni. I had traced his steps to Cerignola, the provincial town in southern Italy where he had written *Cavalleria*, and read his letters to his childhood friend Gianfranceschi in the hush of the secluded library attached to the La Scala museum in Milan. I had paged through the original manuscripts of his operas at the small but beautifully laid out Mascagni museum in his hometown of Livorno, and spent weeks reading about him in old newspapers and magazines, feeding spool after spool into the microfilm reader in Milan's cavernous public library. As I followed the newspaper accounts of his doings in the public eye, I realized that his life was almost too well documented. As one of the premier celebrities of the early days of mass media, rotogravure, and Sunday supplements, his every word was news, his steps routinely followed by the cameraman and the inquiring reporter.

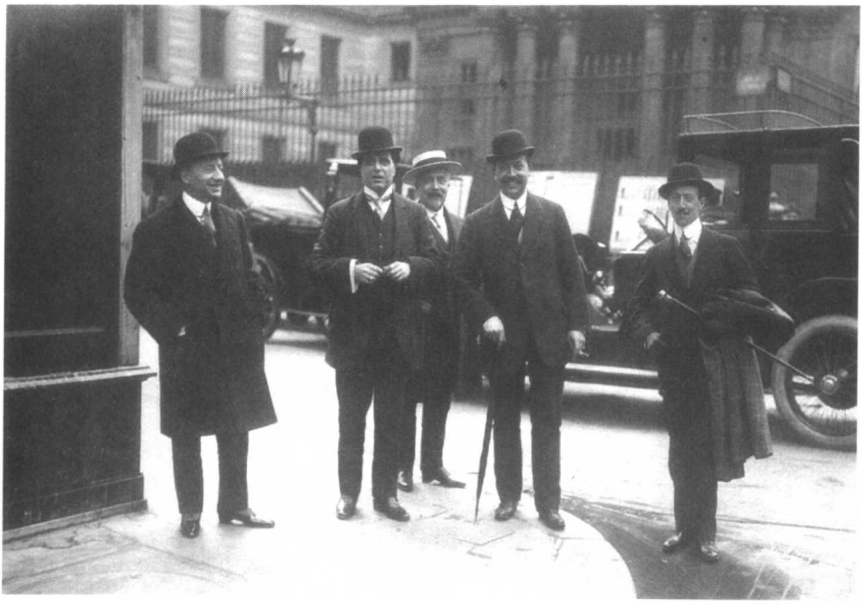
Finally, pursuing the hints in Iovino's book, I traveled to Bagnara di Romagna. Bagnara di Romagna is a modest cluster of houses, stores, and workshops huddled around a church and a fourteenth-century castle, nestled among the flat, green fields of the Po Valley, twenty-five miles east of Bologna. A prosperous but tiny village of no more than a thousand souls, it is a peaceful, almost enchanted place, far from the bustle of Rome or Milan. Anna Lolli had been born in Bagnara di Romagna in 1888; before her death in 1973, she offered everything she had saved from her years with Pietro Mascagni to create a museum in the parish church of the tiny village that had been her first home. After some soul searching, the church had accepted her gift, hired a local librarian to put the material in a rudimentary sort of order, and installed it in two rooms on the top floor of the rectory.

If there is a place in the world where Pietro Mascagni's spirit still resides, it is in those two rooms filled with photographs, books, letters, sketches and drafts, newspaper clippings, everything that could be accumulated over more than thirty-five years of unbroken extramarital devotion. In more than 4,200 letters that he wrote Anna between 1910 and 1943, Mascagni poured out not only his love but also every detail of his personal and professional life, from his love for his children and his frustration with their wayward behavior, his despair over the vagaries of politicians, bureaucrats, and singers, to his delight in a successful performance of one of his operas or a good evening's card game with his friends.

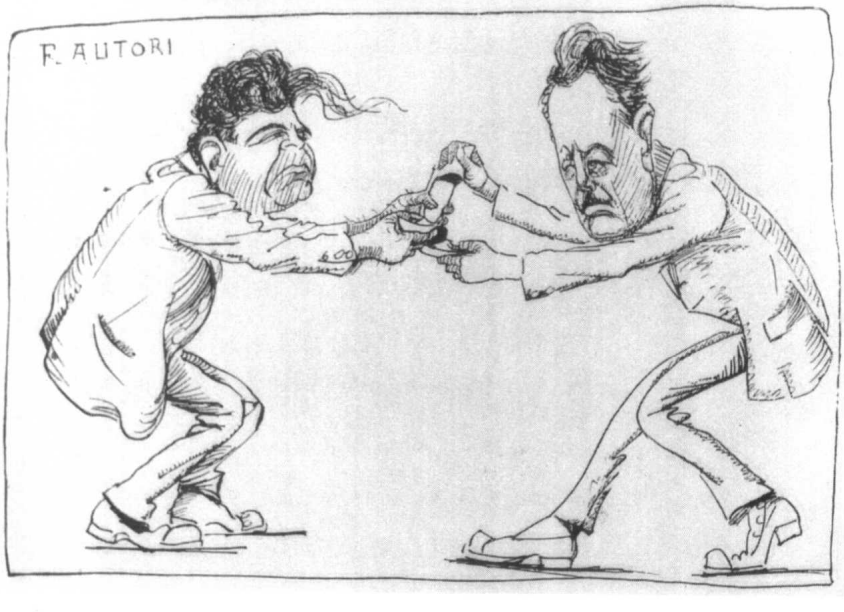
The hospitable parish priest had a work table and chair set up for me in the middle of one room, and I spent the summer of 1989 at that table, read-

ing every single letter, reading every one of the hundreds of newspaper articles that Lolli had cut out and laboriously pasted onto huge sheets of heavy black paper, even playing Mascagni's music on the upright piano he had bought for Lolli's apartment, now sitting in a corner of the room. As I sat there reading, I was never unaware of the presence of the two guardian spirits of the room, in the form of two enormous oil portraits of Mascagni and Lolli, painted by Bruno Croatto in the 1930s, hanging behind me on the wall. By the end of the summer, when I returned to the United States and began to write, I had far more material than I would ever be able to use. It was time to sum up and start writing.

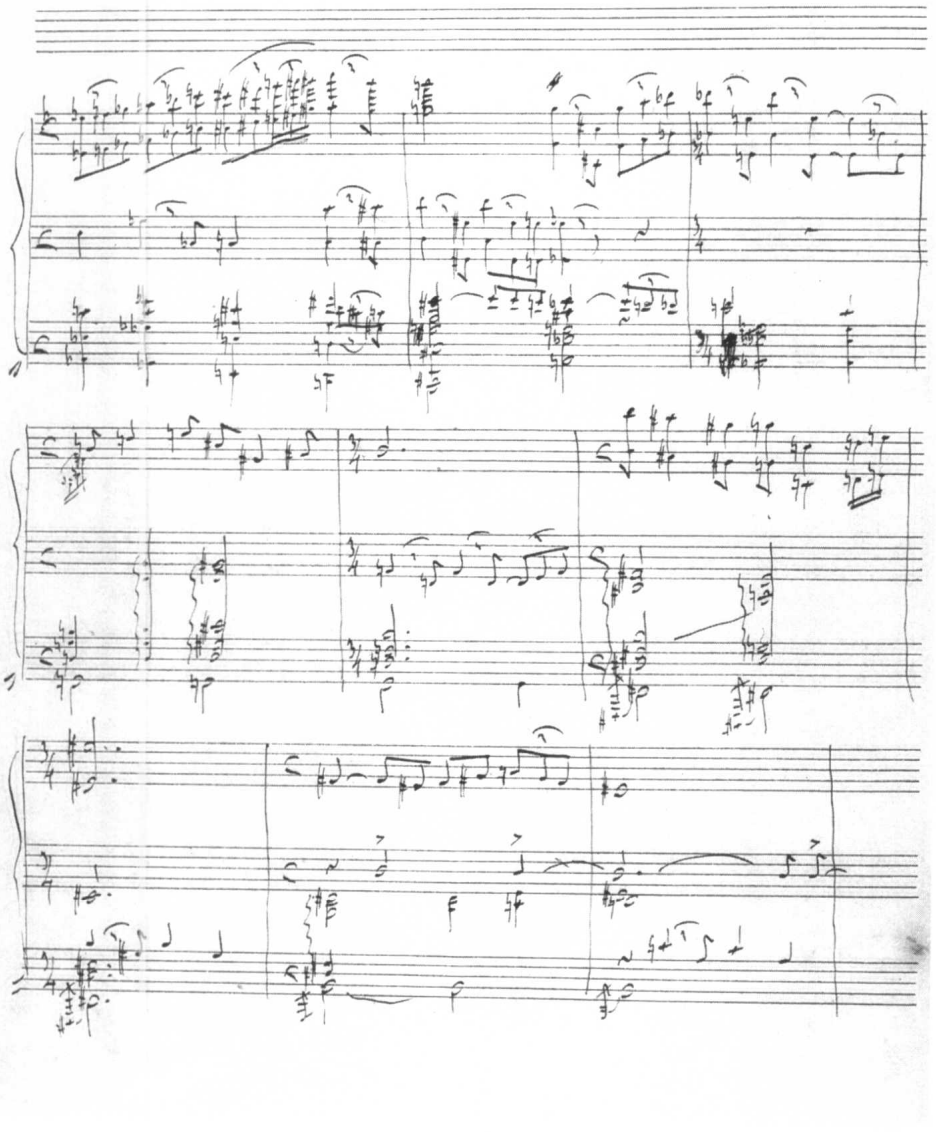
Thrust by *Cavalleria* into sudden fame at twenty-six, Pietro Mascagni spent the rest of his life pursued by the relentless shadow of that opera. Driven by his vision of a transcendent fusion of words and music, he devoted his life to creating a body of operas that, for all their power and beauty, could not but fall short of the exalted goals he set himself. It was his fate, though, to be remembered not for the operas, such as *Iris* or *Isabeau*, in which he pursued those exalted goals, but for a single work, dashed off as a desperate bid to escape poverty, that, however remarkable, reflected neither his aspirations nor his deepest creative drives. Despite the vagaries of posterity, though, Mascagni's remarkable oeuvre remains, ready to be discovered anew by future generations of lovers of Italian opera.



Mascagni in Paris with (from left to right) Gabriele D'Annunzio, the publisher Lorenzo (Renzo) Sonzogno, Sonzogno's attorney Barducci, and D'Annunzio's secretary and biographer Tom Antongini, in 1912. (Museo mascagnano, Bagnara di Romagna)



Caricature by Autori of Mascagni and Puccini fighting over the rights to Ouida's *Two Little Wooden Shoes*, 1914. (Museo mascagnano, Livorno)



Sketch from the Postlude to act 2 of *Parisina,* composed at Bellevue, France, in 1912. (Museo mascagnano, Bagnara di Romagna)

Luigi Illica, the librettist of *Iris*, *Le Maschere*, and *Isabeau*. (Museo mascagnano, Livorno).

The Mascagni family in 1907. From left to right, Edoardo, Pietro, Emy, Domenico, and Lina. (Museo mascagnano, Livorno)

A caricature of Mascagni conducting, 1893. (Museo mascagnano, Livorno)

Mascagni with his fellow composers Franchetti (center) and Puccini (right) in 1896. (Museo mascagnano, Livorno)