Subject: Today's Recommendation: Opera
Posted by elektratig on Fri, 11 Mar 2005 16:08:30 GMT
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Consistent with MB's suggestion below that we move away from the "usual suspects", I'm going to try to start posting on a regular basis about favorite musical pieces in various different genres. Rather than overwhelm people with long lists of suggestions, I will focus each post on my experience with a single album or cd and, where there are multiple performance choices (particularly with classical and opera), a particular performance. Genres will vary from medieval to classical and opera to "international" to country and "old time" to electronic. I will probably try to focus on works or genres that are, hopefully, somewhat unfamiliar to some of you (i.e., no Led Zepplin), but not so obscure as to scare everyone off. I'm going to try to encourage you to try a genre or work that you might not otherwise try.The recommended cd for today is – yikes! – opera: a two-cd set containing two operas, Cavelleria Rusticana ("Rustic Chivalry") by Pietro Mascagni and I Pagliacci ("The Clowns") by Ruggiero Leoncavallo, both featuring Luciano Pavarotti.These two operas share many similarities. Both were composed in the 1890's by Italians who were, more or less, one-hit wonders. Both are relatively short, a little over an hour each. Both inhabit a similar late-romantic musical world. Both are set in Sicilian villages and, dramatically, are considered "verismo", that is they deal with "ordinary" villagers in comparatively realistic (although highly overwrought) settings, rather than with kings and queens. Both have extremely dramatic plots focusing on love, betrayal and murder. Both take place on a single day. "Cav/Pag" quickly became linked in the repertoire and are often presented together, both live in the opera house and on cd.Although there are plenty of other ways to get your toes wet, these operas – and this version of these operas – are an excellent place to start if you have never tried opera before. I can attest to this because these discs were the first opera I purchased and seriously listened to.I purchased them quite by chance. About fifteen years ago, I was disenchanted with rock. I wandered into a music store looking for something different and somehow found myself in the opera section. I knew nothing about opera except that the only people who listened to it were old dames with blue hair, who dragged their bored husbands to performances, at which they promptly fell asleep. Nonetheless, I was desperate, so I looked more closely.Then panic set in: I was confronted by rack upon rack of unknown titles and names, and there seemed to be hundreds of versions of each work. Ashamed to expose my ignorance to the clerks, I searched with increasing desperation for something, anything familiar. And then I found it. The "big aria" in Pagliacci was one of the few I had ever heard and sort of liked, Pavarotti was a name even I recognized, and I was somehow comforted by the picture of him in clown makeup on the cover. I took it home, balanced between fear that I had wasted my money and hope that I might be on to something – and was promptly hooked. I listened to the discs obsessively for weeks, usually following the librettos found in the booklet included with the cd, finding them more and more beautiful on each hearing. At first, I enjoyed mostly the "big" arias, but over weeks and months I came to love the flow and sweep of the operas – Cavelleria Rusticana in particular, set on a single day, Easter Sunday, may lack the highlights that Pagliacci has, but it is, if anything, more consistently beautiful.I won't to try to provide a detailed musicological description, nor will I try to argue the merits of this version over others. Suffice it to say that both feature Pavarotti and his distinctive voice in their prime, and the conducting and other performances are uniformly fine. I listen to these discs all the time and continue to love them fifteen years later.In short, if you want to take a stab at an opera, you can do it in many different ways, but you can't go wrong starting with these discs.

In my case, they ultimately opened up entirely new musical worlds, stretching over hundreds of years. You can't ask for more.
Cav/Pag