

SYNOPSES for the Student Great Works Matinee  
November 9, 2010

**Francis Poulenc: *La voix humaine* (1959)**

Music by Francis Poulenc; Text by Jean Cocteau

Setting: An Apartment in Paris, c. 1955

**Character:** A young woman

A young woman has been interrupted during a telephone call from her boyfriend of five years. He has abandoned her and is to marry another woman the following day. This is the last time they will speak to each other. During the conversation, we learn that the woman is so distraught she has thought of killing herself. Since the phone service in Paris was notoriously poor during that era, they are interrupted several times during the agonizing conversation.



**Ruggero Leoncavallo: *Pagliacci* (1892)**

Music and Text by Ruggero Leoncavallo

Setting: Southern Italy, c. 1950

**The Characters:**

Roles they play in the *Commedia*:

Canio, head of a troupe of actors	Pagliaccio, a clown
Nedda, Canio's wife	Columbina, Pagliaccio's wife; in love with Arlecchio
Tonio, the fool	Taddeo
Beppe	Arlecchino, Colombina's lover
Silvio, Nedda's lover	

Prelude

Two mimes, Comedy and Tragedy, open a trunk. Tonio, a member of an itinerant touring troupe, emerges. Tonio tell the audience that thought they are seeing a play, they should remember that actors – even clowns – are real people who suffer and live lives of agony as well as joy.

Act I

The curtains rise on a village in Italy, where the town greets the arrival of the players. Canio invites everyone to their performance that night, and the villagers invite him to have a drink with them. One man makes a crack about Tonio having a chance to seduce Nedda. Canio, instantly serious, tells him that nothing relating to his wife is a joking matter.

When Canio leaves, Nedda is at first frightened that Canio might know something of her activities, but then she is entranced with the birds and sings of their freedom. Tonio listens to her care-free song and, consumed by desire, begs her to love him. She treats him as the clown in their play. When she realizes that he is serious, she turns nasty. He furiously leaves her just as her real lover, Silvio, rushes in. Despite his passionate pleas, Nedda refuses to elope with Silvio immediately, but she finally agrees to leave Canio.

Tonio, smarting from Nedda's rejection, returns and sees the lovers. He rushes off to the village to get Canio, who arrives just in time to hear Nedda sing that on that night she will be Silvio's forever. She does not use his name; Canio chases Silvio, who escapes. Tonio laughs at the furious Nedda; when Canio returns Nedda will not reveal her lover's name.

Devastated by Nedda's betrayal, Canio sings of his suffering – that he must play the clown although his heart is breaking.

#### Circus Interlude

Canio dreams of his younger days with the circus.

#### Act II

The villagers are eager for the stand play: a young woman, married to an older man, is in love with a young man. She plays at being nice to her husband, but really seeks the young man, and in the husband accepts the situation. The play opens with scenes of Nedda (Colombina) with Tonio (Arlecchino) and their happy romance. Canio (Pagliaccio), as the clown, enters just as Nedda sings the exact words he heard her say to her lover an hour or so earlier. It is too much. She desperately tries to keep him in the play, but after two or three more moments, he explodes.

Nedda tries for a few moments to bring Canio back to the play, but all he can do is demand the name of her lover. She decrees she will never tell him. Blind with rage, Canio stabs her. Silvio breaks from the crowd; Canio sees and recognizes him and stabs him too. The opera ends with the immortal line, "The comedy is over."