

Performers Score Well In Operas; Techniques, Hall Found Lacking

By RICHARD TELLER

Friday evening's presentation by the Mid-Hudson Opera Theatre of Pietro Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" and Giacomo Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi" had some very enjoyable aspects. With musical direction by Willard McNary, "Cavalleria" featured an excellent cast, particularly Catherine Booth and Tony Angelo.

Ms. Booth, who sang the role of Santuzza, has a powerful soprano voice and, more important, the ability to act with it. She was never less than convincing.

Angelo's Turiddu was superlative. This tenor role has tempted many tenors to histrionic heroism, to rather poor effect. Turiddu is no better a human being than the rest of the misfits populating the opera. Angelo avoided making Turiddu one of the good guys, rather portraying him as the sadistic, but conscience-stricken mama's boy Mascagni intended him to be. Every gesture, every vocal inflection, meant something. And

what a voice! The scene in which Santuzza and Turiddu confront each other was electrifying.

Katharine Montgomery and Del Neroni, who sang Mamma Lucia and Alfio, were in good voice, although Neroni, while trying very hard, really did not look evil enough for the bully Alfio. The James Stewart bit with the cigar did not help.

The principal problem with "Cavalleria" was Drew G. Kopf's stage direction. Dutchess Hall at Dutchess Community College is too small for extensive chorus business to work well. All the milling around, the fooling with wine glasses, the "subtle" gestures, crossed the apron like a ton of bricks. Having cast members exit downstage, re-enter upstage, and disappear into the distance was effective once, but not a dozen times. The principals were handled somewhat better, but the use of the extreme corners of the apron, well beyond the edges of the proscenium, was a definite miscalculation. Performers were convincingly in

character until they stepped out of the set and under those decidedly un-19th-century-Sicilian TV monitors. There is no better way to wreck an illusion.

The less said about the set the better. No design credits were given, but half the stage was recognizably salvaged from Thaddeus Gesek's scenery for last spring's "Faust." The other half was a totally mismatched flat. Again, a distraction.

"Gianni Schicchi's" set was better, and the stage direction much more successful, admirable in a farce which invites overdirection. The humor is admittedly banal, but Kopf never let it get out of hand.

John Ericson's portrayal of Gianni was hilarious, with a good baritone to match. Michael Handy was an effective Rinuccio, Elissa Bowen a cute, if small-voiced, Lauretta. Musical direction for this work was by Al Rothstein.

One item. Ed Lustgarten did a great job as piano accompanist, but was amplification of the instrument really called for? Not only was the piano sound spread unnaturally all over the hall, but the phase difference between the piano and the speakers caused a very slight, but distracting echo. A large instrument, without amplification, would have been a better solution.