

Rossini, Il barbiere di Siviglia - The Barber of Seville

ABOUT THE COMPOSER:

Gioachino Antonio Rossini (1792-1868) was born in Pesaro, Italy, to a musical family. Singing and playing music from a young age, Rossini entered the Philharmonic School in Bologna (now called the G.B. Martini State Conservatory of Music) at the age of 14. There, he composed his first opera, *Demetrio e Polibio* (Demetrius and Polybius). In 1824, Rossini moved to France, where he remained for the rest of his life. He retired from writing major works at the age of 37 for reasons unknown, although he continued to write the occasional small religious piece.

Rossini wrote over forty operas. The overture for his last, *Guillaume Tell* (William Tell), is among the most famous pieces of music ever written. In addition to his vast opera catalogue, Rossini also wrote cantatas, sonatas, and a plethora of other instrumental pieces.

Rossini lived during a turbulent time in history. The French Revolution ended when he was seven years old, and the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. Traditional social class structures were breaking down, challenged by more equitable ideals. The time was ripe for a comedy such as *The Barber of Seville*, where a count pretended to be of a lower class in order to win the heart of his lady on his own terms rather than using his title.

In his formative stages Rossini was influenced by Mozart and Haydn, but he quickly found a style of his own. One of the pioneers of the florid bel canto style of singing, his unusual rhythms and technically difficult musical lines challenged his musicians. These stylistic choices garnered criticism during his lifetime, but in posterity have made him one of the most beloved composers of all time.

ABOUT THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

Il Barbiere di Siviglia (The Barber of Seville) is a comedic story of love and deception. The libretto by Cesare Sterbini is based on the first installment of a trilogy of plays by Pierre Beaumarchais. W.A. Mozart had set to music the second piece, *Le nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro), some thirty years before. At the time of Rossini's premiere in 1816, composer Giovanni Paisiello had already produced an opera using the same libretto.

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Supporters of the latter attended Rossini's opening performance to boo his version. This, combined with a hastily-arranged production and an under-rehearsed cast, made for a less than illustrious beginning to The Barber's legacy. However, by the second night, the production found its stride.

Rossini won out in the end, as his Barber has endured the centuries and remains one of the most-performed works in the operatic repertoire. Parts of the overture and Figaro's famous introductory aria, "Largo al factotum," ("Make Way for the Handyman") have been quoted in popular culture, even finding their way into a Looney Tunes Bugs Bunny episode which lampoons the opera.

Opera overtures usually introduce the important motives and themes used later in the work, but Barber does not follow this model. In fact, Rossini had used this overture for two previous works. However, its sparkling energy and wit perfectly set the tone for the comedy to come. Listen for the prototypical "Rossini crescendo," which begins softly and very slowly builds into a frenzy, only to subside and start again.

Throughout the opera, Rossini tests the limits of the performers' vocal range and musicality. In "Una voce poco fa," ("A Voice a Short Time Ago"), Rosina displays virtuosic skill and vocal agility to navigate fast runs, trills, and the many embellishments of the melody—a style known as *bel canto*. Figaro's "Largo al factotum," in which he cries "Figaro! Figaro! Figaro!" and patters about his celebrity life in rapid strings of words, requires great stamina and excellent diction.

Synopsis

ACT I:

Count Almaviva of Spain is in love with Rosina, a beautiful and wealthy orphan. As he serenades her from the street ("Ecco ridente il cielo"), Figaro—Almaviva's friend, barber to Rosina's guardian Dr. Bartolo, and general man-about-town—arrives on the scene ("Largo al factotum"). Figaro agrees to help Almaviva communicate his desires to Rosina. However, Bartolo keeps her under close watch and is conspiring to marry her himself. He requests the help of Basilio, Rosina's music tutor.

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Rosina is quite interested in the handsome Almoviva ("Una voce poco fa") and decides to write him a note to ask his name and let him know she returns his affection. Almoviva instructs Figaro to introduce him as Figaro's cousin, Signor Lindor, and keep the fact that he is a Count a secret. Figaro goes into the house to shave Bartolo and finds an opportunity to talk with Rosina, who gives Figaro the note she had written for Almoviva ("Dunque io son, tu non m'ingani?").

Count Almoviva disguises himself as a drunken soldier and enters, demanding lodging, but Bartolo insists he is exempt from housing soldiers. The argument causes a ruckus, which brings the police to arrest Almoviva. The Count discreetly shows the officer proof that he is the Grandee of Spain and is released. In the confusion, Almoviva manages to tell Rosina he is her beloved Lindor and gives her a love letter. Throughout this scene, a storm is brewing outside as well as in ("Ma signor").

Act II:

As another excuse to visit Rosina, Almoviva disguises himself as a music teacher and enters the house, claiming that Basilio is too ill to give Rosina her lesson. In this disguise, he ingratiates himself to Bartolo by giving him the letter Rosina wrote to Lindor and pretending to help Bartolo deceive her. Almoviva and Rosina then proceed with her lesson. When Bartolo falls asleep, the lovers quickly plan to escape and be wed. Figaro obtains the keys to the balcony to assist in their escape. When Basilio arrives, Almoviva and Rosina convince him he is ill, lubricating the deception with a bribe, and Basilio leaves ("Buona sera, mio signore").

After Almoviva and Figaro exit, Bartolo produces the letter Rosina wrote to Almoviva and tells her she is being deceived. This makes Rosina angry, and she discloses the plans she had made with Almoviva. She agrees to marry Bartolo, who then leaves to summon a notary for the ceremony. However, Figaro and the Count enter and convince Rosina of Almoviva's fidelity as well as his true identity. She forgives him, and when the notary arrives, the lovers bribe him to marry them immediately. Bartolo returns and is enraged when he finds the Count and Rosina are married. After being assured he can keep Rosina's dowry, Bartolo gives his blessing and all is well ("Amor e fede eterna, si vegga in noi regnar!").