

Beaumarchais and *The Barber of Seville*

Beaumarchais was born plain Pierre-Augustin Caron in Paris in 1732. Like his character Figaro, he was a master of many different professions during his life - a watchmaker, teacher of the harp, judge, diplomat and even, at one point, a spy. He was the seventh of ten children by André-Charles Caron, a watchmaker, and the former Louise-Nicole Pichon. In his childhood he learned to play violin, flute and harp. His home was happy and cultured.

He worked as a clockmaker in his father's shop and, when he was 21, he invented a new form of mechanism that became a standard part of new improved watches. His invention was appropriated by a colleague of his father and, burning with indignation, the young Pierre-Augustin appealed to the Académie des Sciences, which ruled in his favour. He was made a Watchmaker by Royal Appointment. He gave music lessons to the daughters of Louis XV, improved his accent, read indispensable classics, and jotted down quotable Latin tags in a little book. He frequented the home of the husband of Madame de Pompadour, the king's mistress, and there staged the first of his *parades* that appealed to a society that had become bored with the professional theatre.

By 1759, having married a widow and taken the name of the estate that came with her (le Bois Marchais), he began to make his mark as Caron de Beaumarchais.

The financier and adviser to Mme de Pompadour, the immensely rich army supplier Joseph Pâris-Duverney sent Beaumarchais on missions to Spain to develop schemes for supplying the Spanish army and irrigating the Sierra Morena. He was a social success and happily absorbed the Spanish atmosphere on which he drew for the first two Figaro plays. He founded a French company to trade with Louisiana. Between 1757 and 1763 he wrote a number of short *scènes* and *parades* for private *théâtres de société* and soon after began his assault on the Paris stage. His plays were sentimental in tone and earnest in defence of middle-class values.

The Barber of Seville was first offered to the Théâtre Italien in 1772 as a comic opera. When it was rejected, Beaumarchais revised it in five acts and approached the Comédie Française, where it was accepted in 1773 but not staged. He was involved in a public altercation with the Duke de Chaulnes, for which he was briefly jailed. His popularity reached new heights when the courts found in his favour in 1774, but the judgment also censured him and deprived him of his civil rights. To earn his pardon, he offered his services to the court, which sent him on secret missions to London, Amsterdam and Vienna where he was also briefly jailed. His orders were to buy off expatriate journalists who were threatening to make damaging revelations about Louis XV's relationship with Madame du Barry. He returned in the summer of 1774 with his standing enhanced, and permission was finally given to stage his play.

After 1770, the Comédie Française moved temporarily to the Salle des Machines at the Tuileries Palace (destroyed by Communards in 1871), and it was there that the première of *Le Barbier de Séville* took place on 23 February 1775. As with Rossini's opera forty-one years later, the first performance was a failure. Undaunted, Beaumarchais pruned its five acts to four and, three days later, it was enthusiastically applauded.

The Barber of Seville was the first in a cycle of three plays all featuring the same characters whom we watch grow older and deal with different situations in their lives. These characters are the Spanish nobleman Count Almaviva, the lovely Rosine who is the object of his affections, and Figaro, a barber at Seville. In the first play Almaviva outwits the old doctor Bartholo in order to marry the doctor's ward, Rosine, all the while helped by the machinations of his barber Figaro. In the second play, *The Marriage of Figaro*, they're a few years older. It is now the valet Figaro who outwits his aristocratic master. Figaro has to protect his new young bride Suzanne, the Countess's maid, from the Count who desires her. At the same time he tries to preserve the Count's marriage to Rosine, who is now, of course, the Countess Almaviva. The third play, rarely revived these days, is called *The Guilty Mother*. It takes place twenty years after the previous play, and involves the illegitimate children of the Count and Countess, the potential loss of their fortune and, again, the last minute redemption of his employers by Figaro's wit and wisdom. (French composer Darius Milhaud's *La mere coupable*, based on this last play in the trilogy, had its first performance in Geneva in 1966).

While *The Barber* is pure comedy with roots in the works of Molière, the second play (which later became Mozart's great masterpiece *Le nozze di Figaro*) was heavily barbed, and flirted dangerously with breaking down the barrier between master and servant. *The Guilty Mother*, however, has a darkness and cynicism that reflects the Revolutionary period during which it was produced and first staged in 1792.

Beaumarchais wrote both *Barber* and *Figaro* with music in mind. The original *Marriage of Figaro* was one of the longest plays written up to that time simply because there were so many musical numbers demanded by the author. And *Barber* was conceived as a comic opera from its inception and was only rewritten as a straight stage play after it was rejected for production by the Théâtre Italien.

Beaumarchais was one of the most colourful characters of the Old Regime, who earned and lost fortunes, served as a secret agent and supplied guns to the American revolutionaries. Although he supported the French Revolution, his involvement with the royal court attracted suspicion and he was forced to go into exile.

After Voltaire's death, Beaumarchais bought his banned books. To publish them, he opened a printing shop in Kehl in Germany, out of the reach of the French censors, and brought out the first complete edition of Voltaire. This 70-volume edition was a financial disaster. Beaumarchais' property in Paris was confiscated and his family imprisoned. In 1796 he returned to France. He died of a stroke in Paris on 18 May 1799 in relative poverty.

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