

# The Swan of Pesaro and *The Barber of Seville*

Gioachino Rossini was born into a musical family in Pesaro on Italy's Adriatic coast, where his father was a municipal trumpeter and his mother was an opera singer. He displayed a precocious talent and, by his early teens, was proficient on the piano, viola and horn, and was in demand locally as a boy treble. He soon began to compose music.

The family moved to Bologna, and it was from there in 1810 that the eighteen-year-old Gioachino was summoned to Venice to fill a gap left by a composer who had failed to deliver a one-act opera entitled *Il cambiale di matrimonio* (The Marriage Contract). Rossini set it to music in just a few days, and this was his very first opera to be performed. It was full of fun and high spirits and took Venice by storm. The story, which seems tailor-made for Rossini, is set in exotic Canada, and the marriage contract of the title is between someone called Tobia Mill and a Mr Slook who had been promised the hand of Mill's daughter, Fanny, in marriage. Fanny Mill is far from enthusiastic about becoming Fanny Slook and, in any case, is in love with one Edoardo Milfort. In the end, Slook changes the contract to allow her to marry the man she loves.

Other operas by the young Rossini soon followed, sometimes with alarming consequences. *L'inganno felice* (The Fortunate Deception) was so popular that enthusiasts showed their appreciation by letting loose flocks of doves, canaries and guinea fowl inside the theatre. Then came *La scala di seta* (The Silken Ladder), *Tancredi* with its celebrated 'rice aria' (so called because Rossini, a great gourmet, composed it while cooking his rice), and *L'Italiana in Algeri* (The Italian Girl in Algiers), which was written in less than a month. The composer was then just 21 years old.

He wrote an opera based on Shakespeare's *Othello* seventy years before Verdi, in which the role of Otello was occasionally sung by a mezzo-soprano opposite another female as Desdemona. Chopin witnessed this curiosity in Paris in 1831, when Maria Malibran (already a famous Desdemona) played Otello, and Wilhelmine Schroeder-Devrient played Desdemona. 'Malibran is small' wrote Chopin, 'and the German woman is huge. It looked as if, in a reversal of the plot, Desdemona would smother Otello.'

Malibran made her debut in 1825 as Rosina. Her father, Manuel Garcia, was the first Almaviva and he had 'ferociously' trained her for the operatic stage, threatening on one occasion to substitute a real dagger for a prop knife if she did not perform to his liking. Rossini described Malibran as the most remarkable singer he had known, surpassing all others, '...she taught me how I could have done *better* than I have done'.

The role of Rosina was originally written for a coloratura mezzo-soprano but was frequently assigned - with modest transpositions - to a soprano. The coloratura mezzo made a comeback in the last three decades of the twentieth century and since that time the part has been done both ways.

Nellie Melba sang Rossini heroines on many occasions and, in her autobiography, she has the following to say: 'If you are acquainted with *The Barber of Seville*, you will of course remember that in the Second Act occurs a scene in which Rosina, the

heroine, is being given a singing lesson. Rossini, the composer, with his well-known laziness, left this scene a blank, leaving it to the discretion of the *prima donna* to sing whatever song she chose during the lesson. It was rather a charming innovation in opera and I often left the song I was going to sing until the last minute, choosing *Mattinata*, *Still wie die Nacht*, or even the mad scene from *Lucia*, as the mood suited me.'

Melba was wrong. Rossini did write an aria for the lesson scene, which seems to have been entirely unknown to her; and, what's more, the aria in question is an integral part of the story. Nevertheless, he allowed his soprano the freedom to insert something else at her discretion, and the libretto reads: 'Rosina sings an air, *ad libitum*, for the occasion'. A similar freedom had been extended to the first Almaviva, who, on the disastrous opening night, used a colourful Spanish melody in order to serenade Rosina. This was changed for the second night, when Rossini's music was used.

Melba's assumption reflected the operatic habits of her (and earlier) times, which frequently saw arias and even whole acts omitted at the whim of a singer, conductor or manager. That Rossini did not want to see his works compromised beyond a certain point is clear from an account of a performance by Adelina Patti in the part of Rosina in 1863. In those days, singers would count the bars in their arias to ensure that no rival had more, and they would alter the music to advantage themselves. Rossini called this the use of the 'aria-meter' and tried to prevent it by writing out the embellishments in detail. But this still didn't prevent Patti from decorating her part to such an extent that the composer could hardly recognise the original. He is said to have told others that he didn't mind some changes, 'But to leave not a note of what I composed, even in the recitatives - well, that is unendurable.'

When, on one occasion, Patti sang a heavily decorated *Una voce poco fa* for Rossini, he commented dryly, 'A very pretty song! Whose is it?'

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, opera had become show business, and considerable money was to be made from it. Theatre managers could do very well, and one of the most successful was Domenico Barbaia, a waiter and circus manager who became director of four opera houses simultaneously: two in Vienna, the San Carlo in Naples and the Scala in Milan. The other immensely successful man of the theatre was of course Rossini himself, whom some called the 'Swan of Pesaro' and others 'Signor Crescendo'! He composed forty operas in fifteen years. So much for laziness!

Rossini went out of his way to please his audiences, causing Wagner to note: 'If he heard that such and such a town particularly liked to hear the roulades of singers, and that another, on the contrary, preferred languorous songs; then for the first he provided nothing but roulades, for the second, languorous songs. Where he knew an audience liked percussion in the orchestra, he immediately started the overture of a pastoral opera with a roll on the drums'. Undoubtedly, this responsiveness to the tastes and preferences of audiences did much to make opera in the mid-nineteenth century a lively form of popular entertainment.

Wagner admired Rossini and lamented the fact that he had laid down his pen at the age of thirty-seven after writing *Guillaume Tell*. 'Ah, Maestro' Wagner told him, '- a crime! You yourself have no idea of everything that you could have extracted from that brain there!'

Wagner called on Rossini in Paris in 1860 through the good offices of a mutual acquaintance Edmond Michotte. Michotte took notes of their conversation and these were published in 1906 as *Richard Wagner's Visit to Rossini*.

Whilst waiting to be ushered into the maestro's presence, Wagner noticed Mayer's portrait of Rossini hanging in the grand salon and remarked to Michotte: 'That intelligent physiognomy, that ironic mouth – it was surely the composer of *Il barbiere*. That portrait must date from the period in which the opera was composed?' The painting was begun in 1816 and finished in Naples a few years later, so it did indeed depict the Rossini of the *Il barbiere* years. 'He was a good-looking youth' added Wagner, 'and in that land of Vesuvius, where women are easily ignited, he must have caused lots of devastation.'

'Who knows?' replied Michotte. 'If he had had a valet as devoted to bookkeeping as Don Giovanni's Leporello, mightn't he perhaps have surpassed the number *mil e tre* (a thousand and three) set down in the notebook?'

'Oh, how you exaggerate' Wagner answered. '*Mil* I'll agree to, but *tre* more – that's really too many.'

In 1822, Rossini had visited Beethoven in Vienna, and he told Wagner that he had found the great man in the most miserable circumstances, bearing an expression of undefinable sadness. In a voice described as soft and slightly fogged, Beethoven had greeted Rossini with the words: 'Ah! Rossini, you are the composer of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*; I congratulate you; it is an excellent *opera buffa*; I read it with pleasure and it delights me. It will be played as long as Italian opera exists. Never try to do anything but *opera buffa*; wanting to succeed in another genre would be trying to force your destiny.'

Rossini, who had in fact composed a number of *opera seria* scores, admitted to Wagner: 'To tell you the truth, I really felt more aptitude for *opera buffa*. I preferred to treat comic rather than serious subjects. But I never had much choice among librettos, which were imposed upon me by the impresarios. I can't tell you how many times it happened that at first I received only part of the scenario, an act at a time, for which I had to compose the music without knowing what followed or the end of the subject.'

The contract for *Il barbiere di Siviglia* was signed on 15 December 1815 by the twenty-three year-old Rossini and Duke Francesco Sforza Cesarini, impresario of the Teatro Argentina in Rome. It calls for the composer to deliver the opera within a month, but Rossini was not given the second act of the libretto until 29 January and the Duke died suddenly one week later. The performances went ahead on 20 February. According to Rossini, he composed *Il barbiere* in just thirteen days and was paid 400 scudi plus a hazel-coloured suit with gold buttons.

### **Nothing primes inspiration more than necessity.**

Rossini did not hesitate to re-cycle suitable passages from his earlier works. For instance, the cavatina *Ecco, ridente in cielo* with which Almaviva serenades Rosina in Act One, began life in the cantata *Ciro in Babilonia* (Cyrus in Babylon) before being used as an address to the goddess Isis in *Aureliano in Palmira* (Aurelian in Palmyra). The famous overture of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* is a re-working of material from *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra* (Elizabeth, Queen of England), which was in turn a borrowing from *Aureliano*. Rossini confessed that he never troubled too much about overtures. 'Wait until the evening before opening night,' he advised. 'Nothing primes

inspiration more than necessity, whether it be the presence of a copyist waiting for your work or the prodding of an impresario tearing his hair. In my time, all the impresarios in Italy were bald at thirty.'

Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* was the seventh incarnation of Beaumarchais' original play. The first, by Friedrich Benda, was premièred in 1776 and the thirteenth appeared in 1924. One of the earliest and most successful versions was by Giovanni Paisiello, written in 1782 at the court of Catherine the Great at St Petersburg, where Paisiello was Inspector of Italian Opera from 1776 until 1784.

Tactfully, Rossini sought permission from Paisiello to create a work on the same subject, and the older man replied that he had no objection. Yet, exercising an abundance of caution, Rossini entitled his opera *Almaviva, ossia L'Inutile precauzione* (*Almaviva or The Useless Precaution*). 'The Useless Precaution' had in fact been the subtitle of Beaumarchais' original play. Only later – after Paisiello's death in June 1816 – did Rossini's opera assume the title by which it is known today.

A notice was printed in the libretto for the première, which reads as follows:

'The comedy by Signor Beaumarchais entitled *The Barber of Seville, or the Useless Precaution*, is being presented in Rome, adapted as a *dramma comico* under the title of *Almaviva, or the Useless Precaution*, this being for the purpose of convincing the public fully of the sentiments of respect and veneration which animate the creator of the music of the present *dramma* toward the greatly celebrated Paisiello, who dealt with this subject under its original title.

Called upon to take up the same difficult task, Rossini, wishing not to incur the accusation of a temerarious rivalry with the immortal composer who preceded him, expressly asked that *The Barber Of Seville* be *re-versified completely* and that some new situations for musical pieces be added, and he further asked that these be to the modern theatrical taste, so much altered since the epoch in which the renowned wrote his music.'

Of course, these remarks were directed not at Paisiello but at his admirers, the so-called *Paisiellisti*, who were inclined to regard Rossini's 'mimicry' as an open insult.

On opening night in 1816, the *Paisiellisti* arrived in force at the Teatro Argentina, determined to give the young upstart a good drubbing. The pandemonium started as soon as Rossini entered the pit to play the clavicembalo in the orchestra (as opera conductors did in those days), dressed in the hazel-coloured suit with gold buttons that had been part of his payment. The crowd reacted with whistles, catcalls and laughter. Rossini told Wagner that he thought members of the audience were going to assassinate him.

Legend has it that when Count Almaviva (Manuel Garcia) entered to sing his serenade, he found that his guitar needed tuning and when he tried to do this, one of the strings snapped. Then, when the singer playing Basilio (Zenobio Vitarelli) came on, he was distracted by the hoots and whistles and fell over a stage trapdoor, cutting his face. Bleeding profusely, he pulled out a handkerchief and continued to sing while attempting to staunch the flow - which set the audience off again.

Soon afterwards, a cat wandered onto the stage. Figaro (Luigi Zamboni) chased it off one side only for it to appear on the opposite side, whereupon it leapt dramatically into the arms of Dr Bartolo (Bartolommeo Botticelli) before jumping down and

heading for the skirts of Rosina (Geltrude Righetti-Georgi). Only when one of the characters brandished a sword did it finally exit, but not before the audience egged it on and imitated its meows. The singers could hardly concentrate on their performances amidst the din. When the first act was over, Rossini applauded the performers for persevering, then, pleading an indisposition, he went home to bed.

On the following night, for the second performance of *Almaviva*, the audience (perhaps minus the *Paisiellisti* this time) listened to the new work in silence before breaking into thunderous applause. But Rossini was absent, pretending to be recuperating from his illness. He later recalled, 'I was sleeping peacefully when I was awakened suddenly by a deafening uproar out in the street, accompanied by a brilliant glow of torches... I thought that they were coming to set fire to the building, and I saved myself by going to a stable at the back of the courtyard. But lo, after a few moments, I heard Garcia calling me at the top of his voice. He finally located me. 'Get a move on, you; come now, listen to those shouts of 'bravo, bravissimo Figaro.' An unprecedented success! The street is full of people. They want to see you.'

At the end of the nineteenth century, Giuseppe Verdi endorsed Beethoven's sentiments of nearly eighty years earlier, declaring: 'I cannot help believing that, for abundance of ideas, comic verve and truth of declamation *Il barbiere di Siviglia* is the most beautiful *opera buffa* in existence.'

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