

# THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

By Gioachino Rossini

Photo by Matthew Staver for Opera Colorado

## IN-DEPTH GUIDE

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**GUILD**



## INTRODUCTION

There is a magical moment in the second scene of *The Barber of Seville*. Rosina, our heroine, is singing about her infatuation for the handsome stranger who has been serenading her and of her determination to persuade her guardian to agree to a match. She goes on to describe herself: “I am docile, respectful, obedient, sweetly loving – if I have my own way.” Then, suddenly, the orchestra stops playing, and Rosina, unaccompanied, sings “ma” (but), and that wonderfully isolated, deceptively gentle monosyllable tells us all we really need to know about her character and how the opera will turn out. “BUT,” she tells us, “If they go against me, I’ll be a viper.” And in case we miss it, she sings it again.

And why would we doubt her? She is, after all, a Rossini mezzo. Gioachino Rossini has been given credit for helping develop the mezzo-soprano as a distinct voice type, with its deep resonance, as opposed to a soprano who is able to sing some low notes. Yet the Rossini mezzo is more than a voice type; in the comedies, at least, the greater force in her voice is emblematic of the force of her personality. From the moment she sets foot on the stage, we know she will overcome any obstacles fate puts in her path.

Music critic Paul Robinson sees a lack of depth of emotion in Rossini’s characters, arguing, for example, that Rosina does not really sing like a woman in love, and that in her aria “it would make no difference – indeed, it would make a good deal more sense – if Rosina were singing about her resolve to become a coloratura soprano.” In other words, we become as aware of the singer’s art as we are of the dramatic situation. But here the medium is truly the message. Rosina and the singer who portrays her are both examples of pure determination.

Consider the heroines of Rossini’s other two most popular operas. The title character of *La Cenerentola* (*Cinderella*) is far from the wilting flower we know from the Disney version. She goes out of her way to defy her stepsisters, and from the self-confidence she displays at the Prince’s ball, we know she is thoroughly in control of her life’s path. *The Italian Girl in Algiers* reverses the clichés of the rescue story, in that the woman becomes the rescuer, and by the time Isabella has sung her memorable entrance aria, we are certain that no mere Arab potentate will be able to stand up to her.



Rossini's greatest operas are not about complex emotions. Like most classic comedies, they are about decent, witty people overcoming the obstacles placed in their way by an outmoded power structure. And they are a lot of fun--so come along for the ride.

## CHARACTERS

**Count Almaviva** (Tenor) – a young nobleman  
(ahl-mah-VEE-vah)

**Doctor Bartolo** (Baritone) – an elderly physician  
(BAR-tow-low)

**Don Basilio** (Bass) – a music teacher  
(dohn ba-SEE-lee-oh)

**Figaro** (Baritone) – a barber and jack of all trades  
(FEE-ga-roh)

**Fiorello** (Bass) – a servant to Almaviva  
(fee-oh-REL-lo)

**Rosina** (Mezzo-Soprano) – a young woman, Dr. Bartolo's ward  
(Roh-SEE-nah)

**Berta** (Soprano) – Bartolo's household servant  
(BER-ta)

Various servants, public officials, etc.

## THE STORY

### OVERTURE

In Rossini's time, operas traditionally opened with formal overtures, and the overture to this opera is one of the most celebrated of all. It would be tempting to expound on how this piece relates to the themes of the opera itself, especially the way in which the trills in the second section provide Spanish local color. Tempting – but not honest. For the first production, Rossini had composed a different overture, based on Spanish folk songs, but he soon became dissatisfied with it and, being no stranger to self-borrowing, he replaced it with one he had previously used in two other operas. Perhaps he rightly surmised that neither of those operas would outlive him and this composition was too good to die with them. Or perhaps he realized that though it was written years before, it perfectly described the action of this opera. In any event, with its increasingly rapid tempo, the overture creates a sense of excitement and anticipation of what is to follow.

### **ACT I** - *Scene I: A street in Seville, in front of Dr. Bartolo's house*

In the early morning hours, Fiorello is leading a number of musicians onstage. We see here the first of several examples of Rossini's comical self-conscious awareness of the difference between real life and the stage (much like twentieth-century theater of the absurd). The very first words of the opera represent a paradox: "Piano, pianissimo, senza parlar" ("softly, very softly, without speaking"). The more they ask for silence, the more loudly they sing. We soon learn the reason for their presence. Count Almaviva has hired them to accompany him as he serenades the woman with whom he has become infatuated. (Another paradox: he later explains that he is posing as a poor student to be sure Rosina will love him for himself and not his wealth or rank, but he has the money to hire a band.)

Accompanied by the musicians, Almaviva sings a number designated in the score as a *cavatina* (a simple, folk-like song), "Ecco ridente in cielo" ("See smiling in the sky"). As befitting a number which is supposed to be a song, it is formal in structure, opening with a slow section followed by a fast one. The lyric itself is conventional and does not really fit the dramatic situation, because the second section describes his joy at winning his lady's affection, something which has yet to occur at this point. Disappointed that Rosina does not appear on her balcony, he pays off the



musicians and asks them to leave, complaining about the noise they are making in thanking him.

Suddenly, the orchestra strikes up a melody which is to be associated with Figaro, and we hear him offstage proclaiming some nonsense syllables, ready to make one of the most dramatic entrances in all of opera. “Largo al factotum” (“Make way for the jack of all trades”), he proclaims. His big solo aria – also designated in the score as a *cavatina* – is one of those pieces which is known even to those whose entire opera collection consists of a single CD of opera’s greatest hits. In it, Figaro brags about his numerous abilities and of the way in which the entire city has come to depend on him, as he mimics the way in which various people are always calling his name--including a falsetto call from one of the women. “You will not fail to find your fortune,” he proclaims to himself. As he successfully negotiates the rapid-fire dialogue of the aria, we come to believe that he is certain to succeed in anything he will set out to accomplish. In the words of Paul Robinson, he is “pure ego”.

Composers of Rossini’s era (and earlier) generally used recitative (a sort of sung speech) rather than real melody to advance much of the plot, and there follows an unusually long section (over six minutes) of such dialogue. Almaviva recognizes Figaro and explains his situation to him: he has come to Seville to follow a young woman he saw in Madrid, whom he believes to be the daughter of an elderly doctor. (Here Sterbini and Rossini have somewhat softened the characters of the two men. In the original play on which the opera is based, Almaviva believes Rosina to be Bartolo’s wife and has no compunction about leading her into adultery. Likewise, in the play we learn that Figaro has a criminal past, having been fired from a government job for embezzlement, a detail which is omitted in the opera.) Figaro, who provides various services to Bartolo’s household, offers his help to Almaviva. Rosina comes out onto the balcony, carrying a letter, which she tells Bartolo is an aria from the opera *The Useless Precaution* (a self-referential allusion to the subtitle of the play and opera). She “accidentally” drops the letter into the street, and when Bartolo goes downstairs to retrieve it, she signals to Figaro to pick it up. Figaro reads the letter to Almaviva. (In conformity with operatic conventions of the time, Figaro speaks rather than sings when he reads the letter, which is a declaration of love.) Unable to find the letter, Bartolo leaves, saying that he is planning to hasten his marriage to Rosina.

At Figaro's instigation, Almaviva borrows Figaro's guitar and sings another serenade to Rosina, even simpler than the first (the score designates it as a *canzone* or song.) He tells her that his name is Lindoro and that he has nothing to offer her but love. Rosina begins to echo it but she is suddenly interrupted. Almaviva offers to pay Figaro to help him break through Bartolo's defenses, and the thought of money inspires Figaro into melody. In a sprightly, multi-section duet, Figaro concocts a plan whereby Almaviva will disguise himself as a soldier and demand to be quartered in Bartolo's house. He will furthermore pretend to be drunk so that Bartolo will regard him as harmless. The two men join their voices to praise Figaro's cleverness. Almaviva goes off in search of a costume, and Figaro enters the Bartolo home as the scene ends.

**ACT I - Scene II: The interior of Bartolo's house**

Rosina is alone on stage. She sings the aria "Una voce poco fa" ("A voice I just heard"), which was discussed in the introduction to this booklet. This is one of the greatest showpieces for a mezzo-soprano in the repertoire, and singers frequently embellish it with their own individual flourishes. Rosina tells us of her determination to defy her guardian, and each repetition seems to make her resolve stronger. Note, for example, how Rossini scores the line "Si, Lindoro mio sara" ("Yes, Lindoro will be mine"), with added emphasis on the name Lindoro when the name is repeated.

Figaro enters and begins to tell her about Almaviva's intentions, but when he hears Bartolo approaching, he hides himself so he can eavesdrop. Bartolo tells Rosina of his distrust of Figaro, but Rosina defends him and leaves in anger. Basilio, the music teacher, enters. He tells Bartolo that Almaviva, whom he suspects of having designs on Rosina, has been seen in town, and he suggests that the best way to counteract his plans would be a slander campaign. In his big aria "La Calunnia" ("Slander"), he describes how slander works, starting as a gentle breeze, but quickly gathering force and eventually turning into a storm. Rossini cleverly matches the music to its subject; the aria begins quietly, with light woodwind accompaniment, but as the slander described becomes more storm-like, Basilio sings more quickly and loudly, and when he refers to the thunder that sounds like a cannon shot, we hear the pounding of the bass drum. Here, Sterbini closely follows Beaumarchais' text, with its musical imagery.



Bartolo feels that there is no time to enact Basilio's plan, and the two men go off to begin work on the marriage contract. Figaro, who has heard the entire exchange, emerges from his hiding place, and Rosina returns. She asks him about the young man she has observed him with earlier. Figaro tells her the man is his cousin, and after teasing her for a while, he eventually tells her that the young man is in love with her. Their dialogue changes from recitative to a duet. Figaro tells Rosina that she should write a letter to Lindoro, but she tells him she is too shy. He continues to persuade her, until she finally pulls out the letter she has already written: "Ecco qua" ("Here it is"), she proclaims, leaving Figaro to marvel at the cleverness of the female sex. Assuring her that Lindoro will come to see her soon, Figaro leaves.

Bartolo returns. Having noticed a missing sheet of paper, he questions Rosina about it, catching her in one lie after another. (Strangely, she says she used the paper to wrap some candy for Figaro's daughter Marcellina. There has been no indication that Figaro is a family man, and we know from the sequel – as did Rossini's audience – that Marcellina is Figaro's mother, not his daughter.) In the aria "A un dottor della mia sorte" ("To a doctor of my standing"), Bartolo tells her angrily that he is smarter than she gives him credit for and will not be fooled. The final section of this aria is in the form of a patter song, and much of our enjoyment in hearing it comes from the sheer pleasure of listening to the speed at which the singer negotiates the text. While Italian, a language rich in open vowels, seems particularly suited to this type of singing, the form has been popular in English as well. Gilbert and Sullivan enjoyed writing patter songs, as in "A Modern Major General" from *The Pirates of Penzance*. A more recent example is Stephen Sondheim's "Not Getting Married Today" from *Company*.

Operas of this era frequently featured elaborate act-ending ensembles, and Rossini does not disappoint us here. Almaviva enters with several other men, all dressed as soldiers. Pretending to be drunk, he produces a billeting order, claiming the right to stay at Bartolo's house. Moreover, he insults Bartolo by repeatedly mispronouncing his name; in Italian, each name he uses is actually an insult. Bartolo explains that he has a document exempting him from being forced to house soldiers, but with his feigned drunkenness, Almaviva pretends not to understand him. He

drops a note for Rosina, which she cleverly switches for a laundry list, so when Bartolo confronts her about it, she can “prove” her innocence.

Figaro arrives and warns Almaviva that things may be getting a bit out of hand. In fact, the police soon arrive on the scene, and Almaviva is about to be arrested, until he secretly shows the captain a document revealing his true identity. The police back off, and the other characters are literally “frozen” in their places with amazement. (As in the opening scene, the immobility of the characters reminds us of the artificial nature of life on the stage.) Scenes in which all of the characters join in expressing their utter confusion were somewhat of a convention for Rossini, as he also included such scenes in *La Cenerentola* and *The Italian Girl in Algiers*. In a *stretta* (rapid concluding section), the characters tell how the hammering in their brains has reduced them to a frenzy as the curtain falls.

**ACT II** - *Same location, later the same day*

The second act, which is considerably shorter than the first, begins with what is arguably one of the funniest scenes in all of opera, the music lesson. Bartolo, alone on stage, tells us of his suspicion that the soldier might have been an emissary of Count Almaviva. There is a knock on the door; it is Almaviva, now disguised as a music teacher. In the play, Almaviva greets Bartolo saying “Peace and joy on your house.” Rossini and Sterbini show how humor can be achieved through musical means, by having him repeat the phrase ad nauseam, usually in a whiny nasal voice, much to Bartolo’s consternation. Bartolo comments to himself that the face looks familiar, but he can’t place it. Almaviva tells Bartolo that he is Don Alonso, a student of Don Basilio, and that he has come to give Rosina her music lesson, since his master is ill. Left to his own devices, without Figaro’s help, he foolishly seeks to win Bartolo’s confidence by showing him Rosina’s letter, proving that she has secretly been conspiring with Almaviva.

Rosina enters and immediately recognizes the man she loves. Accompanied by her new teacher, she begins singing the aria from “*The Useless Precaution*,” and as Bartolo dozes off, she uses the fast section to express her concerns about her guardian’s intentions. Pretending to join in the song, Almaviva tells her that her feelings are reciprocated.



Bartolo wakes up and complains that their aria is boring. He offers to show them what real music is, singing a minuet that Rossini apparently meant to parody an older style of music. To add to the confusion, Figaro now enters, explaining it is time for Bartolo's shave, and he refuses to take no for an answer. In reality, he has come to provide a diversion for Almaviva and Rosina to plan their escape, and amid all the confusion he is able to steal the key to Bartolo's balcony.

Suddenly, there is a new complication. Don Basilio, who was supposedly home in bed, appears at the door. In a comical quintet, the three young people try to persuade Basilio that he indeed is sick and needs to go home immediately. They nearly succeed, and a coin purse from Almaviva proves to be the final convincer. As in the opening of the scene, Rossini uses musical repetition for comic effect, as they sing "buona sera" ("Good night") over and over, alternating harsh sounding descending phrases with softer ascending ones. Basilio leaves, but as soon as we believe he has gone, he surprises the others by returning for one more "buona sera" before departing.

Almaviva tells Rosina that he will come for her that evening, and despite Figaro's efforts at diversion, Bartolo overhears them. However, he still does not know Alonso's true identity. He orders Figaro and Almaviva to leave, and Rosina also leaves the room. Bartolo sends a servant to fetch Basilio, and he goes off to guard the doorway himself to prevent Rosina's escape.

The maid, Berta, is left alone on stage. This character appears neither in Beaumarchais nor Paisiello's opera on the same subject, which preceded this opera by several decades, and quite likely she was added in order to provide an additional female voice for the ensembles. In her aria "Il vecchiotto cerca moglie" ("The old man is looking for a wife") she expresses her befuddlement at the events of the household, but the aria ends with her singing about her own frustration at being alone in her old age. While Berta may have initially been given an aria simply to satisfy the conventions of *opera buffa*, in which each principal singer was assigned at least one solo number, this aria provides a poignant reminder that even in comic stories not everyone enjoys a happy ending.

Basilio and Bartolo enter. Basilio tells Bartolo that he believes that Don Alonso actually is the Count, and Bartolo sends him to fetch a notary to sign the wedding contract at once. In order to persuade Rosina to give up her resistance, he produces a fake letter to back up his assertion that Lindoro did not want her for himself but has merely been acting as a front man for Count Almaviva. Naively, she believes him, and she reveals her lover's plan to break in through the balcony to rescue her. Bartolo exits.

A storm is raging outside (as indicated in the play as well as in the libretto), giving Rossini an opportunity to write a descriptive instrumental passage. (A similar storm scene occurs in *La Cenerentola*). During the storm, Figaro and Almaviva enter from the balcony where a ladder has been placed. At first, Rosina rejects them, but Almaviva reveals his true identity, and the lovers are quickly reconciled.

Here Rossini once again contrasts stage time with real time. Operatic conventions call for a love duet here, while real life would call for a quick escape. As the lovers sing of their happiness, Figaro anxiously reminds them that they should be on their way. At one point he sarcastically echoes their words. Finally, the duet is finished, and they head for the exit, singing “zitti, zitti” (“quickly, quickly”), though the length of the trio is again at odds with the action, as is their singing “piano,” reminiscent of the opening scene.

To their dismay, they discover that the ladder is gone. However, one more reversal of fortune awaits them. Basilio arrives with the notary, and the combination of a bribe and a threat convinces Basilio to serve as a witness to the marriage of Almaviva and Rosina. Bartolo returns with the police, but once again Almaviva reveals his true identity and the police back off.

Almaviva now sings an elaborate two-part aria expressing his joy at the way events have turned out. (Rossini was later to rework this aria into a more elaborate version for mezzo-soprano in *La Cenerentola*.) Bartolo reprimands Basilio for his role in approving the wedding, but the latter replies that he received an offer he could not refuse. Figaro chides Bartolo, telling him that removing the ladder was truly a “useless precaution.”



In contrast with the first act, the finale of this opera is brief, consisting of a musical ensemble called a “vaudeville” (a term which has no relation to the American usage of that word). In this type of ensemble, several principal characters each sing a verse while everyone joins in the refrain. (A similar ensemble concludes Mozart’s *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.) Figaro, Rosina, and Almaviva all express their happiness at the way things have turned out, and the entire cast, including Bartolo and Basilio, proclaim the glory of love as the final curtain falls.

## GIOACHINO ROSSINI AND THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

The son of two musicians, Gioachino Rossini (Jo-KEE-no Roh-SEE-nee) was born in Pesaro, Italy on February 29, 1792. As is the case with most great composers, his musical talent was recognized early, and by age twelve he was already singing professionally in Bologna, where his family had relocated and where he was able to advance his music education. At age 18 he received his first commission to compose an opera. In 1813, when he was barely into his twenties, he wrote two highly successful operas, *Tancredi*, an *opera seria* (a highly conventionalized form of serious opera) and an *opera buffa L'italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Girl in Algiers*), which is still widely performed today and ranks in popularity behind only *The Barber of Seville* and *La Cenerentola* among Rossini's works. Even at this point in his career, he was known for his ability to break loose of the strict genre classification, combining the best of both *seria* and *buffa* operas in his compositions. *Tancredi*, in particular, was remarkable for the reduced reliance on recitative and the increased use of the chorus.

Since copyright laws were lax or non-existent in Rossini's day, he needed to write a lot of music to keep himself afloat financially, and many of his greatest works were written in haste. *The Barber of Seville* was no exception. While there are various accounts of the length of time it took to compose the opera, the actual composition could have taken no longer than a month. The contract for the opera was first signed December 15, 1815, slightly more than two months prior to the premiere on February 20, 1816, and Rossini did not receive the first act of the libretto until January 25. It is possible, of course, that Rossini had some of the music in his head before beginning the actual composition, and he also borrowed a few melodies from his earlier works, but the speed at which the opera was composed still seems miraculous.

Rossini was keenly aware that the choice of this popular Beaumarchais play, which may have been made initially by his producer, could be somewhat controversial. The previous version of *The Barber of Seville* by Giovanni Paisiello, one of the elder statesmen of Italian opera, was still in the repertoire. To ward off criticism, Rossini appended a preface to his score, stating that he had great respect for Paisiello's work and pointing out that his version was totally different, in that Sterbini had based his libretto on the original play and had not copied from the earlier opera.



(Rossini's biographers today discount the story that Rossini had written to the older composer to ask permission to present his new version.) In a further attempt to distance his work from that of his predecessor, he chose Beaumarchais' subtitle, "*Almaviva, or the Useless Precaution*" as the title for the new opera. In later productions, after the death of the older composer, he changed the title to *The Barber of Seville*.

(There was at least one instance where Rossini seems to have borrowed from the earlier opera – the aforementioned scene where Don Alonso repeats "peace and joy" over and over – since this repetition appears in Paisiello's opera but not in the original play. On the other hand, a comparison of the first scenes of the two versions demonstrates that Sterbini and Rossini made several changes from the original that were not based on Paisiello. Most notable was Figaro's aria; Paisiello's version was based on Figaro's song in the original, whereas the Sterbini/Rossini version is completely different in context. In general, Paisiello seems to have stayed closer to the text of the play).

All of these efforts were themselves useless precautions. Opening night was a disaster, primarily due to the fact that despite Rossini's disclaimer, fans of Paisiello resented the fact that this young upstart had done a remake of the master's work (despite the fact that several other composers, both before Paisiello and afterward, had written their own versions. The earliest version, in fact, had been that of the German Ludwig Benda in 1776, six years prior to Paisiello's version). Along with some supporters of a rival company, they managed to cause enough of a disturbance to keep the opera from getting a fair hearing. Some onstage mishaps – a singer falling flat on his face and a runaway cat on stage – also contributed to the opera's first-night woes. Fortunately, the anti-Rossini cabal did not return for the second night, and the work was soon recognized as a masterpiece, drawing praise from such diverse composers as Wagner, Brahms, Beethoven, and Berlioz. Most effusive was Verdi, who wrote, "I cannot help believing *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, for abundance of ideas, for comic verve, and for truth of declamation, the most beautiful 'opera buffa' in existence."

Later the same year, long before Verdi brought Shakespeare's characters to the Italian operatic stage, Rossini composed *Otello*. From 1817 to 1822 he lived in Naples, where he composed many of his most significant works, though none have achieved the enduring popularity of his early comic operas. Once again he anticipated Verdi by writing *Mose in Egitto* (*Moses in Egypt*), which, like Verdi's *Nabucco*, was seen as a covert nationalistic statement.

Having been involved in a number of short-term amorous adventures, he eventually entered into a long-term relationship (though apparently not an exclusive one) with a singer named Isabella Colbran, whom he married in 1822. Shortly afterward, he and Isabella left Italy and headed to Paris, where he hoped to make his mark on the French music scene. His most notable French opera is *Guillaume Tell* (*William Tell*), which premiered in 1829. While this opera is best known for its overture, a virtual symphony in miniature, it contains much gorgeous music and may have had a major influence of the direction opera was to take afterwards. According to critic William Braun, "Whole sections of operas by Verdi and Wagner would not have been written as they were without *Tell*."

Surprisingly, *Guillaume Tell* turned out to be Rossini's last opera. For reasons that are not quite clear, his career suddenly came to a halt. Poor health, including venereal disease and depression, may have been the primary reason, but it probably does not tell the whole story. It may be that he was simply burned out and eager to retire. Opera historian Patrick Dillon argues for a different cause: "The future, he clearly saw, belonged to temperaments far removed from his own. A Classicist at heart, he felt estranged from the enroaching Romanticism of the Parisian scene." The wild excesses of the "mad scenes" so integral to the operas of emerging composers such as Bellini were not for him.

For nearly forty years Rossini lived on as the grand old man of Italian opera, doing some occasional composing, including a mass, but never again for the stage. He returned to Italy for several years, but eventually settled in Paris for the balance of his life. His constant companion during these years was a woman named Olympe Pelissier, whom he eventually married when his estranged wife passed away.



Though today Rossini is seen as one of the great innovators of Italian music, his apparent lack of interest in the new trends in opera caused many to regard him as a reactionary. There exists a transcript of his meeting with Richard Wagner in which he defended the old operatic conventions against the criticisms of the young German, who was taking opera down a different path.

Rossini died in 1868, at the age of 76. Today he is generally regarded as the greatest Italian composer prior to Verdi, and his reputation has grown in recent years with the revival of interest in *bel canto* singing and a greater understanding of the way in which his later works helped pave the way for the romantic operas of his successors.

## CESARE STERBINI

As an opera librettist, Cesare Sterbini (1784-1831) was pretty much a one-hit wonder. Though he wrote seven other opera librettos (one for one of Rossini's more forgettable operas), only *The Barber of Seville* is remembered today. He never worked with any other composer of note. By day, he worked in the treasury of the Vatican.

Sterbini may have been chosen for the task of setting Beaumarchais' text because of his background as a language scholar. He was fluent in French and was able to work directly with the text of the play rather than relying on translations. This helped strengthen Rossini's assertion that he was not copying Paisiello's opera.



## BEAUMARCHAIS

“I’ve been diplomat, acrobat, teacher of etiquette/Student and swordsman, spy and musician/Satirist, pessimist, surgeon and Calvinist/Spanish economist, clockmaker, pharmacist” – thus Figaro describes himself in Corigliano and Hoffman’s *The Ghosts of Versailles*, an opera based loosely on the third play of the Figaro trilogy, and like the self-proclaimed “factotum” of Seville described in the opera, he might as well have been describing Beaumarchais himself. In fact, anyone who reads the biography of Beaumarchais must inevitably surmise that Figaro was intended as a projection of his creator, the man of humble birth mingling as an equal with the aristocracy. In fact, it has been suggested that the name Figaro is a pun on the author’s birth-name – Caron – Figaro being fils-Caron (son of Caron).

Though we know Beaumarchais today primarily as the author of the Figaro plays, he would have been one of his era’s most remarkable figures even if he had never written a single word. He was born January 24, 1732 under the name Pierre-Augustin Caron, the son of a Parisian watch-maker. At the age of 13 he ceased his formal education to go into the family business, and by the age of 21 he had invented a new mechanism to vastly improve the accuracy of watches over anything that had been used before. This got him invited to the court in Versailles, and with his natural charm he was soon circulating among France’s upper set. Since a number of people there had recently taken up harp playing, he further used his skill as an inventor to improve the harp’s pedal mechanism. Over the years, he held several positions at court.

Beaumarchais’ life was one of intrigues, duels, and diplomatic missions, matchmaking for the king, and so on. He was constantly getting in trouble and spent a number of short periods in jail, a victim of court slander (hence Basilio’s attack on slander in *The Barber of Seville*). He was influential in getting France to support the American Revolution cause, as a strictly political move against England. He also was involved in a project with the Perrier brothers to bring fresh water to Paris and with a publishing venture to provide a definitive edition of Voltaire’s writings.

Beaumarchais' literary career began in 1767 with a play called *Eugenie*, a colossal flop. However, in 1775 his play with songs, *The Barber of Seville*, dubbed as a "comic opera," brought him instant acclaim. His battles over royalties for this work were instrumental in assuring authors the right to profit from their endeavors. He followed this with *The Marriage of Figaro*, which was first performed in 1784 after a prolonged battle with the censors, and an opera libretto *Tarare* (1787), with Mozart's rival Salieri. In 1792, inspired by his earlier success, he wrote a third Figaro play, *La mère coupable*, a work which is generally considered inferior to the other two.

Throughout his life, Beaumarchais had an incredible knack for being in the right place at the right time, combined with some amazing luck as well, which enabled him to escape the reign of terror which followed the French Revolution in the 1790s, and he died peacefully in bed in 1799.



## ROSSINI AND OPERATIC CONVENTIONS

To understand Rossini's style in this opera, we need to look at two traditions: the age-old *opera buffa* and the more recent, in Rossini's time, *bel canto* vocal style.

The term *opera buffa* refers to a highly stylized type of comedy which dominated Italian comic opera through the middle of the nineteenth century. It was so popular that buffa operas in Italian were in vogue even in non-Italian-speaking countries, most notably in Austria, where Mozart composed a number of such works for the Viennese court. Its roots go back to the "*commedia del arte*" improvisational comedy presented by strolling players throughout Europe. From this tradition *opera buffa* inherited the practice of relying on certain comic types: the young lovers, the hero's trusted friend, the blustering old man (generally a bass, referred to as a "*basso buffo*"). The stock-in-trade of this latter character type was the patter song, which has previously been discussed.

One notable feature of *opera buffa* is that it consists of several set pieces (arias, duets, ensembles) joined together by recitative, since Italian opera conventions – unlike those of French and German opera – did not, with a few rare exceptions, allow for spoken dialogue.

While in plot development the operas of Rossini stem from a long tradition, musically he was breaking new ground. Rossini is generally regarded at the first of the great *bel canto* (literally, "beautiful singing") composers. As mentioned earlier, he was instrumental in creating music for the mezzo-soprano (low female) voice, and he also helped develop the high baritone as a voice type distinct from the bass. Figaro is one of the earliest examples of this. Though there was no actual *bel canto* school of writers – the term *bel canto* was coined by Rossini in 1858, when he lamented that the tradition no longer existed – the composers of the time did seem to be united in developing a style of singing which, in the words of critic Owen Jander, consisted of "a naturally beautiful voice that was even in tone throughout its full range, careful training that encouraged effortless delivery of highly florid music, and a mastery of style that could not be taught, but only assimilated from listening to the best Italian exponents." In contrast to the Mozart-DaPonte operas, for example, the *bel canto* works make far more vocal demands on the singers. One

feature of the *bel canto* school was the development of *coloratura* singing, the sort of vocal acrobatics which have made superstars of numerous sopranos down through the ages.

*Bel canto* singing also allowed singers some latitude to improvise, much like modern jazz singers, though sometimes that could be taken to an extreme, as the young Adelina Patti discovered when she sang “Una voce poco fa” for Rossini, only to have him ask, “Who wrote the piece you just performed?”

One of Rossini’s greatest achievements was the advance he made in ensemble writing. As his career progressed, the use of ensembles, as opposed to solo arias, became much more prominent. Opera critic Michael Tanner attributes the strength of Rossini’s ensembles to the fact that “However much Rossini’s characters may loathe one another...they love collaborating,” giving these numbers an “incremental force” not to be found in Mozart’s operas, where the characters maintain their individuality rather than joining their voices for purely musical effect.

Though Rossini lived to see his style of writing written off as old fashioned, later generations, down to our own time, have continued to rediscover his works and find them as brilliant and fresh as anything that has been written since.



## SEVILLE IN OPERA

The setting of *The Barber of Seville* may have a particular resonance for Kansas City audiences, in that Seville is designated as Kansas City’s “sister city,” and the area’s most famous shopping area, the Country Club Plaza, is designed to remind us of Spain. Located in the south of Spain, Seville, the capital of Andalusia, has had a long association with the arts. During the time Spain was under Muslim control (AD 712-1248), the city became known for its skilled instrument makers, and after the Christians regained control of the area, it became known as a center of musical activity as well.

Paradoxically, while there is no Spanish operatic tradition, many composers have been fascinated by Spain in general and Seville in particular. Maybe they are intrigued by the picturesque nature of the area, or perhaps it is the fact that Spain strikes them as being an exotic locale, somewhat primitive but not quite as remote as the Middle East or the Orient, an area where raw passions come to the forefront more than in the supposedly more civilized European nations. The Spanish locale might have appealed to Beaumarchais because the style of life depicted in *Barber*, in which a woman could be made a virtual prisoner in her own home, seemed to fit that culture more than it did France – an idea made explicit in the play, when Bartolo chides Rosina by telling her that she is not free to go out on her own as French women do.

In any event, many of the world’s most famous operas are set wholly or partially in Seville. We have already mentioned the fact that *The Barber of Seville* has been adapted numerous times for the operatic stage. One could also add the various sequels and spinoffs, the most famous of which is Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* (though that opera is set on an estate outside of the city and does not include the sights and sounds of Seville itself). Bizet’s *Carmen* contrasts the licentious life of the big city of Seville with that of the simple village in which Don José and Micæla were raised. In Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, it is a place sufficiently exotic that a statue could come to life. Among the other well-known operas that take place in that area one should mention Handel’s *Rodrigo*, Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, Verdi’s *La forza del destino* (*The Force of Destiny*), Prokofiev’s *Betrothal in a Monastery*, and several adaptations of Spain’s most famous work of fiction,

Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Best known among these are Jules Massenet's *Don Quichotte* (a masterpiece that is performed far too infrequently) and Mitch Leigh's *Man of La Mancha*, a Broadway-style musical drama that has enough operatic features to be performed by opera companies, including the Lyric Opera in the Company's "Spanish Spring" 1989 spring season.



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(Some material in this booklet has been repeated from earlier booklets in this series.)