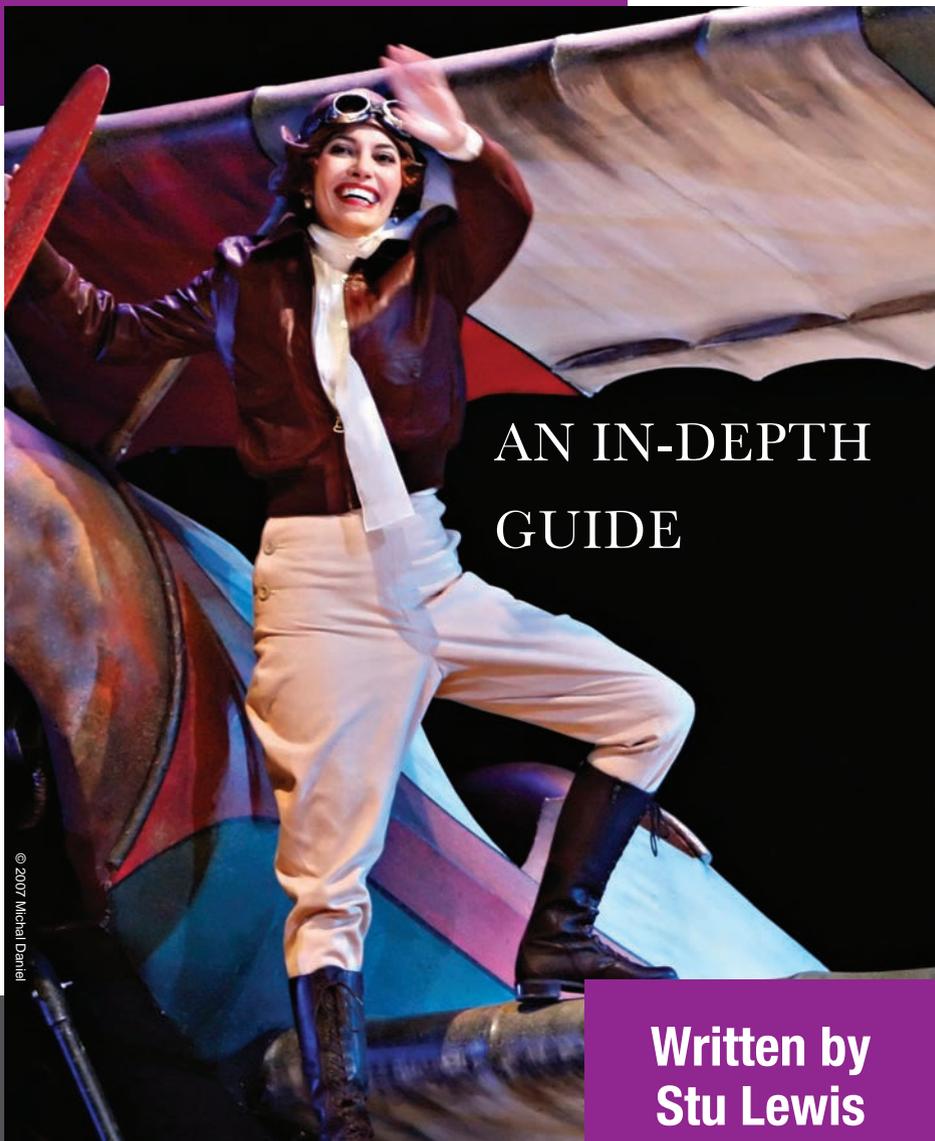


ROSSINI'S

# THE ITALIAN GIRL IN ALGIERS



## AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE

Written by  
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# ROSSINI'S WOMAN OF VALOR

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“Cruda sorte” – cruel fate! These are the first words we hear from Isabella, the title character of Rossini’s *L’Italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Girl in Algiers*). Captured by pirates, looking – in vain, she believes – for her lover, soon to be forced to become part of an Arab potentate’s harem, she certainly is someone who has the right to sing the blues, or at least the nineteenth-century Italian equivalent. And so she does – for twenty-six bars – which is all the time that a Rossini heroine has for self-pity. As she moves to the up-tempo cabaletta, she reminds us that no man, however powerful, could possibly control an intelligent woman.

And so it goes with the Rossini mezzo. Like Rosina in *The Barber of Seville*, who acts docile as long as she has her way and turns into a viper when she doesn’t, Isabella clearly has the inner resources to come out on top. Critic Andreas Richter calls her a “female Don Giovanni” – albeit, without the latter’s amorality. As the Don had the three principal female characters in the opera gravitating toward him, Isabella wins the affection of three men – one of each voice type – manipulating two of them mercilessly. (Another similarity: like Mozart’s opera, *l’Italiana* is labelled a “dramma giocosa” – a jolly drama). *L’Italiana* is a rescue opera, but, as Beethoven was to do years later in *Fidelio*, Rossini and Anelli turn the rescue theme on its head by making the woman the rescuer.

In his book *Viva la Liberta: Politics in Opera*, Anthony Arblaster sees this elevation of women as typical of comic opera: “*Opera buffa* had this subversive background from the start, and it is not surprising to find... in opera as in drama, a reversal of the normal power relations between men and women....Men can laugh at this, too, secure in the knowledge of their

real power and privilege; women may well respond more fervently, and identify themselves more deeply with these fables of fortunes reversed and vain fools outwitted.” In this opera, the superior abilities of women are taken for granted. Isabella even goes beyond other opera heroines of the era in her efforts to introduce her liberated ideals into the Arab world, telling her Algerian counterpart that the key to a successful marriage is for the woman to take control.

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of romanticism, a literary movement which idealized women. Richard Wagner introduced the principle of the “eternal feminine.” However, Rossini’s heroines are a far cry from Wagner’s self-sacrificing heroines. They are assertive women who get what they want for themselves while – in the case of Isabella and Angelina (Cinderella) at least – making the world around them a better place. It might be an anachronism to call Rossini and his librettists feminists, but it is clear that they understood and admired “girl power.” The libretto for this opera was a rewrite of an earlier one by the same librettist for a different composer, and scholars who have studied both versions have noted that Rossini clearly wanted to make Isabella stronger in his version. *L’Italiana* is clearly a fantasy, but it is one we all can enjoy.

# CAST, CHARACTERS AND ARTISTS

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General character information is listed below. To view the actual cast and artists in the Lyric Opera 2014-15 season production of *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, visit [www.kcopera.org/productions/the-italian-girl-14/artists](http://www.kcopera.org/productions/the-italian-girl-14/artists).

**Mustafa** – Bey of Algiers (Bass)

**Elvira** – Mustafa's wife (Soprano)

**Zulma** – her confidant/maid (Mezzo-Soprano)

**Haly** – Mustafa's assistant (Bass)

**Lindoro** – a young Italian prisoner (Tenor)

**Isabella** – a young Italian woman (Mezzo-Soprano)

**Taddeo** – an elderly suitor of Isabella (Baritone)

Male chorus representing eunuchs of the court, pirates, and Italian prisoners

# BRIEF SYNOPSIS

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## Act 1

Algiers 1930s – In the palace, Mustafa declares he no longer loves his wife Elvira. Instead, he desires a more interesting Italian woman to join his harem. Elvira laments that her husband no longer loves her; she yearns to be desired by him again. Mustafa tasks his right hand man, Haly, with finding him a new Italian wife. He also informs Haly that he will give Elvira to his recently acquired Italian slave, Lindoro, as a wife. Lindoro enters, yearning to be reunited with his true love, Isabella.

Elsewhere in Algiers, Isabella has landed her plane in search of her love, Lindoro. She is accompanied by Taddeo. When discovered and captured by Haly, Taddeo says that he is Isabella's uncle, although truly, he is an unwanted suitor who desires Isabella as well. Regardless, Isabella and Taddeo decide to work together. Haly is overjoyed when he discovers that Isabella is Italian. He decides to bring Isabella to Mustafa so that she can be his new, Italian wife.

Back at the palace, Mustafa tells Lindoro that he can be free and return to Italy, so long as he takes Elvira with him. Lindoro agrees as he does not see any other options but Elvira does not want to help Lindoro to freedom; she still loves Mustafa and does not want to leave. Haly arrives, announcing that he has found a new wife for Mustafa. When Mustafa sees Isabella, he is instantly captivated by her. However, Isabella sees him as an obstacle to overcome. Across the room, she spots her love, Lindoro. To prevent Lindoro from leaving, she convinces Mustafa that he cannot banish his own wife and that he should make Lindoro her personal slave. Mustafa concedes.

## Act II

Isabella scolds Lindoro for agreeing to leave with Elvira, feeling betrayed. But Lindoro reassures her of his love and they agree to trick Mustafa and escape together. Mustafa appoints Taddeo as his “Grand Kaimakan,” his personal bodyguard, in exchange for his assistance in winning Isabella’s love. Taddeo does not wish for this position but agrees reluctantly.

Isabella prepares to meet Mustafa and gives Elvira advice on how to make her husband desire her again. Once she is ready, she invites in Mustafa for coffee. Mustafa is joined by Taddeo, who does not leave when signaled by a sneeze from Mustafa. Much to Mustafa’s dismay, Isabella invites Elvira to join them for coffee too.

Haly is concerned that Isabella may be too cunning for Mustafa. Later, Taddeo tells Lindoro that he is actually Isabella’s love. Lindoro pretends to concede so that they may plot an escape together. An angry Mustafa enters and Lindoro convinces him that Isabella is truly in love with him. In fact, she is going to appoint him with a great Italian honor, the order of the Pappataci. All Mustafa has to do to fulfill his obligation is eat, drink, sleep and most importantly, ignore everything around him.

As an initiation to Mustafa’s new position, Isabella and Lindoro throw Mustafa a feast. To provoke Mustafa, Isabella and Lindoro leave together. Refusing to break the rules of his new order, Mustafa continues to focus on eating and drinking. Not until it is too late, do Taddeo and Mustafa realize they both have been tricked, and Isabella and Lindoro have escaped. Mustafa decides that Italian women are too cunning for him and he takes back Elvira as his wife.

# DETAILED PLOT OUTLINE

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## Overture

In Rossini's time, the overture was generally looked upon as an opportunity for the audience members to settle into their seats rather than being an integral part of the drama. Rossini sometimes recycled overtures from previous operas rather than writing new ones. Nevertheless, the overture to this opera is remarkable in its use of orchestration, especially the parts for the individual woodwind instruments, and it builds to a rousing climax, anticipating the frantic action to follow.

Rossini and Anelli set the opera in their own time period. The following description refers to the Lyric's updated production.

## ACT I

The chorus, consisting of eunuchs of Bey Musstafa's court, function as a sort of Greek chorus, commenting on the action, with no consistent allegiance to one person or the other. They lament the fact that the Bey has decided to exile his wife, Elvira. Elvira laments the loss of her husband's affection and is consoled by her attendant, Zulma. Mustafa enters and declares that his mind is made up and that he will indeed terminate his marriage. A rapid-fire ensemble, the first of many which characterize this opera, ensues.

The next dialogue is written in recitative, the sung speech which in Italian opera takes the place of spoken dialogue. Mustafa tells Haly to summon his prisoner, Lindoro, whom he intends to marry to Elvira. He ignores Haly's objection, and he orders his deputy, on pain of death, to find him an Italian woman.

A shift of scene takes us to Lindoro, who, after a languid melodic introduction on the French horn, sings a melancholy aria “Languir per una bella,” lamenting his separation from his lost love. In typical *bel canto* style, the solo ends with an up-tempo section, referred to as a cabaletta. Mustafa enters and offers him an opportunity to return to Italy if he will agree to marry Elvira. However, Lindoro tells Mustafa that he is sure no woman whom he proposes can meet his standards. The two men banter back and forth in a lively duet.

The scene shifts to a desert oasis, where a bi-plane has crashed and fallen into the Algerians’ hands. The various passengers are led in, and finally Isabella makes her appearance. In the aria “Cruda sorte,” which has become a staple in the repertoire of any Rossini mezzo, she laments her cruel fate, but in the cabaletta she expresses her confidence that she will be able to use her feminine wiles to come out on top.

Taddeo, a somewhat older man who has been courting her, makes his entrance, and to protect him, she tells her captors that he is her uncle. Haly rejoices that an Italian woman has fallen into his hands. Left alone, Isabella and Taddeo have what could be described as a lovers’ spat, but they agree to work together to effect their ultimate escape.

The scene shifts back to the palace, where Mustafa reiterates his offer to Lindoro: passage back to Italy if he will marry Elvira and take her with him. While Lindoro is pondering his predicament, Haly enters and gives Mustafa the news of Isabella’s capture. Elvira tells Zulma that she still loves her husband in spite of everything, and she is cool to Lindoro’s advice that she will have her choice of lovers and husbands in Italy.

They exit. Mustafa awaits the entrance of Isabella. Seeing Mustafa, she sings a flirtatious staccato melody, which is echoed by Mustafa, and the two join voices at the end of the duet. Taddeo enters demanding to see his “niece,” and the three join in a trio in which all three are at cross purposes.

Elvira, Zulma, and Lindoro enter to say their goodbyes as they prepare to depart for Italy. Lindoro and Isabella are amazed to see each other. Learning that Mustafa is divorcing Elvira in order to court her, Isabella says she could never love a man who would be so cruel to his wife. She demands that Mustafa take his wife back; moreover, she asks that Lindoro be given to her as her personal slave.

It appears to have been a convention in Rossini’s time that the characters join in an ensemble in which they all express how confused they are. Such an ensemble occurs at the end of Act I of *The Barber of Seville*, and there are no fewer than three such ensembles in *La Cenerentola*. The ensemble which closes this act may be the wildest of them all. Elvira imagines that she hears bells ringing in her head, Lindoro hears a hammer going “tac tac,” Taddeo hears crowing, “cra cra,” and Mustafa hears a drum going “boom boom.” There is no point in making sense of all this; in the words of Melina Esse, “Many of these moments depend on the transformation of the human into something machine-like.” Paul Robinson goes even further, describing this ensemble as a satire directed at the conventions of opera buffa: “he satirizes the entire tradition of operatic ensemble by having his characters sing onomatopoeic noises, as if were instruments rather than voices...Rossini’s point is...what one normally hears in an operatic ensemble verges on the instrumental – a confection of homogenized, interwoven musical lines, whose inarticulateness

grows more pronounced as the music moves toward a climax.” Elvira’s high soprano voice soars above the others as the curtain falls.

## Act II

As in the first act, the chorus introduces the action, this time expressing their bewilderment at the way that the Bey has been possessed by love. Elvira, Zulma, and Lindoro concur. Mustafa enters, visibly lovesick, and asks for Isabella to be brought to him.

The scene shifts to Isabella and Lindoro, having their first moment alone together. Isabella fears that Lindoro has been unfaithful, but he explains that he has offered only to escort Elvira, not to marry her. Lindoro sings a brief aria expressing his joy at being reunited with Isabella.

They exit, and Mustafa enters. Taddeo rushes onto the scene, complaining that he is being pursued by one of Mustafa’s soldiers. However, Mustafa explains that the pursuit is based on Mustafa’s intention to honor Taddeo (in an attempt to get on Isabella’s good side) by making Taddeo his Kaimakan (governor). Taddeo reluctantly accepts, though he sings an aria expressing his discomfort in taking on this role.

The scene shifts to Isabella’s quarters, where Elvira enters to tell Isabella that she has been invited to have coffee with Mustafa. Taking pity on Elvira, Isabella tries to persuade her to be more assertive in her relationship with her husband. As her three potential lovers hide to observe her, Isabella sings the aria “Per lui che adoro” (for him whom I adore), allowing each of the three to believe she is singing of him alone.

Mustafa tells Taddeo that he wants to be alone with Isabella. He is to escort her to him and then leave when he gives the signal by sneezing. In the ensuing quintet (involving Elvira and Lindoro as well), Taddeo deliberately ignores the repetitive sneezes which become part of the music. To further foil Mustafa's plans, Isabella has invited Elvira to join their tete-a-tete.

The characters exit in various directions, and Haly and Zulma are left on stage to express their own amusement at the situation. Haly sings an aria praising the charms of Italian women.

Lindoro and Taddeo now get together, and on the fly they devise a plan to allow for their escape. They will tell Mustafa that Isabella has decided that she will invite Mustafa to be her "pappatacci," a made-up word which means something like "silent husband." The induction ceremony will provide the diversion they need to plan their escape. They tell Mustafa of this supposed "honor." The duty of a pappatacci, they explain, is to eat, drink, and sleep, and to ignore any shenanigans going on around him.

In the meantime, Isabella gathers the Italian captives and sings them words of encouragement, "Pensa alla patria" (Think of your country). Nearly thirty years before Verdi's "Va pensiero" from *Nabucco* was to inflame Italian nationalism, this call for patriotism for a not yet independent nation must have seemed radical indeed. There was apparently no problem including this aria in Venice, which was controlled by the French, whom many Italians regarded as liberators; in productions in other parts of Italy, however, it was frequently banned.

The induction ceremony takes place as planned. To be sure that Mustafa has been sufficiently duped, Isabella flirts with Lindoro, and in compliance with the pappatacci code, Mustafa turns the other way. Isabella and Lindoro begin to board a hot air balloon, and Mustafa ignores the warnings he hears. Finally, when it is too late, Mustafa decides that he has had enough of liberated Italian women, and he reconciles with his wife. All (except maybe for Taddeo) are happy with the outcome, and everyone joins in a tribute to the cleverness of the female sex as the balloon flies away and the curtain falls.

# ONLINE RESOURCES

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Our favorite *The Italian Girl* video clips from fellow opera companies:

[www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLs0evScqLO\\_uaqvBDSLUGlo7PCJkwCaJI](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLs0evScqLO_uaqvBDSLUGlo7PCJkwCaJI)

Photos and renderings previewing the production:

[www.flickr.com/photos/kcopera/sets/72157642168832053/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/kcopera/sets/72157642168832053/)

*The Italian Girl* musical highlights:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNIXyf1HYGA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNIXyf1HYGA)

# GIOCHINO ROSSINI AND *L'ITALIANA IN ALGERI*

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The son of two musicians, Gioachino Rossini (jo-KEE-no roh-SEE-nee) was born in Pesaro (now in Italy) on February 29, 1792. As has been the case with most great composers, his musical talent was recognized at an early age, and by age twelve he was already singing professionally in Bologna, where he was able to advance his music education at the conservatory. At age eighteen he received his first commission to write an opera, and by the age of twenty-one he had already written two successful comedies, one of which, *Il Signor Bruschino*, is still performed occasionally. Early in 1813 he received a commission for his first *opera seria* (serious opera) – *Tancredi* – a hastily written work which had its premiere February 6, 1813 and was notable for Rossini's innovative use of the chorus (which previously had not been used in such works) and the minimal use of recitative.

In May of the same year he received a commission for a comic opera to be performed during carnival season in Venice. The company had experienced a cancellation and needed a new work in a hurry. Rather than start from scratch, the company decided to recycle a libretto which had been used before, Angelo Anelli's *L'Italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Girl* – or woman – *in Algiers*), which had originally been set to music by Mosca in 1808, though to fit Rossini's style, the librettist made several revisions for the new production. At the time of its origin it had been "ripped from the headlines," to use a modern term, as there had been a well-publicized incident a few years earlier when a young Italian woman, Antoinietta Frapollo, had been kidnapped and forced to become part of the Sultan's harem in Algiers. Though the specific incident was no longer front-page news, Venice's position as an important center of trade had created a strong interest in all things Oriental. (Years later a similar

craze for Japanese culture in England was to inspire Gilbert and Sullivan to create *The Mikado*.)

Working to meet a tight deadline, Rossini farmed out the writing of the recitatives and a couple of short arias, and writing at his usual break-neck speed, he composed the opera in less than a month. The May 22 premiere was a huge popular success, leading the composer to comment, "I thought that when they heard my opera, the Venetians would decide I was crazy. But they have shown themselves to be crazier than I am." At first Rossini received some criticism for using a story which had previously been set to music, but the audiences and critics soon realized the vast superiority of Rossini's approach.

Three years later Rossini received similar criticism when he chose to create a new operatic version of *The Barber of Seville*, which was already the subject of a popular opera by Giovanni Paisiello, but as was the case with *L'Italiana*, the public soon recognized the superiority of Rossini's work. This work, which today is Rossini's most popular opera, drew praise from several famous composers, including Verdi, who acclaimed it as the most beautiful *opera buffa* (comic opera) in existence. Later the same year, long before Verdi brought Shakespeare to the Italian operatic stage, he composed *Otello*. He followed this with *La Cenerentola* (*Cinderella*), an opera whose popularity has grown in recent years due to its being championed by popular mezzo-sopranos Cecilia Bartoli and Joyce DiDonato.

Like all great opera composers, Rossini was always aware of the importance of integrating the music with the plot. He frequently demanded revisions in the librettos he was given. In one instance he complained to a librettist, "You have provided me with verses but not with situations."

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From 1817 to 1822 he lived in Naples, where he composed many of his most significant works, though none has achieved the lasting popularity of his earlier comic operas. Once again he anticipated Verdi by writing *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 (though apparently not exclusive) relationship 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 significant influence on 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 final 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 this probably does not tell the entire story. It may be that he was simply burned out and eager to retire once he accumulated sufficient wealth. 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 encroaching 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.

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For nearly forty years Rossini lived on at 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 name Olympe Pelissier, whom he eventually married when his estranged wife passed away.

Though Rossini is seen today as one of the great innovators in Italian music, his apparent lack of interest in new trends caused him to be regarded as a reactionary, and critics decried his lack of seriousness. There exists a transcript of his meeting with Richard Wagner (albeit, from notes taken by Wagner's colleague) in which he defended the old operatic conventions against the criticisms of the young German, who was taking opera down an entirely different path.

Rossini died in 1868 at the age of 76, apparently of a heart attack. Today he is generally regarded as the greatest Italian composer prior to Verdi (though this position could be challenged by a renewed interest in the works of Donizetti), and his reputation has grown in recent years with a revival of bel canto singing and a greater of understanding of the way in which his operas paved the way for the romantic operas of his successors.

# ANGELO ANELLI

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Angelo Anelli wrote forty opera librettos, but it is unlikely that you will ever see a production of any of his works other than *L'Italiana in Algeri*. Born November 1, 1761, he was educated in the classics and was a professor of both Forensic Oratory and Judicial Procedure. He provided librettos for several of the leading opera composers of his day, including Paccini (not to be confused with Puccini) and Paer, though these men are now considered footnotes in music history. He was also known for his interest in Freemasonry. He died April 9, 1820.

# ROSSINI AND OPERATIC CONVENTIONS

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*L'Italiana in Algeri* represents two important trends in the history of opera – the *opera buffa*, which determines the structure of the opera, and the *bel canto*, a term given to the style of singing.

*Opera buffa* was a highly stylized form of comedy which originated in the early eighteenth century and flourished in the final decades of that century and on into the early nineteenth century. It had its origins in the *commedia del arte*, a form of improvisational comedy popular in the Renaissance, which could be seen as the forerunner of today's improv comedy. (Movie fans may recall the appearance of such a troupe in Bergmann's *The Seventh Seal*. Some critics have seen the Marx Brothers as the literary descendants of this style.) *Commedia del arte* performers also appear in two well-known operas: the play-within-a-play in *Pagliacci* and the strolling comedians who interact with the more serious characters in *Ariadne auf Naxos*. One feature which *opera buffa* inherited from *commedia del arte* was the use of comic types such as the attractive young lovers, the trusted confidante, and the blustering old man, generally a bass, referred to as a *basso buffo*. These operas generally depict the triumph of clever young people over their foolish elders.

Perhaps the most important innovation introduced by *opera buffa* was its focus on elaborate ensembles. In *opera seria* (serious opera), the most popular genre of opera prior to the introduction of the *buffa* form, the focus was on solo arias which would give singers the opportunity to display their vocal skills. In *opera buffa*, the composers who were most admired were those who could keep several melodic lines in play, advancing the plot by having several characters express their conflicting emotions simultaneously. 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."

The *buffa* style unfortunately belonged to a brief period of time. No one writes such operas today, though some of Gian-Carlo Menotti's operas in the mid-twentieth century (*The Old Maid and the Thief*, *The Telephone*, and *Amelia Goes to the Ball*) have some *buffa* elements. One composer who was greatly influenced by Rossini was Arthur Sullivan, whose patter songs such as "Modern Major General" appear to be modelled on those found in Rossini's comic operas.

As for the style of singing, Rossini was the first major composer of the *bel canto*, literally "beautiful singing," era. There was no actual "bel canto school." In fact, Rossini coined the term in 1858, when he lamented that this style of singing no longer existed – he did not care for the harsher sounds of Wagnerian opera. Opera historian Owen Jander describes *bel canto* as "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." Such singing made more vocal demands on singers than the operas of earlier composers, such as Mozart. One feature of such operas was the *coloratura* style, with its vocal pyrotechnics which has made superstars of numerous sopranos down through the ages.

*Bel canto* also allowed singers some latitude to improvise, much like a modern jazz singer, though Rossini felt that the trend had gone too far. It was reported that when Adelina Patti sang an aria from *The Barber of Seville* for Rossini, he replied, "Who wrote that piece you just sang?"

For several years *bel canto* was decried as old fashioned, but it was rediscovered in the later part of the twentieth century, championed by singers such as Beverly Sills and Joan Sutherland, under whose influence audiences have been able to rediscover several long-neglected works of the major *bel canto* composers.

# COMEDY IN OPERA

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Let's face it – when the subject of ridiculous opera plots comes up, *L'Italiana* has to be near the top of the list, right after Mozart and DaPonte's *Così fan tutte*. Could any ruler be as totally clueless as Mustafa? Would anyone follow such a leader loyally, as do the Algerians in this opera? Would a leader who captured a beautiful young woman feel the need to court her rather than taking her by force?

This is not simply to apply modern standards to an opera written over two centuries ago. A reviewer at the time of the opera's premiere noted, "If we look for customs, habits, truthfulness in action, there is in this book no trace of authenticity." Many critics in Rossini's own day attacked his lack of seriousness, his appeal to the irrational, and his use of stale formulas. Standahl's comment on *La Cenerentola*, that it was "lacking in some essential quality of ideal beauty," might well have applied to the other comedies as well.

Moreover, some critics have criticized Rossini for his inability to create fully rounded characters. Critic Paul Robinson's description of Rosina's aria in *The Barber of Seville* could equally apply to Isabella's "Cruda sorte": "Rosina has displayed herself for our benefit, and when she has finished, we are entirely convinced of one thing; she is ...an opera singer....It would make no difference...if Rosina were singing about her resolve to become an opera singer."

Let us grant that in comparison with Mozart, Rossini does not give us fully developed characters. Even *Così fan tutte* gives us three-dimensional characters placed in absurd situations. Whereas Mozart tugs at our heartstrings, Rossini goes for the funny bone.

But is this a fault? Comedy has often relied on absurd situations, and the villains or antagonists in classic comedies are often as obtuse as Mustafa. Consider, for example, the Germans in “Hogan’s Heroes,” the various characters played by Margaret Dumont, or even Wiley Coyote. Sometimes the protagonists themselves can be clueless, as in “I Love Lucy” or “Three’s Company,” shows which had lengthy runs on network television. Does comedy need believable characters to be successful? Were “M\*A\*S\*H” and “All in the Family” better shows than “Seinfeld” and “Cheers”? Clearly there is room for both.

What we need to realize is that an opera is not simply a stage play set to music. It has its own logic, where the medium truly is the message. We can identify with the plight of Isabella, Lindoro, and Elvira not because we see them as real human beings but because we want to see decent people triumph over foolishness and tyranny. It is not the words which lead to this identification but the infectious power of Rossini’s melodies that allows us to leave the theater with our spirits uplifted.

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