

# Forever Young

## The Underrated Pleasures of Rossini's Operas

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Gioacchino Rossini was born 231 years ago on February 29, 1792, three months after Mozart's death. But because he was a leap year baby, he has officially celebrated only 55 birthdays, the same trick used by Frederick in *The Pirates of Penzance*, being only 'five, and a little bit over', to get out of his piracy indenture.

The calendrical anomaly would have delighted Rossini, as he loved a good laugh, and most of the lore about Rossini focuses not on his music, but on his *bon-vivant* status and various pithy sayings. One understands this, because he had quite a way with them: "one cannot understand Wagner's *Lohengrin* on one hearing, and I certainly don't intend on hearing it twice."

When he heard the world's most famous singer, soprano Adelina Patti, sing Rosina's famous aria from his *The Barber of Seville*, dripping with vocal decorations that he disliked, he said to her, "what a delightful aria; I wonder who wrote it?"

There is constant confusion about the spelling of his name: Gioachino, with one 'c' is the most common spelling in Italy, but a double 'c' was also not uncommon, rendering him Gioacchino, and he seems to have corrected whatever spelling was used to its alternative, creating endless confusion that he also must have enjoyed. One thing is not disputed, which is how to pronounce his first name, which is "Joe-AAAH-ki-no", and not what one too often hears on public radio, "Joe-a-KI-no".

For various reasons, most people recognize music by Rossini, even if they don't know it is his, especially his *William Tell* overture, for reasons discussed shortly. Rossini composed a tune that was easily the most popular of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, known across the spectrum of society, parodied ruthlessly in Wagner's *Meistersinger*, and now heard only by opera connoisseurs: "Di tanti palpiti" from his opera *Tancredi*, which he wrote on the eve of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. This was a tune that literally went around the world in an era when that was very difficult.

You can easily listen to many great performances of this wonderful aria on youtube.com, but I suggest listening to Cecilia Bartoli's with Giuseppe Patané conducting.

Rossini would likely tire of hearing the tiresome 'cat' duet accredited to him, as he had nothing whatsoever with writing it. This duet, always announced as "Rossini's 'Cat' Duet", was arranged using music *by* Rossini, from his *Otello*, an opera that obviously has nothing to do with felines, who had to await a famous British musical in the 1980s for their theatrical moment.

Before Rossini's most famous opera, there were at least ten operas based on Beaumarchais's play *The Barber of Seville* by the time Mozart wrote his *Marriage of Figaro* in the 1780s, and broad knowledge of Figaro's characters was undoubtedly one of the motivators for him to write it. It isn't so different to today's rival movie studios creating several films of similar subjects.

Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, though dramatically the prequel to *The Marriage of Figaro*, was composed nearly thirty years after Mozart's opera, and its premiere was a famous fiasco, largely because of a cabal organized by friends of the composer Paisiello, who had composed a beloved version of *The Barber of Seville* that was then popular, now totally forgotten.

Rossini was much more than what is perpetuated in legends about him. He was a titanic composer nearly on the level of Beethoven and Mozart, certainly on the level of Haydn, and he had few equals. He was incredibly prolific, and he also reached a point in his 30s where he simply stopped and composed no more for nearly 40 years. This has come down through lore as laziness, but that is too easy. No one makes a decision like that for mundane reasons.

Rossini was unhappy with the directions opera was taking. Rossini was, stylistically, much closer to those who preceded him: Beethoven, Mozart, Cherubini, and Haydn, than he was to the contemporaries to whom he is always linked: Bellini, Donizetti, the young Verdi, or the now-forgotten Mercadante, who was the most renowned when they were all alive.

Rossini disdained everything he considered ‘modern’, which ultimately meant nearly every composer of his own era. He loved the past and wanted to perpetuate it. When he couldn’t, because no one can, he just stopped. His lifelong French pension probably nudged his decision-making.

One of the proudest moments of my career, one I will never forget, was conducting the American premiere of Rossini’s extraordinary *Ermione* 30 years ago at San Francisco Opera.

*Ermione* is one of Rossini’s absolute masterpieces. Thankfully, there are many of them, almost all of which are unknown to most operatic publics outside of the festival in Rossini’s hometown of Pesaro, a gorgeous city three hours east of Florence. *Ermione* in San Francisco marked the American debut of the Italian soprano Anna Caterina Antonacci in the title role. She was, with no hyperbole, one of the most extraordinary artists I have ever encountered. I was so excited to welcome her to HGO as the old Prioress in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, but the pandemic prevented her travel. How fortunate we were that the sublime Patricia Racette could fill in for her.

Anna Caterina brought Rossini to such life that even now, 3 decades later, I can still hear her singing certain phrases. She had that quality that all great stars have: she sounded like no one else. She also, quite uniquely, responded to even the slightest minutiae in the baton. Her powers of concentration were tremendous; she had one of the purest performance focuses I’ve ever experienced.

Maria Callas had this, as evidenced by the famous Paris concert in which the chorus gets hopelessly lost during the aria “Casta Diva” from Bellini’s *Norma*. Lesser singers might have been undone by such a total trainwreck, but Callas simply stayed with the conductor, ignoring the chorus, and she, not the conductor, was the one who eventually set them right.

The relationship of composers to place is something too little studied: standing in Pesaro, Rossini's music seems to seep up out of the Italian soil – but isn't this just successful marketing? Rossini spent very little of his life in the place after being born there. He was largely (in every sense of that word) a Parisian, but not even Rossini's French operas feel very French. He had an Italian soul, something more quantifiable than now, but he certainly also had Parisian tastes. He was fond of the good life.

There are other places where composers spent a great bulk of their lives where one still seems to hear them always: Handel's London, Bach's Leipzig, Britten's Aldeburgh, and most famously and successfully, Mozart's Salzburg, an association so strong that the composer Richard Strauss started the storied Salzburg Festival in order to capture it. Late at night after a performance in Salzburg, with the moon illuminating the mountains, one does indeed hear fragments of Mozart as though they were hanging in the air, helping us forget that he didn't much like his hometown. Of course, in the daytime one also hears "Do-Re-Mi" from the very-American *The Sound of Music* broadcast from every available spot. Places are potent when music is associated with them.

*Ermione* was revelatory. It is one of Rossini's greatest operas, and every bit as dramatically potent as the great, if forgotten, French drama on which it is based, *Andromaque* by Jean Racine. The opera was written for Rossini's first wife, Isabella Colbran, one of the 18 operas (!) he composed for her. They must have had an extraordinary relationship, for they stayed in love even after parting, and even as Colbran lay dying from the venereal disease he gave her. Oh, to have heard her as *Ermione*, and oh, to do that opera again with a great singing actress.

As I was conducting *Ermione* for the 1993 Rossini Festival in San Francisco, one of the other operas in repertory was *L'Italiana in Algeri* in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's production, produced especially for Marilyn Horne, who was then 59 years old, an age at which most singers would not dream of performing a role as vocally taxing as Isabella, the title character of the opera.

In a memory I carry on my shoulder always, I would attend the second act of *L'Italiana* and stand just offstage right, as close as I could get without the audience seeing me, solely to hear her sing "Per lui che adoro". Marilyn, knowing I was there because I always was, would in the later performances drift downstage right,

only feet from me, to sing the aria's exquisite *pianissimo* second section. Invariably, I would cry being so close to such extraordinary vocalism, and she would exit the stage and give me a big hug. It is perhaps my favorite Rossinian memory.

Relative to other arts like painting or drama, western music is so young that we don't have a lot of language for it. This means we most often have to borrow words from philosophy, literature, or painting to describe music. Rossini's music, inevitably, is described in words more often associated with food: 'bubbly' or 'sunny' or 'crackling', as though his scores were something you bake or sauté. He would have liked all of the culinary allusions as much as he loved the ultra-rich *Tournedos Rossini* named after him, a filet mignon pan-fried in butter, then topped with fried foie-gras. Not for the faint of heart or artery.

I love the Rossini comedies as much as anyone, but his greatest operas are dramas. *Tancredi*, *Otello*, *Mosé in Egitto* (Moses in Egypt), which exists also in a French version as *Moïse et Pharaon*, the finale of which is the parting of the Red Sea, *Ermione*, *Maometto II*, *Semiramide*, and his final *William Tell*, which ends with one of the great moments in opera's long history: a great C Major sunburst on the word *liberté* (liberty) that seems to open a world of music previously unknown before he composed it. This is not the music of a simple comedian who was adept at writing music – this is vital, thrilling, soaring music.

He is widely known now really only for *The Barber of Seville* and to a lesser degree, thanks to Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's extraordinary production that revived the opera for our era, his version of Cinderella, *La Cenerentola*, which is another of Rossini's extraordinary masterpieces. The greatest comedies of all genres, in addition to making us laugh, give us ideas about how to live. No matter how simple or silly *Barber* or *Cenerentola* may seem on their surfaces, they both carry important truths, chiefly that forgiveness is everything in life.

Rossini was ripe for American children's cartoons in their heyday because his music was so lively and...that awfully overused word...bubbly. Rossini has been retroactively criticized for using the same music for both serious and comic operas, and the interesting tale of his famous overture for *The Barber of Seville* is a good case in point. It served as the overture to three operas: a drama, tragedy, and a comedy. Can such 'all purpose' use of an overture be taken seriously? The range of

music's emotions in Rossini's time was not so limited as in ours: what we hear as a comic overture to *The Barber of Seville* is not actually comic in itself, but has become comic because of its more-contemporary associations in cartoons and commercials.

It goes similarly with perhaps Rossini's most famous composition, his overture to his epic opera *William Tell*, which is a brilliant four-part tone poem that miniaturizes the Swiss setting of the story, and the opera's subject, which is the liberation of Switzerland from the Holy Roman Empire in the 17th Century. But so strong is the association with *The Lone Ranger* that it is probably useless to hope it can ever be thought of any other way. Never mind that *The Lone Ranger* has not been produced on network television since 1957, and its time of maximum popularity was nearly a century ago in the 1930s on radio, where nearly 3000 episodes were produced. Poor Rossini – but he probably wouldn't mind being known, however he was known.

One of my very favorite movies is the 1989 British film *The Tall Guy*, an utterly hilarious film that is now mostly forgotten in the way most movies are. Rossini's music plays a wonderful and unusual role within it. One can't help feeling he would have enjoyed the use of his music in this film, for Emma Thompson and Jeff Goldblum, each early in their movie careers, have one of the most delightfully and purposefully overdone sex scenes imaginable set to Rossini's overture to *La gazza ladra*, (*The Thieving Magpie*). The whole film is a riot, but this scene holds a special place. It will never have the associations of *The Lone Ranger*, but it is indelible.

Rossini bridged several worlds. He had a famous meeting with Wagner in Paris, and the account of their meeting by Stendhal is entertaining reading. But there was a much more important composer-to-composer meeting in Rossini's life. In April 1822 Vienna launched a Rossini celebration which Rossini attended. He had just turned 30, and he had only one wish: to meet Beethoven. Rossini walked himself over to Beethoven's home at the time, one of 60 apartments in which the moody composer lived during his Viennese years. Beethoven praised *The Barber of Seville*, but Rossini was despondent meeting the slovenly and irritable man living in relative squalor. We sadly don't know what else they talked about.

The feeling of conducting Rossini is one of levitating weightlessness, which is only to say that it is as challenging as any other type of weight loss. This isn't something so simple as playing or singing lighter; quite the opposite: it requires playing and singing truer. Rossini demanded that singers have the freedom and flexibility of instrumentalists, and one of the enormous challenges of singing Rossini is the number of times he seems to think the human voice is a clarinet or a French horn, easily capable of huge skips and fast notes. This, of course, is a great compliment to clarinetists and hornists, for whom huge skips and fast notes are achieved through years of mastery, but they accomplish this with an instrument outside their body; singers can't do that so easily.

Think of an aria like 'Tanti affetti', which is the finale of his opera *La Donna del Lago*, (*The Lady of the Lake*). If there is a more ebullient expression of vocal joy in opera, I'm not sure what it would be. The vocal line at the beginning of the aria floats over a skeletal accompaniment – a common Rossinian trait – like light fog hovering over a lake. Then the fun really begins: a rondo in three parts in which the vocal line becomes more and more florid each time, nearly jumping off the page – and each rondo is preceded by a two-octave cadenza, just like a clarinet, but an overwhelming challenge for a singer, requiring immense control.

One of the emotional and vocal equivalents of 'Tanti affetti' is surely the famous finale of *La Cenerentola*, "Non piu mesta", a musical ray of light at the end of a long comic drama of darkness. The joys of conducting these arias are almost too complex to describe, because conducting Rossini requires everything from a conductor, but almost no one notices it. You see, Rossini did not compose traditionally 'orchestral' opera, in that beyond overtures or storm scenes, they do not stand on their own *orchestrally*; they need voices to complete them.

And this quality alone, the necessity of human voices to *complete* his music, was – and often still is – enough to make Rossini's music considered lesser. Of course, paintings, books, and sculptures that are completed by the observer are not considered lesser, but music plays by different rules.

Where does this strange assessment come from? It comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from that young composer Rossini met when he was himself quite an old man: Richard Wagner. Wagner's operas were the first to stand alone as orchestral music, and the first in which singers largely had to fit themselves into a vast orchestral

texture, and orchestras finally felt that they weren't simply accompanists. This, incredibly, is still an issue with orchestras, many of whom still consider playing Wagner more 'important' than playing, say, *The Barber of Seville*, because there is a perception that there is more for them to do, or that the audience notices them more in Wagner than in Rossini.

Fallacy thinking abounds in our art, for there is very little as orchestrally energetic and exciting as a Rossini finale, those extraordinary first-act enders for which he was so famous. Rossini writes in repeated ratios, meaning that a single 8-bar phrase will usually consist of 4 repeated rhythmic figures, usually moving upward in register, and they build until they burst, and the burst is such joy. There is nothing in music quite like Rossini.

Karl Barth famously said that when the angels praise God in heaven, "*I am sure they play Bach, However, when the angels are alone, they play Mozart, and God is delighted to listen to them.*"

No one would quibble with this lovely allusion. But we might add that when God wants to scold everyone for playing music in a way that calls too much attention to itself, and they try to suppress an inappropriate laugh, I think they take a moment for Rossini.

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