

The Barber of Seville

Music by Gioachino Rossini • Libretto by Cesare Sterbini

Study Guide to the Opera

Campaign by MARC USA. Photo: Rieder Photography.



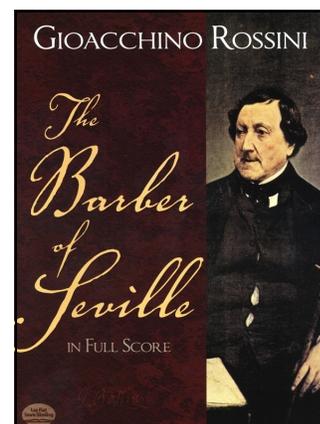
The “Hairdresser” of Seville – A new look at a Masterpiece

by Jill Leahy and Beverly Crawford

There is an astonishing amount of history surrounding *The Barber of Seville*. To begin with, the basis for the story comes from the first play in a comic trilogy about the barber character Figaro (written in 1765 and premiered in 1775) by French playwright and early supporter of American independence, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. His plays were so well-loved by audiences that the character of Figaro shows up in several “Barber” operas and again in a famous “Marriage” opera by Mozart.

Rossini was a prolific and in-demand composer, constantly called upon to create new music for Italian Festival seasons. When he was unhappy with a librettist’s offering for a commission he had in 1816, he turned to Cesare Sterbini, an Italian writer and librettist, who suggested that he rework a libretto from a previous popular *Barber* opera written 34 years earlier by Giovanni Paisiello in 1782. Some stories say that, as a courtesy, Rossini notified Paisiello that he planned to use some of the *Barber* libretto for his own opera but was calling his work *Almaviva, o sia L'inutile precauzione* (*Almaviva, or The Useless Precaution*). At its premiere at Teatro Argentina in Rome on February 20, 1816, Paisiello’s fans almost stopped the show in anger. Rossini arrived wearing a yellowish-brown Spanish-style suit with gold buttons, prompting Paisiello’s fans to issue the first catcalls and whistles of the evening. Then there was a series of laughable mishaps, including an out-of-tune guitar with a broken string, an itinerant cat being chased onstage and hiding under Rosina’s skirt (causing the audience to meow), and Don Basilio falling on his face and singing his aria with a bloody nose. The next night the audience decided to listen and Rossini’s music soared into the record books.

Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville* is one of the most performed operas ever. Beethoven said to Rossini, “I congratulate you. It will be played as long as Italian opera exists.”



The Barber of Seville Synopsis

(Il barbiere di Siviglia, ossia L'inutile precauzione)

ACT I. Outside of Dr. Bartolo's house, a group of musicians, including the wealthy (and disguised) Count Almaviva, serenade Rosina, a beautiful young maiden kept hidden away inside (**Ecco ridente in cielo**). When Rosina, the ward of Dr. Bartolo, offers no answer to the musicians' serenade, Almaviva pays the musicians, sends them away, and decides to wait until daylight in the hope of seeing her. Figaro the barber, who was once employed by Almaviva, arrives singing a song about being the city's factotum (**Largo al factotum**). The Count asks Figaro for help winning over Rosina and sings another serenade to her, calling himself Lindoro, a poor student (**Se il mio nome saper**). Figaro devises a plan—the Count will disguise himself as a drunken soldier quartered at Dr. Bartolo's house to gain access to Rosina, whom Dr. Bartolo intends to marry. The Count is excited about this plan while Figaro looks forward to a nice cash pay-off from the grateful Count (**All'idea di qual metallo**).



Rosina reflects on the voice that has enchanted her heart and resolves to use her considerable wiles to meet Lindoro (**Una voce poco fa**). Dr. Bartolo appears with Rosina's music master, Don Basilio, who warns him that Count Almaviva, Rosina's admirer, has been seen in Seville. Dr. Bartolo decides to marry Rosina immediately. Basilio praises slander as the most effective means of getting rid of Almaviva (**La calunnia è un venticello**). Figaro overhears the plot, warns Rosina, and promises to deliver a letter from her to Lindoro. Suspicious of Rosina, Dr. Bartolo tries to prove that she has written a letter, but she outwits him at every turn. Dr. Bartolo is angry at her defiance and warns her not to trifle with him (**A un dottor della mia sorte**).

Disguised as a drunken soldier, Almaviva arrives and passes Rosina a note, which she manages to hide from Dr. Bartolo. The old man argues that he has exemption from billeting soldiers. Figaro announces that a crowd has gathered in the street, curious about all the noise coming from inside the house. The civil guard bursts in to arrest the drunken soldier. The Count reveals his true identity to the captain and is instantly released. Everyone except Figaro is amazed by this turn of events, and all comment on the crazy events of the morning (**Ma, signor . . . Mi par d'essere con la testa**).

Intermission

ACT II. Dr. Bartolo suspects that the "drunken soldier" was a spy planted by Almaviva. The Count returns, this time disguised as Don Alonso, a music teacher and student of Don Basilio. He has come to give Rosina her music lesson in place of Basilio, who, he says, is ill at home. "Don Alonso" also tells Dr. Bartolo that he is staying at the same inn as Almaviva and has found the letter from Rosina. He offers to tell Rosina that it was given to him by another woman, proving that Lindoro is toying with her on Almaviva's behalf. This convinces Dr. Bartolo that "Don Alonso" is a true student of Don Basilio, and he allows him to give Rosina her music lesson.

Figaro arrives to give Dr. Bartolo his shave and manages to snatch the key that opens the balcony shutters. The shaving is about to begin when Basilio shows up looking perfectly healthy. Everyone convinces Basilio, with repeated assurances and a quick bribe, that he is sick with scarlet fever. Basilio leaves for home, confused but richer. The shaving begins, sufficiently distracting Dr. Bartolo from hearing Almaviva plotting with Rosina to elope that night. But Dr. Bartolo hears the phrase "my disguise" and furiously realizes he has been tricked again. Everyone leaves. The maid Berta comments on the crazy household.

Basilio is summoned and told to bring a notary so Dr. Bartolo can marry Rosina that very evening. Dr. Bartolo then shows Rosina her letter to Lindoro. Heartbroken and convinced that she has been deceived, she agrees to marry Dr. Bartolo and tells him of the plan to elope with Lindoro. A storm passes (**Temporale**). Figaro and the Count climb over the wall. Rosina is furious until Almaviva reveals his true identity (**Ah, qual colpo inaspettato**). Basilio arrives with the notary. Bribed with a valuable ring and threatened with a couple of bullets in the head, Basilio agrees to be a witness to the marriage of Rosina and Almaviva. Dr. Bartolo arrives with soldiers, but it is too late. Count Almaviva explains to Dr. Bartolo that it is useless to protest, and Dr. Bartolo accepts that he has been beaten. Figaro, Rosina, and the Count celebrate their good fortune (**Di sì felice innesto**).

Characters of the Opera

Rosina [roh-ZEE-nah] *mezzo-soprano*
A ward of Dr. Bartolo who falls in love with Count Almaviva.

Count Almaviva [ahl-mah-VEE-vah] *tenor*
A young nobleman who falls in love with Rosina at first sight, and tries to win her love by disguising himself as other people.

Figaro [FEE-gah-roh] *baritone*
A barber, who knows everything that takes place in Seville. He helps the Count win Rosina's love.

Doctor Bartolo [BAR-toh-loh] *baritone*
Takes Rosina as his ward because he wants to marry her, but in the end loses her to his rival.

Don Basilio [bah-ZEEL-yoh] *bass*
Rosina's music teacher. He does favors for both the Count and the Doctor, and can be easily bribed.

Berta [BAIR-tah] *soprano*
Rosina's governess; she provides insight into the actions of the characters.

Fiorello [fyor-ELL-oh] *bass*
Servant to the count.

Notary, Constable, Musicians, Soldiers



The History of Barbering

The Barber Pole is a familiar symbol around the world, yet few people know that it symbolizes the medical activities many barbers once practiced. The red and white spiral stripes represent the bandage with which the barber wrapped the patient after bloodletting.

Figaro, the barber in the Spanish city of Seville, is much more than a barber or surgeon. He could take care of everything, so he called himself a "factotum". He was a jack-of-all-trades, matchmaker, letter carrier, pharmacist, veterinarian, and yes, could even give shaves and haircuts.

Meet the Composer

by Jill Leahy

Gioachino Antonio Rossini (February 29, 1792 – November 13, 1868) was born into a family of musicians (father a trumpeter, mother a soprano) and had the good fortune to live when great composers like Haydn, Beethoven, and Wagner were creating masterpieces of classical music. The music of Mozart and Haydn influenced Rossini so much that he was referred to as *Il tedesco* (the little German). Rossini recounted that he was able to meet and talk with both Beethoven and Wagner.

A prolific and quick composer, Rossini wrote three or four operas a year during the peak of his career. Between the ages of 23-30 he composed 20 operas, including his most famous opera, *The Barber of Seville*, composed in a few weeks.

Rossini is most often written about in relation to Donizetti and Bellini, other composers of the *bel canto* (beautiful singing) period. Until the time of Rossini, singers dictated how they would show off their voices. Rossini was the first composer to include specific ornaments and expression marks in the music to indicate exactly what he wanted singers to sing. His music requires great musical range, power, and flexibility on the part of the singer, and this difficulty may have contributed to the move away from *bel canto*.

According to the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Rossini is deemed to be one of the most important Italian opera composers of the first half of the 19th century, and until he completed *William Tell*, his final opera in 1829, he was considered the greatest Italian composer of his time. Rossini retired as a very wealthy man who enjoyed giving lavish dinners attended by notable names in music.



Photograph of Gioachino Rossini, by unknown photographer, circa 1855. Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3275321>

Select Rossini operas:

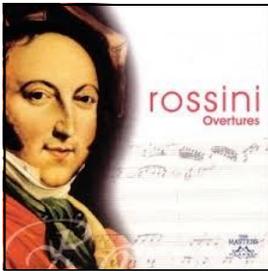
Tancredi
L'italiana in Algeri
Il barbiere di Siviglia
Otello
La cenerentola
La gazza ladra
Armida
Mosè in Egitto
La donna del lago
Semiramide
Le comte Ory
Guillaume Tell



Rossini-inspired recipe:
Tournedos Rossini with Foie Gras and Truffle sauce on biscotti doppio with an avocado bok choy salad and tourné potatoes.

A Laundry List of Rossini *Quotes* and Facts

Gathered by Jill Leahy



Give me a laundry list and I'll set it to music.

Rossini was 18 years old when he wrote his first opera in Venice.

Answer critics with silence and indifference. It works better, I assure you, than anger and argument.

Though his overtures are famous, Rossini didn't compose a new one for every opera.

Wait until the evening before opening night. 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. I wrote the overture of La gazza ladra the day before the opening night under the roof of the Scala Theatre, where I had been imprisoned by the director and secured by four stagehands. For the Barbieri, I did better: I did not even compose an overture, I just took one already destined for an opera called Elisabetta. Public was very pleased.

Rossini was nicknamed "Signor Crescendo" because of his characteristic habit of scoring a long, steady increase of sound over an *ostinato* figure. Music that began as a whisper rose to a monstrous roar.

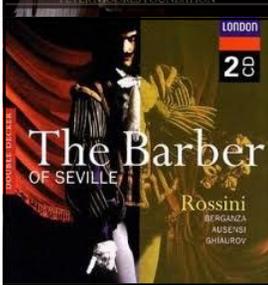
Every kind of music is good, except the boring kind.

When he was 37, Rossini stopped writing music, except for a few works. For the rest of his years, he spent his time cooking and eating.

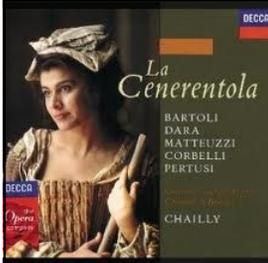
Eating, loving, singing, and digesting are, in truth, the four acts of the comic opera known as life, and they pass like bubbles of a bottle of champagne. Whoever lets them break without having enjoyed them is a complete fool.



1813



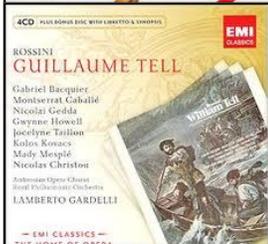
1816



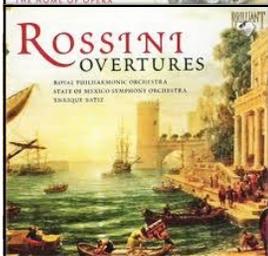
1817



1817



1829



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Packing in Popular Opera Music

The Barber of Seville is a work of unbelievable energy, especially during the first act, in which nine of the most popular moments in all opera are packed into less than forty minutes of music.

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