

Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*

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These study materials are produced for use with the Bob Jones University Opera Association's production of *The Barber of Seville*.

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"Figaro, Figaro, Fiiii-garo!"

The Spanish Barber Who Transformed Italian Music and French Politics

His name constitutes opera's most famous phrase. But the Spanish barber Figaro was the creation of French theater before he became the property of opera.

French playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799) created the character Figaro in response to the demands of middle-class playgoers of his day. They wanted stage characters and plots that realistically portrayed their own problems and role in society. *The Barber of Seville* is a servant who is cleverer than his master.

Beaumarchais' first drama about Figaro and the wealthy Almaviva family, *The Barber of Seville*, was written in 1775 as a stage play interspersed with songs. It is a sunny comedy based on a familiar scenario from older Italian comedy and the works of Moliere: an old guardian wants to marry his young ward for her money and beauty but is foiled by her lover with the help of a clever servant.

Seven years later the Italian composer Paisiello created the first of many operas based on the French play *The Barber of Seville*. It was in 1816, however, that Paisiello's fellow Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini gave the world the phrase "Figaro! Figaro! Fiiii-garo!" while creating a work that charted a new direction for Italian opera. Whereas melody with extensive ornamentation had been the predominant element in opera, Rossini reached new heights in integrating drama with music.

Beaumarchais' first Figaro play was ideal material for Rossini and his librettist, Cesare Sterbini. While Sterbini turned the playwright's lines and ideas into verse, Rossini turned the play's more general features—the comedy, wit, irony and gallantry—into one of the best comic operas ever written.

In 1784 a second play by Beaumarchais featuring the same characters was staged in Paris after having been banned by King Louis XVI for years. *The Marriage of Figaro* premiere was a landmark event in theater history as well as in the history of 18th-century France.

Beaumarchais' second Figaro, a much bolder character than his predecessor, mocks the aristocracy and the politics of absolutism. His speech



Gioacchino Rossini in 1820

attacking the immorality of the nobility and questioning their right to govern caused a political furor in Paris that would not end until Louis XVI had been executed and the Bastille torn down. Not only had an aristocratic form of entertainment become a forum of the people, but theater had also been established as an influential political force in France.

Mozart's brilliant operatic version of this second Beaumarchais play about the barber Figaro—*The Marriage of Figaro*—opened in Vienna two years later. It is a comedy, but one with a serious underlying tone. Like the stage version of the story, the opera includes criticism of class relationships and the immorality of the aristocracy.

Although Beaumarchais spent a few days in a Paris prison for displeasing Louis XVI, his pen would produce yet a third play employing the same characters. *The Guilty Mother*, written in 1792, is a sentimental drama which takes place 20 years after *The Marriage of Figaro*. The play is a patent failure.

By all rights Beaumarchais is one of France's most important dramatists. He owes much of his renown today, however, to two great operatic creations which derive from his two best plays: Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* (1816) and Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786).

The Barber of Seville

Plot: The Short of It

The action occurs in Seville, Spain, during the late eighteenth century.

A young Spanish nobleman who conceals his identity, Count Almaviva, serenades the beautiful Rosina. But her guardian, Dr. Bartolo, will not allow her to see her new suitor because the jealous older man plans to marry Rosina himself and keep her dowry.

The clever barber Figaro plots with Almaviva to outwit Bartolo. The count disguises himself as a soldier, newly assigned to live at Bartolo's house. Pandemonium breaks out, and the police arrive.

Almaviva enters Bartolo's house in the disguise of a professor, supposedly a substitute for Rosina's music teacher, Don Basilio, who is ill. With Figaro's help, Almaviva manages to trick Bartolo and win Rosina's hand in marriage. As the happy pair prepare to elope, the groom reveals that he is a wealthy count. He later devises a means of reconciliation with Bartolo, who joins in the general rejoicing of the finale.

The Barber of Seville

A Masterpiece of Comic Opera

The Barber of Seville is a light-hearted comedy. Its humor is interwoven with some of opera's most beautiful music. By genre, it is *opera buffa*, an Italian term for comic opera that is humorous and fast-paced. Giuseppe Verdi in 1898 remarked of Gioacchino Rossini's accomplishment, "For abundance of ideas, comic verve, and truth of declamation, *The Barber of Seville* is the most beautiful *opera buffa* in existence."

Although *The Barber* cannot properly be called music theater, it is certainly "good theater." Its frivolous plot centers around the shenanigans of the clever barber Figaro, who intends to spoil old Bartolo's chances of marrying his wealthy ward, Rosina. The story is full of practical jokes, farfetched disguises, confusing turns, and befuddled fools. Rossini is both a master of comic timing and a genius at translating theatrics into music. By putting his characters' feelings into the music rather than merely setting them to music, the composer achieves brilliant characterization that draws the audience into the plot.

In nineteenth-century Italy, the skills of singers were much more highly prized than those of composers. While Rossini himself received a new suit of clothes and a one-time fee of 400 scudi for composing *The Barber*, the *prima donna* ("first lady," in this case mezzo-soprano Geltrude Righetti Giorgi, the original Rosina) was paid 500 scudi for each performance.

In keeping with the musical taste of his day, Rossini created many heavily ornamented melodies that give the singers in *The Barber* ample occasion to display their vocal skills. The opera's arias are elaborate showpieces for vocal virtuosity in the style known as *bel canto*, or "beautiful song." This singing technique was said to be characterized by smooth tone, beautiful timbre and elegant phrasing.

For example, Rosina's "Una voce poco fa" ("A voice just now") is a dazzling expression of a young woman's intent to marry according to her own desires, not those of her tyrannical guardian. This aria is as dramatically meaningful as it is lovely. "I am soft, I am gentle," Rosina sings, "but everyone must learn that I will have my way." The quick tempo and florid trills and runs of the finale give the leading lady more than enough opportunity for vocal acrobatics while also suggesting the wily side of Rosina's character.

It is not coincidental that some of Rossini's best-known music in *The Barber* is for the singer playing Figaro. While he was composing the opera, he shared a lodging with the baritone for the premiere performance, his friend Luigi Zamboni. His solos for the prime mover of the plot are among opera's most enduring creations.



Costume Sketch for Figaro by Harrell Whittington



Bob Jones University Opera Association's 1999 production, featuring costume and scenic design by Harrell Whittington

The famous phrase “Figaro, Figaro, Fiiii-garo!” hails from the *cavatina* (an elaborate aria demanding virtuosity) which brings onstage the bustling barber who is at everyone’s disposal. Figaro enters playing a guitar and singing a sparkling song about himself, “Largo al factotum della citta,” or “Make way for the jack-of-all trades!” A barber by profession, he is also a doctor, a letter carrier and an adviser to the lovelorn—in short, Seville’s most sought-after citizen.

Rossini’s musical style instantly characterizes Figaro as a creature of perpetual motion, a bundle of impulsive energy. As the opera unfolds, he proves a vital character who dominates and mocks all others. In the words of critic Francis Toye, “Rossini was able to turn [irony and wit] into music better than any other man who ever lived.”

Another favorite musical moment for *The Barber* audiences is Don Basilio’s bombastic bass aria about slander, “La calunnia.” Himself a notorious talebearer, the sly clergyman/music teacher sings of the growth of slander from a baseless suspicion to an uproarious storm which destroys its victim. While Basilio advises Bartolo to eliminate his rival by slandering him, the orchestral music builds to an overwhelming, climactic crescendo, suggesting the spread of rumor from mouth to mouth.

Rossini’s music nowhere proves more appropriate to his characterization than in the serenade “Se il mio nome saper vio bramate” (“If you wish to know my name”) for the tenor Almaviva. Passing himself off as a man of humble station named “Lindoro,” the count is extremely nervous about presenting his suit to Rosina in song. The piece is a convincing portrait of a man anxious to impress the woman he loves.

But it is not only Rossini’s solo vocal works that give *The Barber* its character and color. The composer is also a master at creating rich and witty ensemble pieces and finales. He employs character interaction and simultaneous stage action in the duets, trios, and larger ensemble works to great effect. In the trio “Zitti, zitti” (“Quiet, quiet”), for example, as the Count and Rosina repeatedly caution each other to be silent, Figaro mimics them, and Basilio has the ladder by which they plan to elope taken away. (The removal of the ladder is “the useless precaution” of the original title for *The Barber*.) Rossini’s finales for both acts are also large, brilliant depictions of character interaction.

One of the major points of historical debate surrounding Rossini’s composition of *The Barber* is the overture. Opera overtures from the period are musically independent works, not merely a medley of tunes from the opera that will follow. In fact, for the opening night of *The Barber*, Rossini simply attached an overture he had already used for two earlier operas. Through no fault of his own, he had worked at a furious pace, composing the entire 600-page manuscript score in less than three weeks. The overture is not the only part of *The Barber* score imported from the composer’s other works.

Later in the season Rossini replaced the original overture with the standard opening still heard today for *The Barber*. It, too, the composer had used at least twice before. Interestingly, the same score serves *The Barber*, a comedy set in Spain, and *Elisabetta*, a tragedy set in England. With its superb orchestration, inventive melodies, and rhythmic verve, the *The Barber* overture remains a favorite in concert halls around the world.



Costume Sketch for Rosina by Harrelll Whittington

February 20, 1816: An Opening Night Fiasco

Rossini's original title for *The Barber of Seville* was *Almaviva, Or The Useless Precaution*. It opened at the Teatro Argentina in Rome on February 20, 1816. Italian audiences were fond of an opera named *The Barber of Seville* that had been composed more than thirty years earlier by their compatriot Giovanni Paisiello (1740-1816), who already considered Rossini a rival.

Therefore Rossini and his librettist dared not arouse the ire of Paisiello's Roman devotees by using the same title, even though it was not unusual for various composers to set the same story again and again. Two other musical versions of Beaumarchais' *The Barber* had, in fact, predated Paisiello's, and four had appeared between Paisiello's and Rossini's.

Nevertheless, Paisiello supporters at the opening night of *Almaviva* were so strongly biased against the new work that they drowned out the music with jeering, hissing and whistling. Many audience members left the theater long before the final curtain.

But they returned on the following evening to give a second hearing to Rossini, who feigned illness and stayed at home. The performance was much better received, and within a week, the opera had become popular with Roman audiences. *The Barber of Seville* remains today, almost 200 years later, the most widely appreciated of all comic operas.

Opening Night: The Adverse Conditions

The Theater

"The interiors of Roman theatres at this time were built entirely of wood and were decrepit and unsafe. The stairs, passages and boxes were cramped and dirty. The narrow benches in the stalls were even more uncomfortable, and the straw cushions which the spectator could rent for the evening were as hard as wood." (*William Weaver*)

The Orchestra and Chorus

"The chorus at the Argentina totalled 16; the members of the orchestra numbered 35. All were poorly paid amateurs." (*William Weaver*)

"The Roman orchestras are worse than anyone can believe; musicians and a proper feeling for music are both wanting. The two or three violinists play just as they choose and join in when they please; the wind instruments are tuned either too high or too low; and they execute flourishes like those we are accustomed to hear in farmyards." (*Felix Mendelssohn*, 1830)

"The Roman choruses are rather below that of the Opera-Comique [in Paris] in point of warmth, intonation and ensemble; the orchestras are formidable and imposing in the manner of the Monegasque army, possessing every single quality which is normally considered a defect. . . . In Rome the word 'symphony' is used, like the word 'overture,' to designate a kind of noise which theatre orchestras produce before the rise of the curtain, and to which no one pays any attention." (*Hector Berlioz*, 1830)

Opening Night Fiasco: Other Contributing Causes

Rossini's Dress

[Note: The composer conducted the premiere performance from the harpsichord in the orchestra pit.] "Laughter, catcalls, and whistling broke out when Rossini appeared in a hazel-colored Spanish-style suit with gold buttons given him by [the opera's producer] to wear on this occasion. [Members of the audience] 'were men too commonsensical to believe that a man wearing a coat of that color could have the slightest spark of genius or that his music deserved to be listened to for a single instant.'" (*Herbert Weinstock, who quotes Alexis-Jacob Azevedo*)

An Onstage Fall . . . and a Feline Extra

In scene three "the bass Vitarelli, who was singing the role of Basilio, stumbled over a small trap-door which had been left open by mistake, bruised his face badly, and almost broke his nose. He had to sing 'La calunnia' with a handkerchief held to his nose, and the audience, thinking that this was all part of the stage business, decided it did not like it, and hissed anew."

"At the beginning of the Act I finale, a cat appeared on stage. Figaro chased it in one direction, Bartolo another, and the frightened creature took refuge in Rosina's skirts. The curtain fell on a scene of confusion, and Rossini turned to the noisy audience, shrugged his shoulders and began to applaud." (*Charles Osborne*)