

# Rossini's *La Cenerentola* March 2016

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These study materials are produced for use with the BJU Opera Association production of *La Cenerentola*.



Sheralyn Berg (understudy) as Angelina, called Cinderella, BJU Opera Association 2003

## **La Cenerentola** Opera's Best-Known Rendition of the Rags-to-Riches Fairy Tale

**La Cenerentola** (pronounced chen-eh-REN-toh-la; in English, **Cinderella**) by the Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868) is a fairy tale with the fairy left out. Also missing from the opera are the pumpkin that is transformed into a coach and the mice and lizards that become horses and footmen. Yet Rossini's plot, like the fairy tale, is in a sense magical even though it does not employ supernatural agents. Its magical quality stems from its focus on transformations, especially that of a mistreated serving girl who marries a handsome prince. Instead of a fairy godmother with a wand, it is the wise presence of Alidoro, a tutor and close friend of Prince Don Ramiro of Salerno, that brings about this gratifying transformation in Rossini's Cinderella.

Angelina, known as Cinderella, is treated badly by her stepfather, the self-important Baron Don Magnifico, and her vain half-sisters, Clorinda and Tisbe. They force her to serve as a scullery girl and sleep in the ashes on the hearth. They even complain when she

### **La Cenerentola: The Short of It**

Since the death of her mother, Cinderella has been the mistreated servant of her stepfather, Don Magnifico, and her two snobbish half-sisters. Disguised as a valet, the Prince of the realm visits Magnifico's house, looking for a beautiful and virtuous woman to marry. There he falls in love with Cinderella.

When the Prince's valet Dandini also arrives, disguised as the Prince, the half-sisters try to win his affection. Dandini invites them all to a ball at the palace that very evening. Magnifico refuses to allow Cinderella to go, but Alidoro, tutor to the Prince, comes to her rescue and takes her to the ball.

Prince Ramiro sees a veiled woman there who reminds him of Cinderella. When he expresses his love for her, she gives him one of a pair of matching bracelets from her wrist and keeps the other, telling him that if he loves her, he must find her.

Later during a storm, the Prince takes shelter in Magnifico's house, this time without his disguise. There he recognizes Cinderella by the bracelet she wears. Cinderella agrees to marry him. She also persuades him to forgive Magnifico and her half-sisters for their cruelty to her. He agrees, and they all live happily ever after. ♡

sings as she works. Her fortunes begin to change, however, when Alidoro in disguise as a poor beggar comes to Magnifico's door to ask for charity. The sisters try to drive the poor man away, but the tenderhearted Cinderella gives him bread and coffee.

Having thus found Cinderella to be a beautiful and genuinely kind young woman, Alidoro tells Prince Ramiro about her. The Prince is, in fact, considering taking a wife because, according to the terms of his late father's will, he must either marry soon or lose his inheritance.

Courtiers who attend on Ramiro arrive at Don Magnifico's to announce that the Prince will shortly visit there in search of the fairest woman in the realm, whom he intends to choose as his bride during a ball at the palace. Immediately Clorinda and Tisbe begin squabbling and awaken their father with the news.

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# cinderella

## THROUGH THE AGES

Cinderella, whose name means “little cinder girl,” is the heroine of an almost universal fairy tale. Folklore scholars have identified more than 3,000 stories that can be categorized as “Cinderella variants.” Almost every culture worldwide has one or more Cinderella stories. One of the oldest surviving versions dates from 9th-century China.

Most of these stories have three elements in common: (1) The heroine is a young, beautiful woman who is badly mistreated, usually by other women, especially her stepmother and stepsisters, who are jealous of her. (2) A fairy godmother or some other figure with supernatural power intervenes on her behalf. (3) The heroine’s fortunes are reversed when a handsome prince falls in love with and, after a small amount of difficulty, marries her.

The best known version of the Cinderella story in English-speaking cultures is based on the French tale by Charles Perrault, **Cendrillon, ou La petite pantoufle de verre**, which appears in the author’s 1697 collection of fairy tales known in English as **Tales of Mother Goose**. Perrault’s story first appeared in English translation in 1729 and soon became popular among London’s upper and middle class families.

Perrault’s tale is polished and elegant whereas earlier versions of the story include violence and raciness. The stepmother in some versions, for example, cuts off one daughter’s toes and another’s heels in an attempt to make their feet fit into the dainty slipper the Prince employs to find his bride. Also in some stories the Prince has Cinderella’s cruel relatives tortured to death.

Perrault, on the other hand, created a cautionary tale for young women. Perhaps its most prominent moral theme is that a beautiful woman is a rare treasure who will always be admired, but graciousness is of even greater value. Without graciousness, nothing is possible; with it, one can do anything.



Joanie Joy Pegram as Clorinda and Leigh Ellen Fort as Tisbe, BJU Opera Association 2003

One of the most memorable features of many English Cinderella stories originates in a mistranslation of peasant versions pre-dating Perrault’s. The French term *pantoufle en vair* (“a fur slipper”) was mistaken for *pantoufle en verre* (“a glass slipper”). In the “fur slipper” versions, the fairy godmother gives Cinderella sable slippers for the ball because they were the footwear of ancient royalty.

In creating the story line of the opera, which premiered in 1817, Rossini’s librettist Jacopo Ferretti used as direct sources two librettos loosely based on Perrault’s fairy tale: Nicholas Isouard’s popular **Cendrillon** (1810), based on a libretto by Charles-Guillaume Etienne; and Stefano Pavesi’s **Agatina, o La virtù premiata** (1814), based on a libretto by Francesco Fiorini.

Both the libretto and score of **La Cenerentola** were written hastily. On December 23, 1816,

Ferretti suggested to Rossini the possibility of their collaborating on a new Cinderella opera. By Christmas day Ferretti had sent the composer the first installment of the libretto, which he completed in three weeks. Rossini completed his half of the bargain in only 24 days. The opera premiered on January 15, 1817, at the Theater Valle in Rome.

Ferretti’s libretto follows only the bare-bones outline of the traditional Cinderella story. Most notably, Ferretti altogether omits the fairy element. The reason for this significant change is not clear. Some historians suggest that Signore Cartoni, the manager of Rome’s Theater Valle, either found the story’s supernatural elements offensive himself or judged that operagoers in Rome would not approve of them. Others speculate that the small theater simply did not have the technical capacity to accommodate the quick scene changes necessary to a story driven by magical transformations.

At any rate, Ferretti replaced Cinderella’s godmother with a character who is both philosophical and practical, the Prince’s tutor Alidoro. By employing this unique character, a kind of guardian

angel whose name means “wings of gold,” the librettist in one stroke eliminated the magic of fairies and created a spokesman for the role of higher supernatural powers in the triumph of good over evil. The opera’s subtitle is *La bontà in trionfo*, or “Goodness Triumphant.” The work is not, however, so much a moral parable as a highly entertaining creation about human foibles and follies.

Ferretti also changed Cinderella’s circumstances. In spite of her plight, she is an ambitious young woman who longs to be fashionable again as she was in former times. Her inheritance has been embezzled by the cruel buffoon of a stepfather in whose custody she has remained as a servant since the death of her mother.

Ferretti’s plot is a witty romp that includes disguise and deception, farce, irony, and romance while encompassing the broader theme of goodness triumphing over evil. Ferretti’s characterizations of Cinderella, Dandini, and Don Magnifico are especially well developed.

Rossini’s score fairly sparkles with wit and folly, matching Ferretti’s libretto at every turn. It also evokes moments of tender romance and genuine pathos. The score’s vocal highlights include a brisk first act duet between the Prince and Dandini (*Zitto, zitto, piano, piano!*), a lively musical depiction of the young men’s impetuosity; a charming sextet in Act 2 that represents the musical climax of the opera; and Cinderella’s aria in the finale (*Perché tremar, perché?*), a show of technical excellence quite appropriate as the grand finale for the prima donna.

The score has its orchestral highlights as well, including a light, delicate overture and an orchestral interlude before Act 2 that faithfully imitates the thunderstorm that causes Prince Ramiro to take shelter at Magnifico’s house, where his treasure hunt comes to an end.

**La Cenerentola**’s popularity in the opera house has been intermittent, apparently because producers find it a difficult piece to cast. The score, more than merely challenging, stretches all but the most accomplished singers to their limit. One of the major expectations Rossini’s audiences brought to the opera house was to hear singers show off their beautiful voices and polished technique. In successive works the composer raises the bar higher and higher. Modern audiences sometimes find it difficult to appreciate the sound of these florid flights unless they are performed with ease and great beauty.

**La Cenerentola** presents several such challenging roles for singers. In particular, the title role must be performed by an unusual female voice, a coloratura contralto or mezzo-soprano with a range extending from a low E to at least a high A. Tisbe requires a similarly wide range—from a low D to an F. The score also

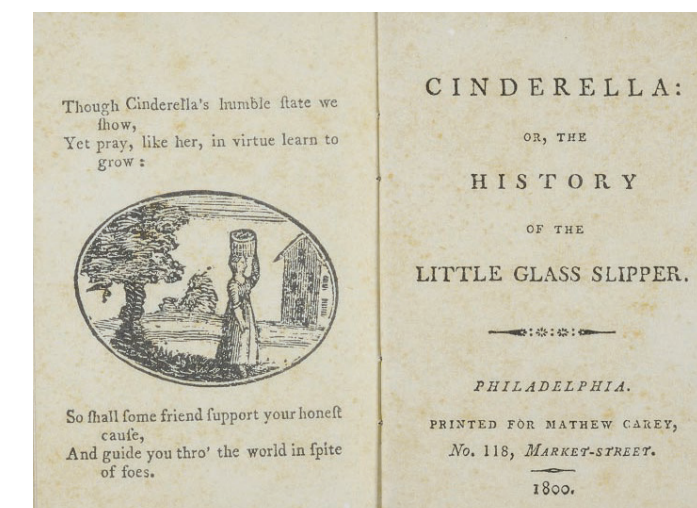
includes patter songs, the vocal equivalent of rapid-fire speech in the theater, which are musically and physically demanding for the entire cast.

In addition, part of the ingenuity of Rossini’s score is his use of musical motives to suggest the transformations that are the chief interest of the opera’s plot and characterization. Rossini has created transformations in vocal style which serve as musical metaphors for the transformations depicted in the story line. Cinderella, for example, gradually matures from a wistful girl at the hearth in a household of buffoons to a regal redeemer figure in the finale at the palace. The other characters undergo similar vocal transformations.

In creating such characters through music, Rossini draws from a remarkable range of styles. His achievement in this regard is just one of the witty elements that went into the creation of a work that offers a high level of both entertainment and artistry to audiences some 200 years after its premiere. ☺

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*The earliest known edition of the Cinderella story published in the United States dates from 1800. Mathew Carey, the publisher, was an Irish immigrant who became a very successful publisher in Philadelphia. We cannot be certain of Carey’s source for this version of the story, but we know that he had lived in France and was fluent in French. It is no surprise, then, that his wording is close to Perrault’s. The poem of advice to children opposite the title page was original to the edition.*



# Rags to Riches

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A man who dreams of financial security and worldly advancement, Magnifico urges the rival sisters to primp and prepare to use all their feminine wiles in order to save the failing family fortune.

Not wishing to marry a woman who is attracted to his riches and his realm rather than his person, the Prince disguises himself in the clothing of his valet, Dandini. Then he calls at Magnifico's house, hoping to meet the paragon of virtue described to him by Alidoro. Cinderella is alone at the moment, and the two immediately find themselves attracted to each other. But because she does not appear to be Magnifico's daughter, the Prince is confused about Alidoro's advice that one of the baron's daughters is worthy of the heart of a prince.

Soon Dandini, the bogus Prince, arrives with attendants and announces that he will hold a ball that very evening in order to meet all the young women of the realm. Not surprisingly, Cinderella's stepfather and half-sisters fawn over him. The real Prince stands aside, quite embarrassed, as the bumbling Dandini plays his role with great relish.

After her half-sisters have departed, Cinderella entreats Magnifico to take her to the ball too, but he refuses and threatens to strike her with his walking cane. Both the Prince and Dandini try to restrain and intercede with him on the poor girl's behalf. Then Alidoro, this time in his own clothing as the Prince's agent, arrives with a register of all the eligible women in the land. He demands that Magnifico bring forward the third daughter listed as part of the family, but the manipulative stepfather swears that Angelina is dead and that Cinderella is merely an ignorant kitchen wench. The Prince takes Magnifico at his word.

After everyone else has left for the ball, Alidoro reappears in beggar's clothing and reveals his true identity to Cinderella. Addressing her as "daughter," he promises that she too will go to the ball. He also assures her that her innocence will triumph over evil because God, "at Whose feet the thunder rolls, sees all things and will not allow the good to die of pain." Soon Cinderella, like the beggar Alidoro, will be transformed.

At the ball Dandini, still disguised as Prince Ramiro, carefully observes Cinderella's half-sisters, finding them vain, fickle, mean-spirited women who "have the intelligence of a pair of timpani." Then he plays them against each other for his favors. At last he offers to marry one sister himself and give the other his valet for a husband. Neither woman, however, will consider marrying a coarse lackey with common looks and a "plebeian soul" (ironically, Prince Ramiro in disguise).

Alidoro appears at the ball to announce the arrival of a mysterious veiled lady. When Cinderella steps forward and reveals her face, pandemonium breaks loose at the sight of such rare beauty and grace. Although Magnifico and his daughters are suspicious, no one can be certain about the identity of the woman who has charmed the hearts of all.

Dandini, still playing the Prince, pays court to the belle of the ball, but she confides that she has already fallen in love with his valet. Besides, rather than rank and riches, she wants a husband who will offer her respect, love, and kindness. The Prince overhears her confession and comes forward to court Cinderella. Soon thereafter she gives him one of her bracelets and tells him that if he loves her, he must seek and find her by the matching bracelet she will be wearing. She also admonishes, "You must know me, see enough of me, survey my fortunes." Then she disappears from the ball.

Once the true identities of Dandini and the Prince have been established, Magnifico explodes in a fury that he has been taken in by a hoax. Later the Prince, no longer in disguise, is forced by a storm to take shelter in the Magnifico's house, where Cinderella is once again at work in her tattered clothing. The Prince, however, recognizes the bracelet on her wrist as a matching piece to the one given him at the ball.

In the Prince's presence, however, Magnifico and his wicked daughters castigate Cinderella with filthy names. The Prince rebukes them and professes his undying love for Cinderella, but the three still persist in deriding and calling Cinderella a filthy kitchen maid. She responds by begging the Prince to pardon their unkindness.

When the Prince then proposes marriage to Cinderella, the three assume that he is joking. Cinderella accepts his offer and attempts to embrace Magnifico and his daughters, but they rebuff her roughly. Calling them treacherous and insane, the Prince leads his bride away.

During the wedding feast Magnifico and his daughters follow Alidoro's advice and beg Cinderella's forgiveness for having treated her cruelly and squandered her dowry. Left alone, Alidoro offers thanks to "righteous heaven" that "Pride has been humbled" and that "Goodness of Heart sits triumphantly on the throne."

Cinderella is delighted to forgive and forget the past and dwell instead on her present happy estate. Thus the palace resounds with the praises of Cinderella, and they all live happily ever after. ♡



Prince Ramiro overhearing Angelina's confession to Dandini, BJU Opera Association 2003