

The "I hate opera guide" to Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*)

- Opera can be extremely boring and very slow and painful. But only if you go unprepared
- If you know the story and if you are familiar with the music, opera is thrilling and intoxicating
- If you follow this primer you will definitely enjoy the opera. This will take you less than 19 minutes of preparation

Basic Facts:

OK, OK: so *Barbiere* is perhaps the least boring opera. As a matter of fact, it is super fun, a so-called comic opera. This is the *one* opera that EVERYONE will enjoy:

- Take your kids: it's full of humor, even the youngest audience members will enjoy it
- Take your spouse or a date: it's romantic!
- Take your friends: nobody will be annoyed that you took them to a long and boring opera: it's short
- And don't bring your tissues: nobody dies. For a change, an opera with no suffering or tragic death!

Originally penned by French playwright Pierre Beaumarchais, the story was so popular it was turned into an opera by three different composers (and I'm not even counting Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" - which is based on the same story)!

Gioachino Rossini's *Barbiere*, first performed in 1816, became the most popular version (after a rocky start) and helped turn Rossini into a superstar. It is among the top three most frequently performed operas today. The music is Rossini at his playful best. Fun, lighthearted, energetic and with addictive melodies: but they are tough to sing. So you need a great cast.

The opera starts with the famous overture (the musical introduction at the beginning of most operas). In between the magnificent arias, duets and quintets, there are so-called recitatives, where the characters speak/sing their lines accompanied by a harpsichord. This was typical for the time, but fell out of fashion in the late 19th century.

Barbiere has only 2 acts, takes 2 ½ hours and has one intermission

Characters and Plot:

The opera is set in Seville, Spain in the 18th century (Opera Hong Kong will change the period a bit - but I'm not giving that away here).

The Count Almaviva is not only dashing and rich, he's also obsessed with a young girl called Rosina, who he is relentlessly courting. Since he doesn't want her to fall for him because of his social status, and because she is so protected, he's constantly trying to seduce her in disguise: as a student, as a soldier, as a voice teacher. He just won't give up.

Rosina is pretty, innocent and under-age. And she's rich. She lives under the strict supervision of her guardian, the grumpy old geezer Doctor Bartolo. He does everything to avoid Rosina meeting any eligible bachelors. Mostly, since he's waiting to snatch Rosina himself once she is of age. That's because he wants her money.

Figaro is the barber of the city. He knows everyone's secrets as all his customers confide in him. He's a crafty opportunist, a bit naughty actually, and a huge busy body. Count Almaviva asks him to help facilitate his courtship of Rosina.

Dr. Bartolo and his corrupt and hypocritical side-kick , the priest and music teacher Basilio, sense that something romantic might be cooking between Rosina and a suitor, and Bartolo rushes to marry his ward. Figaro intervenes and manages to officially marry off Rosina to the Count Almaviva. All are happy, except Dr. Bartolo of course.

4 steps to learn the music in 19 minutes:

1) The most famous aria of all times in under five minutes

In "*Largo al Factotum*" (Make space for the factotum), Figaro introduces himself to the audience. Watch the brilliantly comical performance by English baritone John Rawnsley. He has magnificent breath control and does a great job of the famous tongue twister at 4:14. A great Figaro can act, sing, whistle and make you laugh. Rawnsley delivers all the goods: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dq_0wPYFp9A

2) A perfect serenade in four minutes

In "*Ecco Ridente*" (There, smiling in the sky), very early in the opera, the Count Almaviva serenades Rosina, pretending to be a student named Lindoro. It is deliberately sickly sweet, but hugely difficult to sing well. Watch bel canto superstar Juan Diego Florez knock the lights out with vocal agility, effortless heights and endless breath. The Peruvian tenor is considered the greatest bel canto singer of our generation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvySWctOHrc>

3) A four minute lesson in bad-mouthing

The nasty Basilio suggests a way for Dr. Bartolo to drive away any possible suitor from Rosina: spread evil rumors. Watch famous Italian singer and actor Ruggero Raimondi sing "*La calunnia e un venticello*" (Slander is like a little breeze). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvkISFpEIlk>.

You get extra credit if you watch this concert version by legendary Bulgarian bass Nicolai Ghiaurov. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS8l0ArPkYU>. Pay special attention from 2.02 onwards, to witness a typically Rossinian *crescendo*, where the composer builds tension to tremendous dramatic effect by gradually adding instruments and volume.

4) It's all about the girl, in six stunning minutes

All the fuss in the opera is about the girl Rosina. In "*Una voce poco fa*" (The voice I just heard...has won my heart) , she sings about her feelings for the man who is courting her, who she knows only as the student Lindoro. This is a fiendishly difficult aria, because of the complicated scales, trills and the dizzying heights. It is sometimes sung by a high soprano, but often also by a lower mezzo-soprano. Watch the shooting star American soprano Isabel Leonard in the New York Met production. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5y0YWX1Vku>

Just for fun, watch the immortal, and certainly not under-age Maria Callas sing the same aria in a concert. Focus on her precision and how she effortlessly sneaks in hugely difficult ornamentations. Her voice and charisma sparkles as much as the jewelry she's wearing. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG0BIOgl-aQ>

Learnings from the Plot

Frankly, this is pure entertainment: there are few learnings to be had. But you will have a great time at the Opera Hong Kong Production on 5,6 and 7 of May 2017.

PWE for Opera Hong Kong