

IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA: ROSSINI'S THREE-WEEK WONDER

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Gioacchino Rossini reportedly completed “The Barber of Seville” (“Il barbiere di Siviglia”) in just three weeks. When asked if this could really be, his contemporary Gaetano Donizetti replied that he had always considered Rossini “lazy”.

The opera, which remains as buoyant and frothy as when it premiered 201 years ago, shows no outward sign of haste. (Not that Rossini wasn't above recycling some material: the now famous overture was on its third outing, having been used before in *Aureliano in Palmira* and *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*.) Count Almaviva, disguised as the impecunious student Lindoro, woos Rosina, kept under lock and key by her guardian Dr Bartolo who wants her — and her money — for himself. It is Figaro, the town barber and “factotum” (a marvelous term for “jack-of-all-trades”, but here meaning “fixer”) who schemes to wrest Rosina from Bartolo's clutches and bring the two young lovers together. These plans are increasingly ridiculous and error-prone — Almaviva comes disguised first as a drunken soldier and then as a substitute music teacher — while Bartolo has counter-plans of his own, all of which come to naught, hence the opera's subtitle “l'inutil precauzione” or “the pointless precaution”.

The classic example of *opera buffa* (comic opera) is based — very closely — on the 1775 play of the same name by French playwright Pierre de Beaumarchais. In all the comic comings and goings on of Rossini's opera, it can be forgotten that the original was also a satire on the nobility: the rather common Figaro, of course, outsmarts everyone. At the same time, the Italian opera brought the story full circle, for de Beaumarchais's characters owe much to the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. De Beaumarchais followed with a sequel in 1778 — which became the basis for the celebrated Mozart opera “Le Nozze di Figaro” less than a decade later. In opera, therefore, the sequel precedes the original!

Rossini's version, like Mozart's, has outshone the original play on which it was based. But such was the popularity of the original play, that Rossini's was hardly the first operatic *Barbiere*. Giovanni Paisiello came out with one as early as 1782 — popular in its day, it is now largely forgotten, although it is sometimes presumed that the hissing that accompanied the premiere of the Rossini version came from Paisiello partisans. By the second performance, however, the success of Rossini's “*Barbiere*” was secured.

Several of the opera's arias have become classic recital pieces. These include, of course, “*Largo al factotum*” which contains the well-known refrain “Figaro! Figaro! Figaro!” and “*Un voce poco fa*” (A voice not long ago), written for a contralto or coloratura mezzo-soprano, but often transposed up for soprano allowing, for example, Maria Callas to become one of the best-known Rosinas. “*Barbiere*” also has some of the best lines in all of opera, such as Figaro's spelling out the name of the object of Almaviva's affections letter by letter to an impatient Rosina, and Almaviva's — in his drunken soldier role — butchering Dr Bartolo's name: it comes out as “Dr Barbarian” at one point.

It is possible to see *Barbiere* as just a bit a fun but those who listen closely will discern some trenchant social commentary. However much the men, even Figaro, strut and pretend they are in control, the only character who has her act together is the feisty and headstrong Rosina. “*Io sono docile*”, she says, “I am gentle, respectful, obedient,” but if you mess with me, she goes on, “*sarò una vipera*” — “I'll be a viper.” She knows to play the game, she says. And indeed she does.