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Gioachino Rossini, *The Barber of Seville*

(first performed 20 February 1816 at the Teatro Torre Argentina in Rome, libretto by Cesare Sterbini based on the comedy *Le Barbier de Séville* by Pierre Augustin de Beaumarchais)

On its premiere Rossini's opera *The Barber of Seville* failed dismally. Too many seasoned opera-goers felt Rossini had betrayed the Italian musical soul. Too much noise and speed, too "harmonic" was his opera, and not "melodic" enough. This criticism sounds innocent enough, but in the Italy of 1815 these terms had political connotations, too. "Melodic" was how commentators described music in the "true" Italian tradition, "harmonic" on the other hand was how foreign music sounded like – worse still, music from north of the Alps. And indeed the young Rossini had committed the sin of having let Mozart and Haydn influence him. Less aristocratic audiences, however, loved the fizz in Rossini's operas and these audiences contributed to his phenomenal success in no small measure.

The failure of *Barber's* first night had other, more mundane, reasons, too, and among other things they tell us a lot about the immense popularity of opera as well as the delicacy of the opera business. Before Rossini Giovanni Paisiello had already composed an opera called *The Barber of Seville*, and Paisiello opposed Rossini's treatment of Beaumarchais' text and the fact that he had turned it into a comic opera. His numerous and vociferous supporters were out in force on the first night of Rossini's *Barber*, they jeered, hissed and disrupted the performance. The composer himself was mocked at, too. As part of his remuneration from his client Duke Francesco Sforza-Cesarini, owner-impresario of the Teatro di Torre Argentina, Rossini had received "a hazel-coloured jacket with gold buttons" (Richard Osborne) – a present which almost invited the ridicule of his critics. To add insult to injury on the opening night one of the singers on entering the stage tripped over the trapdoor and hurt himself badly. Later a cat appeared on stage and mixed among the performers, and when chased off to one side of the stage it reappeared on the other. The audience imitated its meowing and encouraged the cat to return every time the cast had just fought it off. The night was a disaster. Rossini was so devastated that he did not conduct the following two performances of the opera, although he was contractually bound to do so. Unaware of the second night's success Rossini declined to accept the loud cheers of the public who had gathered outside his residence fearing they might be out to lynch him.

The incidences around the first performances of *The Barber of Seville* also show something else: Music, and particular opera, mattered in Italy. If England was referred to as the "Land ohne Musik" ("nation without music") Italy around 1800 (and for a long time prior to this) was quite the opposite – a

musical nation which exported its musicians and its music all over Europe. To foreigners it appeared as if Italy was full of “untutored musical geniuses” (John Roselli), sheet music of opera tunes appeared immediately after an opera’s premiere and spread quickly, and children were named after operatic characters. In fact in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century music seemed to be the common cultural language in a politically divided country. Italy had just survived Napoleonic rule (the country had been under French rule 1796-1814) and national unification was still 60 years away. Fragmented though as it was politically, musically speaking, Italy was highly unified and new pieces travelled quickly – as did their composers.

At the same time musicians lived a precarious life. Whereas orchestras in the major cities in the north were at least partly subsidised at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Rome they were not. Musicians were hired there and then, whole orchestras were only formed for particular occasions, and pay was low. John Rosselli tells us that Rossini was dumbstruck when in 1816 his Roman barber told him that he was in fact the first clarinet in the orchestra which had performed Rossini’s *Torvaldo e Dorliska* a year earlier.

The fact that orchestras tend not to have been subsidised in the south, however, does not mean that the public did not take an interest in the arts. The opposite was the case. In Rome as in almost every other major Italian city the middle classes keenly supported cultural events, and the local nobility patronised and subsidised artistic output. They occupied the opulent boxes and put themselves on display as the most prominent part of the audience. They formed committees to run theatres, organised season tickets and fund- raising events, and: they loved opera. In terms of live performance opera ruled and its audience appeal far outweighed that of theatre, symphonic concerts or sacred music. During the 50 years of peace preceding Napoleon’s invasion opera seasons had sprung up and multiplied all over Italy.

This popularity translated into well-versed and well- informed audiences who followed and advanced a lively discourse on all matters operatic. Middle- class audiences would go to the opera four or five times a week, particularly during the season. Vast public spaces within the theatres – foyers, refreshment rooms, and lavish staircases – invited audiences to talk, drink and debate. The talking very often continued once inside the auditorium, possibly even through the first scene, patrons would promenade around, or make social calls on the nobility in the expensively decorated boxes. These boxes offered the possibility of public display, hearing the latest gossip, social company, holding court

almost – quite apart from taking in the musical entertainment. Although there was a hierarchy on display in the auditoria of these theatres this hierarchy was not static and changed from theatre to theatre and even according to season or genre, with serious opera commanding the highest ticket prices and the highest prestige. In short an Italian opera house at the time of Rossini was a social as well as a cultural institution, an integral part of the socio- economic fabric of a town and at the heart of its civic discourse (although unaffordable for labourers and peasants).

During an opera performance, and as indicated above, audiences did not sit still throughout, they moved around, talked, drank and ate, sometimes they did not even appear to be interested at all in what was going on on stage. During an opera season a new work would receive a number of performances and it was not uncommon for spectators to see the same piece half a dozen times. Clearly audiences were not prepared to quietly listen to the whole opera every time they went. At the same time, however, there were moments of close attention, of acute listening, almost participating in the stage action. Audiences greatly appreciated moments of high drama presented well or the convincing delivery of a demanding tune, and they would show their appreciation immediately with a short sharp *bravo*. Equally, when singers missed a note or sang flat they were instantly punished by laughter, jeering or whistling. This call- and- response almost, this active participation of a passionate and well- trained audience disappeared towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was still very much in place during Rossini's lifetime. And it was these kinds of audiences that Rossini wrote *The Barber of Seville* for.

Rossini's masterpiece has stood the test of time and happily survived the vicious onslaught of supporters of a rival composer on the first night. Apart from the ingenious music it seems to have been the opera's comedy, its tempo and unexpected turns, its irony and irreverence, its sense for dramatic situations and its subtle humour, which have endeared it to generations of opera- goers.

sources for suggested illustrations:

- theatre inside: <http://atavelintime.wordpress.com/tag/teatro-argentina-roma/>
- theatre outside: <http://www.classical-composers.org/comp/rossini>
- theatre outside (close up): <http://rometour.org/museums-monuments-and-archaeological-areas?page=9>
- opera dress 1816: <http://rometour.org/museums-monuments-and-archaeological-areas?page=9>
- Dr Bartolo, from Rossini's opera: [http://www.allposters.com/-sp/Dr-Bartolo-from-the-Opera-The-Barber-of-Seville-by-Rossini-Posters\\_i1738060\\_.htm?AID=84261396](http://www.allposters.com/-sp/Dr-Bartolo-from-the-Opera-The-Barber-of-Seville-by-Rossini-Posters_i1738060_.htm?AID=84261396)