

The Barber of Seville, by Gioachino Rossini

**Opera Preview by
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On November 16th and 18th of 2012, The New Orleans Opera Association will be presenting an outstanding example of Opera Buffa from the Italian repertoire, based, once again, on the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte. The performers will be Deborah Domanski as Rosina, Michele Angelini as Count Almaviva (Lindoro), Matthew Worth as Figaro, the outstanding Basso Samuel Ramey as Don Basilio, and Thomas Hammons as Doctor Bartolo. The Conductor and Artistic Director of the Opera Association, is, of course, Robert Lyall.

Even though the original play “Le Barbier de Seville ou la Precaution inutile” (“The Barber of Seville or the useless Precaution”), was written by a Frenchman, Pierre Beaumarchais in 1773, and the first of the trilogy of operas derived from it, “The Marriage of Figaro”, was written by Mozart, an Austrian, in 1786, about a series of events that supposedly took place in Seville, Spain, the story contains variations of many of the stock characters derived from the Commedia dell'Arte: Figaro himself was frequently depicted as Arlecchino or

Harlequin, as shown in the picture, attached. However, some say he was actually derived from the character Brighella (“the trickster”).

Two other versions of this opera preceded Rossini’s, with the one by Paisiello in 1787 being the most successful. When Rossini’s opera first debuted in Rome in 1816, it was booed by admirers of Paisiello, and was thought to have been a failure. But the very next night it became an outstanding success, as it has been ever since. In fact, it is now considered Rossini’s greatest work.

Surprisingly, the opera made its first appearance in the United States right here in New Orleans in 1823, and only in 1825 did it become the first opera ever sung in Italian in New York City.

The Composer

Gioachino Rossini was born in 1792 in Pesaro, Italy, on the Adriatic coast south of Rimini. Both his parents had musical careers: his mother was a singer and his father a horn player. At an early age, therefore, Rossini learned to play the piano and the cello, and sang and composed chamber works and sacred music. He entered the Bologna Conservatory in 1806, and by the end of his 21st year had composed some ten operas for northern Italian theaters, including Venice and Milan. In 1815 he moved to Naples and composed nine serious operas by

1822, some of them derived from Shakespeare (“Otello”). His last work for Italy was “Semiramide” (1823), before moving to Paris to become Director of the Italian Theater there, and in 1829 he composed “William Tell” in French. He remained in Paris during the revolutionary transition period from 1830 to 1836, assisting other Italian composers like Bellini and Donizetti. He returned to Italy as Director of the Bologna Conservatory, but returned to Paris in 1855 because of ill health.

He died in 1868 after composing some works other than operas (like the religious piece, “Stabat Mater”) and was celebrated as a Master from an earlier era. His last opera may have been “William Tell”, but in his lifetime he composed many outstanding works, which together served as a bridge between the baroque and romantic styles.

In fact, the structure of his compositions became the dominant mode for opera until well into the 20th century: the lightening speed of his “patter songs,” the adaptation of two-statement arias or cabalettas, his slow building but resounding crescendos, the concentration on scenes instead of arias to construct a story, and the use of coloratura mezzo sopranos which in time became somewhat rare because of the difficulty of performers to master the technique. Among Rossini’s lesser known operas that are still being performed today are *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella), *La Gazza Ladra* (The

Thieving Magpie), and L'italiana in Algeri (The Italian Girl in Algeria).

The Story

Act One of The Barber of Seville opens at dawn, with a group of musicians, including the Count Almaviva disguised as a poor student, attempting to serenade the beautiful Rosina, wealthy ward of Doctor Bartolo. When she fails to come to the window, he pays the musicians and is about to walk away when Figaro, the town barber appears, singing his famous aria, “Largo al Factotum” (“Make way for the Fixer”).

In these days barbers did many things other than cut hair, including minor surgery using leeches, and in this aria Figaro boasts extravagantly about how he is in universal demand by the town citizens and functionaries, not only for his work as a barber and wig maker but also as a master at solving difficult problems.

Having previously been employed by Almaviva, the Count recognizes Figaro and asks him if he can help him win the heart of the beautiful Rosina. Figaro tells him that old Doctor Bartolo intends to marry her himself. They watch as Doctor Bartolo locks Rosina in the house and hurries off to make plans for the wedding. Almaviva serenades her once again telling her

that he is a poor student, Lindoro, with only love to offer her. Figaro then makes a suggestion.

Since it was not then unusual for soldiers to be billeted in private residences when there were insufficient housing facilities for them, Figaro suggests that Almaviva disguise himself as a drunken soldier ordered to stay in Doctor Bartolo's residence. For that idea Almaviva rewards Figaro generously.

Inside, Rosina sings a lovely song about what she has just heard from Lindoro: "Una voce poco fa`" ("A little while ago a voice..."). She writes a letter to Lindoro secretly planning to escape, when Figaro joins her. At the sound of footsteps, Rosina leaves but Figaro hides and listens to a conversation between Doctor Bartolo and Don Basilio, Rosina's music teacher and priest.

Don Basilio warns that Count Almaviva wants to marry Rosina also, and that to prevent it from happening Doctor Bartolo needs to create malicious rumors about the Count ("La calunnia e` un venticello": "Calumny is a little breeze").

When Doctor Bartolo and Don Basilio leave to draw up the contract, Figaro warns Rosina about Bartolo's intentions but she assures him she can handle the situation. She then asks him who the handsome young man was that she just saw him with. Figaro replies that it was his impoverished cousin who is madly in love with her. When Figaro suggests she write a letter to

Lindoro, she gives him the one she has already written and he goes off to deliver it.

Doctor Bartolo arrives unexpectedly, witnesses the last interaction, and accuses Rosina of writing a letter to her lover. He threatens to lock her up saying that he is not easily deceived. At that moment the Count arrives behaving like a drunken soldier and demands that Doctor Bartolo provide him with lodging. While Bartolo searches for his exemption from billeting, Almaviva tells Rosina that he is Lindoro. He then slips Rosina a letter, but she exchanges it for a laundry list when it is demanded of her by Bartolo. Berta the servant then admits Don Basilio.

Figaro re-appears saying that their arguing can be heard throughout the town and that crowds are starting to gather. Soldiers appear to resolve the billeting issue. All the characters singing their own lines give their own explanations of the controversy. The officers try to arrest the Count but release him when he reveals his identity. Bartolo explodes in anger and more chaos erupts.

In Act Two Count Almaviva assumes a different identity and announces to Doctor Bartolo that he is Don Alonso, here to substitute as Rosina's music instructor for the ailing Don Basilio. He repeats the phrase "Pace e Gioia" ("Peace and Joy") so often the bored Doctor Bartolo sends for Rosina and retires to his chair falling asleep while Rosina sings a Rondo pretending to take

her singing lesson from the man she recognizes as Lindoro.

Figaro arrives to shave Doctor Bartolo and steals his key to the balcony window. Don Basilio unexpectedly arrives to give Rosina her singing lesson. Almaviva and Figaro quickly bribe him, claiming he looks like he has scarlet fever. So he willingly pretends to be ill and departs. Figaro busily shaves the Doctor while Rosina and Almaviva make their plans to elope that night. Doctor Bartolo overhears them, drives Almaviva and Figaro from the house and locks Rosina in her room.

Bartolo send for Basilio again. Berta, the maid, comments on the foolishness of old men who want to marry young women. Basilio admits he does not know Don Alonso and maybe he is really the Count. Bartolo tells Basilio to go out and come back with a notary immediately. He then tricks Rosina into thinking Lindoro is a servant of the Count who intends to sell her to Almaviva, and thus persuades her to marry him, instead.

Later, when Figaro and Lindoro enter through the balcony window, Rosina accuses Lindoro of wanting to sell her to that wicked Count Almaviva. Lindoro quickly throws himself at her feet and admits his true identity. The lovers then express their feelings for one another and Figaro urges them to escape. But by the time they decide to leave, the ladder has been removed and Don Basilio enters with the notary.

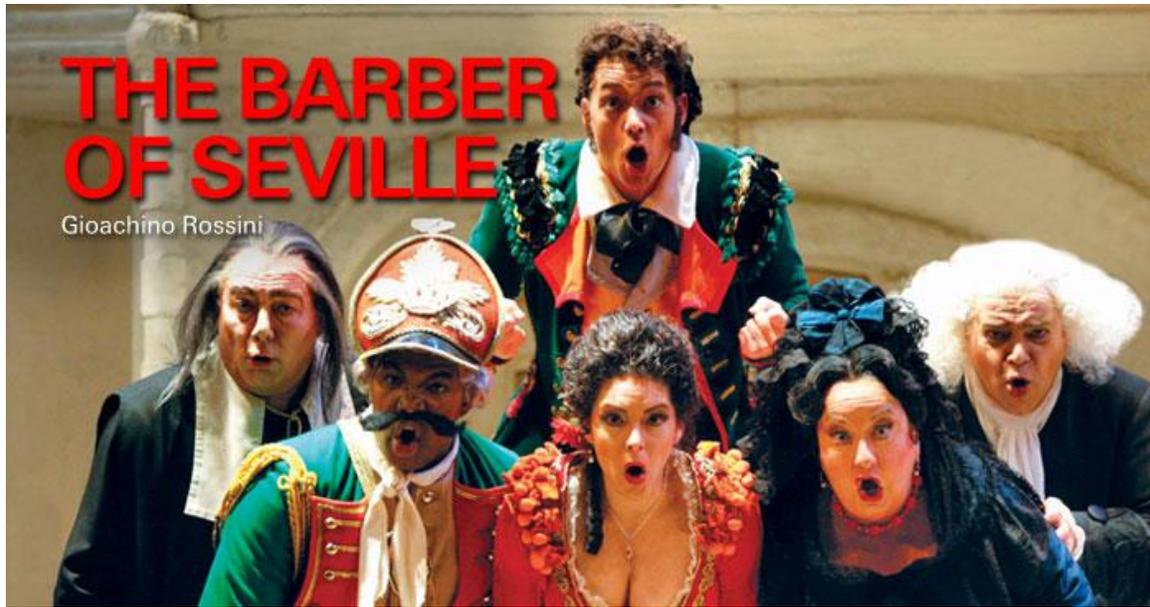
Figaro immediately persuades the notary to marry the Count and Rosina. Don Basilio agrees to be the witness to the wedding contract after being offered a choice between a valuable ring or two bullets to the head. Doctor Bartolo enters accompanied by soldiers, but is pacified when he is offered Rosina's wealth, and in return agrees to give his blessing to the marriage of Rosina and Count Almaviva.



Gioachino Rossini
1792-1868



**Rosina and Almaviva
From
The New Orleans Opera
Website**



**The Chorus from the End of
Act One**



**Figaro as Arlecchino
(Harlequin)**