

IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA  
PROGRAM NOTES by Stephen Lovely  
CEDAR RAPIDS OPERA THEATRE  
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What a relief! What luck! You have tickets to Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and are perhaps even now seated in the theater. Relax. Your mind will not be taxed. You will not be asked to grapple with complex political, religious, or moral issues. Your heart will not be broken. You will not be asked to witness the deterioration and death of a tuberculous heroine. No lovers will die in each other's arms. There will be no poisonings or stabbings or shootings, no suicides or drownings or beheadings. No one will be buried alive, or crushed by soldiers' shields, or dragged screaming into hell, or consumed by flames on a funeral pyre. This is comic opera, *opera buffa*, and it's designed to charm, to make you laugh. You'll only be asked – no, invited – to do two things: enjoy the crafty scheming of our charismatic heroes and heroine, and delight in Rossini's brisk, bright, vivacious music.

Gioacchino Rossini composed *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in Rome, in late January and early February, 1816. Rossini was twenty-four at the time. Accounts differ as to how long it took him to compose his score, but most agree that he did it in an astonishingly short period – less than three weeks, possibly less than two. Gaetano Donizetti, Rossini's far more prolific contemporary, is said to have remarked, upon hearing of this feat, "That does not surprise me, Rossini has always been lazy."

Rossini was obviously not. Over the course of two decades he wrote nearly forty operas, catering to audiences that demanded a steady flow of new entertainment. This insatiable demand made it necessary and therefore common for a composer, when writing a new opera, to reuse material from his previous operas. Rossini did so freely in *Il Barbiere*. The storm music in Act II was originally written for *La Pietra del Paragone*, an earlier Rossini opera, and bits of Rosina's first aria are lifted from *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra*. *Il Barbiere*'s magnificent overture was originally used in *Aureliano in*

*Palmira*, then again in *Elisabetta*. Rossini felt free to borrow a bar here and there from other earlier compositions such as *Sigismondo*, *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*, and *Il Signor Bruschino*.

It's easy, from the pulpit of high art, to denigrate Rossini for self-plagiarizing, for catering to the needs of commerce before originality. But it should be considered providential and fortunate that so many of Rossini's most brilliant, beautiful melodies came to roost in a single opera, which we can hear all in one evening, and which has become one of the most popular and frequently produced operas of all time.

Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* wasn't the first. There were six, earlier, operatic Barbers – three German, two British, and one Italian – all produced between 1776 and 1782, all based on the famous comedy *Le Barbier de Séville* by the French playwright Beaumarchais (1732-1799). Beaumarchais originally wrote *Le Barbier* with music, but the operatic version was rejected by the Opéra Comique, the foremost opera house in Paris. Beaumarchais rewrote *Le Barbier* as a play, which premiered in Paris at the Comédie-Française in 1775. *Le Barbier* would become part of a trilogy of plays featuring Figaro, Almaviva, Rosina, Bartolo, and Basilio. *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784), a sequel to *Le Barbier*, caught up with Figaro and his gang later in life, and formed the source material for Mozart's magnificent opera *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786). Two hundred years later the American composer John Corigliano used the third play in Beaumarchais's trilogy, *La Mère coupable* (1797), as the source for his opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991).

Did Beaumarchais realize what an enormous contribution he'd made to opera? He may not have noticed, given how many significant contributions he made in other realms. Beaumarchais was a man of incredible ambition and energy. He spent his life among the aristocratic movers and shakers of pre-Revolutionary France, vaulting up the social ladder, making advantageous connections, getting rich, accumulating enemies, and battling them in the press and in the courts. Over the course of his long career he was, at one time or another, a watchmaker, inventor, music teacher, courtier, diplomat, financier, arms dealer, secret agent, playwright, pamphleteer, and publisher.

He was also a vigorous proponent of individual liberty, a passion no doubt stoked by his frustration with the censorship and autocratic prohibitions of pre-Revolutionary

French society. In the spring of 1777, before France had weighed in on the side of the colonies in the American Revolution, Beaumarchais, conspiring with the American agent Silas Deane, raised money to charter a private fleet that penetrated the English blockade and delivered enough supplies, weapons, and equipment for 25,000 American soldiers, contributing to a decisive victory at the battle of Saratoga. It's astonishing to think that a single Frenchman believed strongly enough in the cause of American liberty to do all this on his own initiative, and to spend so much of his own money. It's interesting, and hardly an imaginative stretch, to think that in the presence of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, as we watch Figaro conspire with Almaviva to free young, willful Rosina from captivity in the house of her autocratic guardian, Dr. Bartolo, we're seeing a dramatization of 18<sup>th</sup>-century America's struggle for independence from its own autocratic guardian, King George III. More generally, we're watching the epic Enlightenment struggle between liberty and individual rights and democracy and the centuries-old entrenchment of authoritarian rule – a struggle still going on today.

If *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* is about anything, it's about the necessity of craftiness and trickery to defend our own liberty and well-being, and the liberty and well-being of others, in a world where malicious or oppressive forces are willing employ any means – brutality, deceit, slander, cunning – to control us. Beaumarchais and Rossini were both well aware that the world was cruel and callous and, under most contemporary political regimes, repressive. They admired cleverness and nimble-mindedness as personal traits, and understood how crucial they were to survival, to outwitting the powers that be. *Il Barbiere* asks us to appreciate cleverness, to take delight in a certain light-hearted, morally well-intentioned, self-preserving trickery.

For this reason, Figaro, not Count Almaviva, is our hero. Figaro is clever and inventive, and takes pride in these qualities. In his marvelous Act I cavatina, "Largo al Factotum," he also congratulates himself on his intelligence, his good fortune, his happiness, his desirability, and his ability to please, and does so with the same strutting, self-aggrandizing bravado a rap singer might use to flaunt toughness and sexual prowess. Figaro's old friend and employer Almaviva isn't as quick-witted. Even when Figaro suggests a plan, Almaviva's slow to catch on to its advantages. Doctor Bartolo and Don

Basilio make up a similar pair. In the doubles match of wits over Rosina, they're on the opposite end of the court, Don Basilio deft and ruthless, Bartolo a little slow on his feet.

Rossini just wants us to enjoy the match, to watch the ball zing back and forth, to cheer when Figaro or Almaviva makes a good cross-court shot and denies Bartolo and Basilio the point. Rossini wants us to feel the excitement of the characters when they hit on a good idea, and with zesty, ebullient music makes it all but impossible for us not to thrill and celebrate with them. Notice in Act I, when Figaro suggests that Almaviva sneak into Bartolo's house by posing as a drunken, billeted soldier, Rossini has them sing "Che invenzione prelibata!" ("What a fine idea!") over and over together in giddy, jubilant triplets. Shortly afterwards, in her lovely cavatina "Io sono docile", the acrobatic phrases Rossini gives Rosina, while characteristic of the Bel Canto style, are also meant to be a musical incarnation of her mental agility, proof that she's capable of dispatching with her adversaries as handily as she dispatches with the cavatina's difficult runs and arpeggios. In Don Basilio's aria "La calunnia è un venticello", the famous "Calumny Aria" in which Basilio explains to Bartolo how they might slander Almaviva by starting a nasty rumor about him, Rossini has Basilio take delicious pleasure in his own deviousness, allowing the entire aria to build in volume and speed and intensity – a perfect example of the widely-admired Rossini Crescendo – to a turbulent fracas in which Basilio, intoxicated by violent visions of Almaviva's ruin, races to convert his visions into words. Even the pompous, slow-witted Bartolo is allowed his moment of self-congratulation in his aria "A un dottor della mia sorte." Here, in a passage that echoes Rosina's bravura vocal gymnastics in "Una voce", Bartolo unveils his own clever scheme in rapid-fire patter. Sadly, Bartolo's scheme isn't clever at all. He simply plans to lock Rosina in the house.

Poor Rossini! He slaved in his room day after day, under strict deadline, writing his score to *Il Barbiere* at a furious pace, barely taking time to eat or sleep or change his clothes or, ironically, as he confessed to one source, go out onto the streets of Rome and get a shave. Rossini composed some of his most brilliant, sparkling music to animate Beaumarchais's characters and their ambitions, as well as to make the audience laugh, to make us feel witty and energized, to win us over to the cause of Figaro and Almaviva and Rosina. And what did Rossini's first audience do? They hissed and whistled and shouted and jeered. True, Italian opera audiences were raucous and unforgiving, and comic operas

of this era were typically conveyor-belt confections, hastily prepared and staged before they were ready. On opening night the singers might be hoarse, the costumes held together with pins, the paint on the scenery wet. One might hear carpenters hammering away backstage. During the premiere of *Il Barbiere*, according to various accounts, Almaviva failed to tune his guitar before coming on stage, then broke a string while tuning it in front of the audience; Basilio tripped over a partially-open trap door and bloodied his nose; a cat wandered continuously across the stage.

None of these glitches would have necessarily doomed the premiere, even in front of an unruly audience. Unfortunately for Rossini there were other, nefarious forces at work. The first Italian version of *Il Barbiere* had been written not by Rossini but by Giovanni Paisiello, in 1782, and at the time of Rossini's premiere Paisiello's *Barbiere* was still popular and esteemed, if not particularly entrancing. It was common for multiple composers to lay claim to a piece of source material (another Barber was being produced in Dresden simultaneously with Rossini's) but as a precaution Rossini informed the audience in a preface to the libretto that in deference to Paisiello, who was still alive, an old man, Rossini intended his version to emphasize different aspects of Beaumarchais's play. Rossini even gave his version a different title, *Almaviva, or the Useless Precaution*. Paisiello's Roman fans weren't pacified. On the night of February 20, 1816, possibly at the old man's instigation, they packed the Teatro Argentina for Rossini's premiere, determined to sabotage the performance and reinforce Paisiello's claim to *Il Barbiere*. As if that weren't bad enough, another rivalry was playing out between the Teatro Argentina, whose impresario, Duke Sforza-Cesarini, had commissioned Rossini's *Barbiere*, and the Teatro Valle, which had produced Rossini's previous opera and wanted to maintain its dominance of the Roman comic opera scene. No doubt some of the saboteurs in the audience were from the Valle.

What a strange evening that must have been! As the comedy unfolded on the stage, as Beaumarchais's characters, reinvigorated by Rossini's score, struggled to pursue their desires and fortunes, offstage, in the audience, in the streets and piazzas of Rome, in cafes and salons where opera fans huddled and chattered, in the press, life was imitating art. A similar intrigue was playing out in which a young, enterprising composer and his employer, a Duke, struggled for what they felt was their legitimate right to pursue (that is,

set music to and perform) a witty, exquisite creation (Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier*) which had until then been claimed by an eminent elder citizen (Paisiello) who was willing to use force and underhanded tactics, if necessary, to fend off younger, more attractive suitors.

Sound familiar?