

*Virginia
Opera*

The
Barber
of Seville
Rossini

STUDY GUIDE

2008-2009 SEASON

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PLOT OVERVIEW

The young and beautiful Rosina is the ward of the elderly Dr. Bartolo. Count Almaviva, disguised as a commoner, becomes enamored with Rosina, but is frustrated by Bartolo, who keeps her secluded: Bartolo plans to marry Rosina so he can secure her dowry.

The Count encounters Figaro, Seville's famous factotum: a barber and jack-of-all-trades. Figaro plans an intrigue that will enable the Count to enter Dr. Bartolo's house and meet Rosina.

The Count, disguised as a soldier, demands to be billeted in Bartolo's house. When that fails, the Count disguises himself as Don Alonso, a music teacher substituting for the supposedly ill Don Basilio. Basilio suddenly appears, but is dismissed after he is bribed to feign illness. Bartolo discovers the charade and the intrigue fails.

Basilio, now Dr. Bartolo's notary, arrives to perform the wedding between Bartolo and Rosina. At the point of a gun, Basilio is forced to substitute the Count's name on the marriage contract: Rosina and the Count are married. Although seething at his loss, Dr. Bartolo is content when the Count gives him Rosina's dowry.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE OPERA

Count Almaviva, a nobleman	Tenor (Lyric)
Figaro, a factotum	Baritone (Lyric)
Rosina, a ward of Dr. Bartolo	Soprano (Coloratura)
Dr. Bartolo, Rosina's guardian	Bass (Buffo Baritone)
Don Basilio, a cleric and music teacher	Bass (Buffo)
Fiorello, a servant	Bass
Berta, Rosina's governess	Mezzo-soprano (Character)

TIME and PLACE:

17th century, Seville, Spain

DETAILED STORY NARRATIVE

ACT I: A square in Seville

Old Dr. Bartolo guards his beautiful ward, Rosina, a young lady bearing a considerable dowry if he should marry her. The handsome young noble, Count Almaviva, is secretly in love with Rosina and arrives before dawn with a group of musicians to offer a serenade to Rosina.

The Count pays his musicians generously, and in their enthusiasm he has difficulty dismissing them. Nevertheless, the Count becomes crestfallen and frustrated because Rosina has not come out on her balcony to thank him for his charming serenade.

While the Count lingers dejectedly near Dr. Bartolo's house, pandemonium heralds the noisy approach of Figaro, the barber of Seville. Almaviva conceals himself to listen to Figaro's merry song in which the factotum – the jack-of-all-trades - describes his various activities: "Figaro here, Figaro there, Figaro wanted everywhere."

The Count recognizes Figaro, having met him at an earlier time, and immediately enlists his services, promising him money to arrange a meeting for him with Rosina, the woman he loves from afar. Figaro is certain he can succeed for the Count, because as Seville's greatest factotum, his multiple professions provide him with entry into the homes of people of all stations: in particular, Figaro is Rosina's hairdresser and Dr. Bartolo's barber.

As they speak, Rosina appears on the balcony, drops a note to her anonymous serenader, but is quickly ordered back into the house by her suspicious guardian, Dr. Bartolo: Rosina's note requests the name of the anonymous serenader.

Figaro insists that the Count sing a second serenade: *Se il mio nome*, "If my name you would know..." in which the Count announces to Rosina that he loves her. However, the Count hesitates to reveal his name and station in fear that Rosina would be influenced by the glamour of his aristocratic status: he reveals that he is Lindoro, a man of poverty, but rich in the emotions of love.

Figaro contrives an intrigue to get Count Almaviva inside Dr. Bartolo's house: "I have it! A regiment arrives today. You can dress up as a dragoon and insist that your men must be billeted in Bartolo's house."

Figaro and the Count vent their joy at this scheme in a rollicking duet: the Count delights in the prospect of finally meeting Rosina, and Figaro exults at being paid handsomely for his services.

ACT I - Scene 2: A room in the house of Dr. Bartolo.

Rosina reads a note from her secret lover, Lindoro, and expresses her romantic feelings and excitement.

Dr. Bartolo, protecting his prize, and appreciating Rosina's beauty as well as her dowry, has given strict orders to the servant, Berta, that no one is to be admitted into his house except the music teacher and lawyer, Don Basilio, and, of course, the barber, Figaro. Dr. Bartolo hopes that with the aid of the cunning Don Basilio, he can arrange a marriage to Rosina this very day.

Don Basilio and Dr. Bartolo plan their own intrigue. Basilio suspects that the man who has been haunting the neighborhood and serenading Rosina is none other than the Count Almaviva. To rid themselves of Almaviva, Basilio suggests that they invent a rumor and scandal to destroy his reputation: by defaming the Count, they are confident and certain that Rosina would reject him.

Certain of success, the conspirators go off to prepare a marriage contract for Dr. Bartolo and Rosina. However, Figaro has been listening through a keyhole, has heard their nefarious plans, and warns Rosina that her guardian is determined to marry her against her wishes.

Rosina has become preoccupied with the anonymous serenader and asks Figaro if he can identify the young man. Figaro tells Rosina that he is none other than his cousin, a man very much in love at this moment. Rosina becomes impatient to meet Figaro's cousin, and is assured by Figaro that if she sends him a note of encouragement, he will come to her immediately. The wily Rosina had already written the note and hands it to Figaro.

Dr. Bartolo suspects that Figaro may be carrying messages between his ward and the mysterious serenader. He surveys Rosina's desk and inquires why Rosina's hand is stained with ink, why a sheet of paper is missing, and why the pen is fresh with ink.

Rosina blushes and feigns innocence, but the ink marks on her fingers betray her. She tells Bartolo that she used the ink as a salve after she had burned herself; that she needed the paper for wrapping some sweets for a girlfriend, and used the pen to design a pattern for her embroidery. Dr. Bartolo erupts in rage, cautioning his ward to forgo matching wits with a doctor of his rank.

A knock is heard on the outside door and a visitor is admitted: it is the Count Almaviva in a soldier's disguise. He staggers into the room, pretends to be drunk, and insists that he billet his men in Bartolo's house, but Bartolo indignantly protests, claiming that he has an official waiver granting him exemption from quartering soldiers. As Bartolo goes off to find his waiver, the Count manages to slip a love note to Rosina.

Officers and soldiers arrive. When Dr. Bartolo complains about the infringement of his privacy, the officer arrests the "soldier," but after the Count surreptitiously reveals his aristocratic identity to the sergeant, to the consternation of the entire company, he is released.

ACT II: A room in Bartolo's house

His "soldier" scheme a failure, Figaro has invented another intrigue to enable the Count to enter Bartolo's house: this time, he will appear as Don Alonso, a music teacher.

Just as Dr. Bartolo congratulates himself on having rid himself of the soldier, a knock on the door introduces Don Alonso (the Count), who explains that he is replacing the ailing Don Basilio, and has arrived to give Rosina her music lessons. Polite sarcasm follows the interchange between Don Alonso and Dr. Bartolo.

Don Alonso pretends to be an ally of Dr. Bartolo by explaining that he lodges at the same inn as the Count Almaviva, and this very morning he found a letter which Rosina had written to the Count. Don Alonso offers to help Bartolo, who immediately takes him into his confidence, and becomes excited that he now has another ally to help him ruin the Count's reputation.

Dr. Bartolo summons Rosina for her music lesson with Don Alonso. To allow the lovers a discreet moment of privacy, Figaro decides to distract Dr. Bartolo by announcing that since his calendar is full, he must shave the doctor at this very moment.

Bartolo reluctantly accedes and gives Figaro the keys to his closet so he can fetch linen. A loud crash is heard and Bartolo presumes that Figaro has broken all of his china. Frantically, he goes out to investigate the damage, leaving Rosina alone with her music teacher, an opportunity for the young lovers to exchange hurried words of love.

Figaro returns and excitedly advises the Count that he has stolen Dr. Bartolo's balcony key: that key will serve them well for the next phase of their intrigue.

While Figaro performs his "barber" business and covers Bartolo's face with lather, to everyone's amazement, Don Basilio arrives. In order to protect their charade, Figaro and the Count immediately try to dispose of Don Basilio.

Dr. Bartolo, told earlier by Don Alonso that Basilio was ill, inquires of the bewildered Don Basilio why he has come out with a fever. The Count passes Basilio a purse with money, sufficient explanation that he is to feign illness and diplomatically make a hasty departure; prolonged farewells to Basilio compound the humorous situation.

The lovers plan their elopement while Figaro shaves Dr. Bartolo and distracts his attention by splashing soap generously into his eyes. Count Almaviva whispers to Rosina that she should not fear, because they now have the balcony key and they will come to fetch her precisely at midnight. The suspicious Bartolo approaches the preoccupied lovers, discovers the masquerade, and realizes that he has again been duped. In a fury, he orders everyone out of his house.

Bartolo proceeds with his own intrigue and shows Rosina a note that indicates that her supposedly devoted lover, Lindoro, is conspiring to surrender her to the infamous Count Almaviva. Rosina feels betrayed and explodes in a fury: in revenge, she offers to marry Bartolo at once. Although she admits to Bartolo that she had planned to elope with Lindoro, she now insists that Bartolo arrest Lindoro and Figaro when they arrive.

As night falls, a thunderstorm arises. Figaro and Count Almaviva enter Dr. Bartolo's house through the balcony with their stolen key. Rosina greets them with a storm of reproaches, accusing Lindoro of pretending love so he can sacrifice her to the insidious Count Almaviva. The Count is delighted that Rosina is unaware of his real identity, and that she truly loves the poor Lindoro rather than a wealthy nobleman. He reveals his true identity to Rosina, the lovers embrace, and are reconciled.

Don Basilio interrupts them, now returning in his role of notary and preparing to wed Rosina to Dr. Bartolo. However, with the aid of a pistol, Don Basilio is persuaded to marry Rosina and the Count instead.

Dr. Bartolo arrives with the police and orders the intruders arrested, but he is too late: the marriage contract has been signed, and his former ward, Rosina, is now the wife of the distinguished Count Almaviva.

After the Count graciously gives Bartolo Rosina's dowry, the old intriguer decides to accept his hard luck philosophically, while the irrepressible Figaro bestows garrulous good wishes on the newlyweds.

MEET THE COMPOSER: GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Gioacchino Antonio Rossini, 1792 –1868, was the most important Italian opera composer during the first half of the nineteenth century.

A whole generation of music lovers, from 1820 to 1840, acclaimed Rossini the undisputed king of opera composers, living or dead, and in the eyes of the opera world, he was idolized and adored, towering significantly over the shoulders of Mozart, Gluck, or even Beethoven.

Though Rossini is best known for his *opera buffas*, his comic and satiric operas, he also composed *opera serias*, operas with serious themes. Whatever the particular genre, all of his music contains a unique melodic inventiveness and rhythmic vitality: those special features became the inspiration for his illustrious *bel canto* contemporaries, Bellini and Donizetti, as well as the young Verdi.

Rossini was born in Pesaro, Italy. As a child, he displayed exceptional musical talent, which earned him entry into the Bologna Conservatory at the age of twelve. In 1810, at the age of eighteen, he wrote his first opera, *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*, “The Marriage Contract,” but his first substantial success occurred two years later with his opera, *La Pietra del Paragone*, “The Touchstone,” introduced at La Scala and given fifty performances in its first season. *Tancredi* and *L’Italiana in Algeri* followed, and were even greater triumphs. By the age of twenty-one, with these early successes, Rossini had already become established as the idol of the Italian opera public.

In 1815, he was engaged to write new works as well as direct two opera companies in Naples. His first opera under that arrangement was *Elisabetta*, written expressly for the popular Spanish prima donna, Isabella Colbran, the former mistress of the King of Naples, and later the woman who would become his wife for whom he would write several operas.

Rossini wrote his celebrated *opera buffa* masterpiece, *The Barber of Seville*, for production in Rome. Even though a combination of circumstances spelled disaster for the opera at its premiere, on its second evening the opera was acclaimed, and with each successive performance, it gained new admirers. Today, it is generally considered the greatest comic masterpiece in the entire operatic canon.

In 1822, after marrying Isabella Colbran, Rossini left Italy for Vienna where he and his operas became the rage. Two years later, he went to Paris to direct the Théâtre des Italiens. Rossini’s popularity in Paris was so great that Charles X gave him a contract to write five new operas a year; and at the expiration of the contract, he was to receive a generous pension for life.

During his Paris years, between 1824 and 1829, Rossini created the comic opera *Le Comte Ory* and *Guillaume Tell* (1829), “William Tell,” the latter a political epic adapted from Schiller’s play (1804) about the thirteenth century Swiss patriot who rallied his country against the Austrians. The stylistic innovations Rossini introduced in both these works would eventually influence composers as different as Adam, Meyerbeer, Offenbach, and Wagner.

His contemporary audience considered his music like vintage wine, always improving with age, and never growing sour or flat. His music was always fresh, gay, simple, and saturated with bubbling melodies and an inexhaustible *joie de vivre*; it was music that was easily understood at first hearing, and never required the discovery of an underlying significance.

Though Rossini was only thirty-eight years old when he completed *William Tell*, he had already composed thirty-eight operas. Rossini would put down his operatic pen, retire, and live for thirty-eight years more, never again writing another note for an opera. He was at the height of his creative powers and a world-renowned figure, yet in those next four decades, he produced only some sacred music, a few songs, and some instrumental and piano pieces.

Rossini did not fit into the conventional picture of the starving composer: few composers in their lifetimes ever enjoyed such phenomenal success, and he literally sat on top of the music world, becoming pleasantly intoxicated with his well-deserved success.

Rossini’s sudden withdrawal from the world of opera has inspired much conjecture. Some scholars have concluded that Rossini’s indolence and laziness had gotten the better of him after he had achieved such immense wealth: others claim that the initial failure of *William Tell* to achieve success had embittered

him; that he was disappointed that his fame had become overshadowed by the popularity of those grand opera spectacles of Meyerbeer and Halévy which replaced his *opera buffa*s; and still others suggest that Rossini's neurasthenia, a mental disorder characterized by fatigue and anxiety, as well as his debilitating bout with gonorrhoea, had become too serious after 1830 and prohibited him from work.

Nevertheless, while in his retirement, Rossini became the major figure in the social and cultural life of Paris. He had become esteemed as Europe's leading composer, and his overtures were even compared to those of Beethoven. He relished the title, "the music emperor of Europe," and he certainly lived like one, maintaining homes in Italy, Paris, and a summer villa in rural France. Rossini had become rich, famous, and gourmand-stomached.

After finally marrying Olympe Pélissier, a woman whom he had loved for years but could not marry until his first wife died, he reigned like a nineteenth-century prince in his luxurious Paris apartment, where he entertained friends in the grand manner, granted audiences, held court, and offered commentaries. Legend reports that the great classical composer, Camille Saint-Saëns, would be anxiously sitting in one corner of Rossini's home waiting his turn at the piano, and in another, a famous singer would likewise be preparing to entertain the bejeweled ladies.

Rossini's death was brought about by complications following a heart attack. He was buried in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, but at the request of the Italian government, his body was removed to Florence where he is buried in the cemetery of the Santa Croce Church.

Thirty-eight years was a long retirement, and a long time to be devoted to Rossini's legacy of gourmand eating, attractive women, and sharp witticisms. Nevertheless, the most famous opera composer of his generation preferred to remain silent musically, and in spite of his personal problems and illnesses, one could easily conjecture that perhaps he was satisfied that he had said all he ever wanted to say in the last dramatic scene of *William Tell*: it was a passionate cry for liberty during an historical time of severe conflict and tension between reform and revolution.

THE HISTORY OF *THE BARBER OF SEVILLE*

In many respects, Rossini's *Barber* owes some of its provenance to Giovanni Paisello's *Barbiere di Siviglia* (1782), an earlier adaptation of Beaumarchais. At its premiere, Rossini's opera suffered disaster. Out of veneration and respect for Paisello, Rossini gave his opera a different title: *Almaviva, or the Useless Precaution*, but that failed to placate Paisello's followers: there was a cabal of noisy opposition from Paisello's friends, proving that the old dictatorial composer was still very popular and had a devoted following in Rome.

The premiere audience literally rolled in the aisles, not at the humor in the opera libretto, but because of the unfolding of a monumental series of disasters. The tenor forgot to tune his guitar, and a string broke as he attempted the opening Serenade: the Don Basilio fell and bruised himself badly during his entrance, and became distracted as he attempted to stop blood from flowing from his nose during his *La Calunnia* aria; and a cat entered the stage during the second act and jumped into Dr. Bartolo's arms. All in all, the *Barber's* premiere received a big tide of disapproval.

Nevertheless, in the hindsight of opera history, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* has become one of the greatest masterpieces of comedy in music. Sterbini's shrewdly contrived libretto for *Barber* is a first class adaptation that dutifully captures all of the humor, wit, and gaiety of the original Beaumarchais. Rossini's melodies and music contain a perfection of form, an utter spontaneity, sparkle, and charm, that are always enormously faithful to character and situation. *Barber* is perhaps the only one of Rossini's operas to survive the test of time, even though *La Cenerentola*, *Turk in Italy*, and *William Tell*, are indeed magnificent scores.

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT: PIERRE BEAUMARCHAIS

Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799), son of a clockmaker, initially followed in his father's footsteps and was subsequently appointed clockmaker and watchmaker to the court of Louis XV. Beaumarchais was also a musician: he was self-taught as an instrumentalist and composer for guitar, flute, and harp, and eventually became the harp teacher to the King's daughters.

In 1763, France was still seeking revenge against England for its loss of Canada, and was observing with great interest the development of American resistance. The French government offered covert aid to the American rebels, but at the same time, was determined to remain out of the conflict until an opportune moment. In 1776, they established a fictitious company under the direction of the author, Beaumarchais, which funneled military supplies and sold arms to the insurgent American colonists.

However, the picaresque Beaumarchais's ultimate fame rests on his literary achievements: the comedic theatrical trilogy *Le Barbier de Séville, ou La Précaution Inutile* (1775), "The Barber of Seville, or The Useless Precaution," *Le Mariage de Figaro, ou La folle Journée* (1784), "The Marriage of Figaro, or the Day of Craziness, and the final installment, *La Mère Coupable* (1784), "The Guilty Mother." Beaumarchais's trilogy represented a caustic satire of contemporary French social and political conditions that ultimately reflected the growing dissatisfaction with the ruling class and nobility in the years preceding the French Revolution. In retrospect, his writings did much to influence, and even precipitate the Revolution, prompting Napoleon to later comment that they were indeed the "revolution already in action."

Beaumarchais's plays center around the colorful character, Figaro, a factotum or jack-of-all-trades, whose ingenuity serves as the symbol of class revolt against the aristocracy. In effect, the characterizations flatter the lower classes while at the same time, castigate the nobility. Mozart's opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Rossini's opera, *The Barber of Seville*, both adapted from Beaumarchais's original plays, would eventually assure immortality for these literary masterpieces.

Louis XVI forbade performances of *Le Mariage de Figaro*, but the masses, not in a mood to be trifled with in the 1770s, demanded the plays. The King would briefly imprison Beaumarchais, but under pressure, later placated him and agreed to a performance of *Le Barbier de Séville* at Versailles, his wife Marie-Antoinette as Rosine, and the future Charles X as Figaro.

In the Mozart/Da Ponte *Mariage*, Beaumarchais's depiction of contemporary class conflict is profoundly portrayed. But in Rossini's opera adaptation of *Barber of Seville*, which premiered in 1816, an entire generation after France's political and social upheavals, the heat of the revolutionary fires had diminished, and nothing of any political or social consequence was emphasized in the text. In fact, the libretto had the obliging approval of the Roman censor, and neither the government nor the aristocratic powers posed any pretext whatsoever to suppress it.

Beaumarchais's plays portray class conflicts evolving against a background of a highly sophisticated battle of the sexes. In Beaumarchais, a subtle use of wiles, wit, determination, decency, love, and a little luck, can tip the scales against aristocratic arrogance and power. The realities of class separation are presented as they are, but there is an underlying implication that social hierarchies are accidents of fortune rather than reflections of native worth.

In these stories, Figaro is the real hero, the master of sabotage and intrigue, and an inventive "man for all seasons"; his enterprising cleverness elevates him above the rest of society. Figaro was Beaumarchais himself. The villains and tormentors are in continuous conflict with one another. In *The Marriage of Figaro*, Figaro maintains a witty and high-handed attitude toward his aristocratic master, Count Almaviva. In Beaumarchais's original, Figaro speaks about the Count: "What have you done to earn so many honors? You have taken the trouble to be born, that's all": the essence of eighteenth century political and social conflict that bred the French and American Revolutions.

Although Rossini's opera may lack some of the deep and tender sentiment which underlies so much of Mozart's music, his *Barber* contains much more humor, and is quite more frolicsome and scintillatingly vivacious, serving to endow it with an elemental freshness and energy. And certainly, by its very subject matter, Rossini's *Barber* suggests an inherently livelier and lovelier charm in its recounting of Count Almaviva's adventures while outwitting Dr. Bartolo and carrying off the mischievous Rosina, as opposed to the depiction of the domesticated Count's intrigues, suspicions, and philandering after his marriage.

THE MUSIC AND STYLE OF ROSSINI

Rossini was a remarkably productive composer, completing an average of two operas per year for nineteen years, and in some years writing as many as four operas. Legend indicates that the composer could not have taken more than three weeks to compose *The Barber of Seville*, and at a later time, he even boasted to Wagner that he had written the opera in thirteen days. His prolific rate of opera production was made possible by his amazing creative facilities, his fluent technical resources and capabilities, his nimble craftsmanship, and his fertile melodic inventiveness.

Rossini was constantly balancing a tension between mediocrity and genius. What helped increase his voluminous output was his capacity for making compromises. It could be conjectured that Rossini had the temperament of a hack, often using poor material to overcome a lack of inspiration or “composer’s block.” It is rumored that he even permitted other composers to interpolate numbers of their own into his works, and he often conveniently borrowed ideas from his older operas, although that practice is universal for all composers: *The Barber of Seville* Overture is derived from a medley of themes from his previous opera, *Aureliano in Palmira*, which also furnished the melodic framework for Rosina’s aria, *Una voce poco fa*.

Nevertheless, Rossini was also a genius who could bring the most sublime melodic inspiration into his writing, what Verdi would call, “an abundance of true musical ideas.” His bold experiments brought significant innovations to the opera genre: he perfected what is today called the Rossini crescendo, earning him the pseudonyms *Signor crescendo* and *Signor accelerando*. Those techniques took a phrase and repeated it over and over in rapid tempo with no variation, save that of volume: the technique facilitated an explosion of patter and genuine excitement in his scores, and to this day, represent his unique, identifying musical signature.

Rossini was one of the first composers to write out cadenzas instead of allowing the singer to improvise them: he was a pioneer in accompanying recitatives with strings instead of piano; and he developed his ensembles to almost symphonic proportions. His more profound use of orchestra, together with his inventive creation of orchestral effects and coloration, provided a more profound expressiveness. In particular, his overtures remain examples of his outstanding achievements: *La Gazzza Laddra*, *Semiramide*, and, of course, the *William Tell* overture, familiar to millions as the Lone Ranger Theme.

Rossini’s greatness lies in the fact that he not only composed great comic operas, but serious operas as well. The best pages of his serious operas have power and passion, and his best comic operas are marked with a dashing spontaneity, verve, and gaiety. In those comic operas, in particular, Rossini was a master of perfecting the art of mixing humor with pathos. Among his most important operas are: *La Scale di Seta* (1812); *La Pietra del Paragone* (1812); *Il Signor Bruschino* (1813); *Tancredi* (1813); *L’Italiana in Algeri* (1813); *Elisabetta* (1815); *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1815); *Otello* (1816); *La Cenerentola* (1817); *La Gazzza Ladra* (1817); *Armida* (1817); *Mosè in Egitto* (1818); *La Donna del Lago* (1819); *Zelmira* (1822); *Semiramide* (1823); *Le Siège de Corinthe* (1826), *Le Comte Ory* (1828); and *Guillaume Tell*.

Rossini, together with the contemporary composers Bellini and Donizetti, were the Italian triumvirate of the *bel canto* opera tradition that dominated early nineteenth century opera: *bel canto* literally means “beautiful singing.”

The *bel canto* style is voice concentrated, and demands singing with beauty, elegance, flexibility, an assured technique, bravura, vocal acrobatics, and virtuosity. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in Italy, music meant opera, and opera to the Italians meant singing: an art form that was a vehicle to show off the technical versatility of the voice that was combined with the Italian gift for melody.

Rossini composed exclusively in the *bel canto* tradition: all of his music contains beautiful melodic lines which require singing virtuosity. Often *bel canto*, *coloratura*, and even *fioritura* are synonymous terms used interchangeably, but primarily, they all stress an elaborate and brilliant ornamentation of the vocal line in which the concentration remains focused on the voice and melody.

Bel canto and its vocal fireworks, when performed intelligently, inherently provide dramatic poignancy and eloquence: in this style, it is the voice and vocal line, together with vocal fireworks, virtuosity, and bravura that become the preeminent features of the art-form. As a consequence, lyricism dominates, and by

necessity, the orchestra is a secondary ingredient, generally an accompanist that is subdued when the singer is singing, regardless of what is going on dramatically.

In general, the dramatic intensity of many *bel canto* librettos receive minor praise from our modern music-drama centered audiences: in the *bel canto* tradition, drama and dramatic continuity were generally secondary considerations to the art of singing. In retrospect, many of those librettos could be considered humdrum and hackneyed, even though an abundant number of them were written by extremely talented and original craftsmen.

Nevertheless, it has been the freshness of their underlying music that has compelled many opera-goers to overlook the librettos. Contemporary champions of the tradition have proven that there can be real drama in these works. In this style, dramatic effects and pathos are expressed primarily through the inflection of the vocal line: therefore, *coloratura* passages achieve their dramatic effects through dynamics, becoming bent and flexed, stretched, speeded up, or slowed down.

The *opera seria*, or serious operatic style, which had reached its peak during the mid-eighteenth century, provided an exquisite means to display and glorify the voice: drama would be expressed through vocal bravura in operas such as Handel's *Julius Caesar* (1723), and Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1781). In later romantic melodramas, the voice became likewise the instrument to convey drama: the sleepwalking heroine in Bellini's *La Sonnambula* (1831), or the Mad Scene in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835).

Those three great masters of *bel canto*, Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, have left a legacy of *bel canto* operas for posterity, and the preeminence of their works on our contemporary stage remains proof that the art form is not only captivating, but a classic art form capable of continuous rejuvenation. Certainly, the art form is very much alive in the contemporary opera theater, as proven by the success of recent superstars of the genre: Maria Callas, Alfredo Kraus, Marilyn Horne, Joan Sutherland, and currently, Cecilia Bartoli.

In the *bel canto* period, it was the singer's day: opera existed for the express purpose of showing off the voice, and in each of Rossini's thirty-eight operas, he proved that he was one of the greatest and foremost practitioners, as well as innovators, of the *bel canto* art form.

COMMEDIA DELL' ARTE

The *Commedia dell'Arte* genre – literally translated, “artistic-play,” originated and is defined as satirical entertainment. The tradition existed for centuries, most prominently performed by troupes of strolling players throughout Italy during the Renaissance. At that time, its underlying satire and irony were important and popular theatrical forces, and ultimately, they would shape the development of comedy on the dramatic as well as lyric stages.

The art form originated in market places and streets where performers traditionally wore masks in order to conceal their identities: their protection was necessitated by the fact that they were satirizing and ridiculing their contemporary world; performers clowned, insulted, and ridiculed every aspect of society and its institutions by characterizing humorous or hypocritical situations involving cunning servants, scheming doctors, and duped masters.

In order to draw attention to themselves, they generally wore exaggerated and comical costumes. Plots would contain very few lines of set dialogue, and much of their performance contained spontaneous improvisation. The standard characters were the Harlequin, Columbine, and Pulchinello. In Italy, the characters became affectionately known as *zanni*, no doubt the root of our English word “zany,” meaning funny in a crazy or silly way, or a silly person, clown, or buffoon. The *Commedia dell'Arte* and *opera buffa* comic traditions and satires became the prototype for vaudeville and slapstick, exemplified by Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and today, Mel Brooks and Gene Wilder.

During the eighteenth century, the *Intermezzo* developed in the Italian theater: it was a short play with music that was presented between the acts of a serious drama. The *Commedia dell'Arte* and the *Intermezzo* genres were the theatrical predecessors that would develop into the *opera buffa*: Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (1733) became one of the earliest *opera buffas*, and almost a century later, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* would serve as the model for all future *opera buffas*, followed by Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* (1832) and *Don Pasquale* (1843); Verdi's *Falstaff* (1893), and Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (1918).

OPERA BUFFA

Opera buffa, the comic or satiric genre, must be distinguished from its more serious predecessor, *opera seria*. The *opera seria* generally dealt with historical, legendary, or mythological themes, and usually contained a happy ending with due reward for rectitude and good deed. Quintessential examples of *opera seria* are Handel's *Julius Caesar* (1724), Gluck's *Orfeo et Euridice* (1762), and Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1781).

During the pre-French Revolution and pre-Romantic eras, aristocrats identified with the extremely popular *opera seria* genre: these operas portrayed lofty personalities whom they perceived as flattering portraits of themselves. *Opera serias* were massive scenes of pageantry that were married to highly complex, ornamented arias that would exploit the virtuosity of individual singers.

As the end of the eighteenth century approached, the *opera buffa* developed: it was a more realistic genre that portrayed more human characters in everyday situations. The lower classes, in an almost uncanny extension of the classical *Commedia dell'Arte* and *Intermezzo* genres, preferred the satire of the *opera buffa* genre, which, like its predecessors, was usually concerned with love intrigues involving cuckolds, deceiving wives, and scheming servants. In certain respects, the *opera buffa* genre's themes and subjects provided a democratization in the performing arts, which enabled the lower classes, mostly through comedy, to satirize their masters and vent their frustrations and chagrin at social injustices.

In contrast to the *opera seria*, the *opera buffa* preferred simplicity in design. Generally, a few characters would be portrayed against an uncomplicated setting with commensurate simplicity of underlying melodies and tunes. Yet musically, there would be much stylistic contrast: the use of rhythmic, staccato passages to emphasize coquettish moods. *Opera buffa* featured extended act finales with sophisticated ensembles (taboo in the *opera seria*), and many set-pieces involving the participation of many characters in duets and trios.

Patter songs are a feature of *opera buffa*: these are tongue twisters delivered at presto speed that are an art in itself that requires an acute sense of comic timing in order for the singer to make the words intelligible, and a vocal virtuosity equivalent to words coming out of a typewriter at breakneck speed. In its practical sense, patter is nothing more or less than rapid fire articulation, similar to those popular tongue-twisters: "She sells seashells at the seashore," or "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." In most classic *opera buffas*, the patter usually portrayed old busybodies, and were usually sung by *basso buffos* who would be chattering and grumbling incessantly.

Rossini's *opera buffas* created the role-model for patter songs and made them *de rigueur*: in *The Barber of Seville*, Figaro's *Largo al factotum* is an example of quintessential patter.

Mozart ingeniously used the inherent satirical style of the *opera buffa* genre to reflect the changing social and political upheavals awakened by the Enlightenment: the demise of the *ancien régime* that would vanish at the end of the eighteenth century. Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) is considered one of the greatest *opera buffas*: a satiric portrayal of the political and social conflicts existing within his contemporary society. To achieve his objectives, Mozart created incomparable musical characterizations: his heroes became the lower classes, such as Figaro and Susanna, and his antiheroes became those contemptible aristocrats, such as the Count Almaviva and Dr. Bartolo. Mozart brilliantly exploited the *opera buffa* genre, injected his ingenious musical inventions, and breathed life into his characters.

The essence of good comedy is not that it has necessarily happened, but that it could happen. Therefore, comedy must have a link with reality so that it does not degenerate into farce. In order to be convincing and believable, real or imagined situations must convey a sense of credibility. The essence of *opera buffa* is to provide farce, burlesque, satire, and irony, together with moments of seriousness and real human emotions: a magnificent blend of heartfelt comedy and humor together with sentiment and tenderness so that the comic action achieves credibility.

Rossini once wrote: "I was born for the *opera buffa*." His *Barber* is pure *opera buffa*, and an ingenious writing within that genre and style. Like Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, both are nineteenth century works: pure *Commedia dell'Arte* plots that are presented with musical and dramatic tastefulness, elegance, and refinement, never bearing the faintest hint of vulgarity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

English

1. *The Barber of Seville* is a satire of contemporary French social and political conditions. What is satire? What makes something a satire? Give examples of some of the satirical social and political issues.
2. The censorship committee controlled many French playwrights, why do you think this happened?

Science

3. Many great scientific discoveries took place during the 17th century when *The Barber of Seville* is set. What are some of those discoveries and how did they benefit society then and today?

History

4. Commedia Dell' Arte is a style of performance meaning “artistic play” and each type of character had certain characteristics. What were some of these characters? What are some of the characteristics for each character?

Geography

5. Research the geography of Spain. Discuss any changes that have occurred between the 17th century and today.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, and Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving a unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Cosi fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Cosi fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Marriage of Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<i>Verdi Baritone</i> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<i>Buffo Bass</i> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Cosi fan tutte)	<i>Basso Cantate</i> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

