ROSSINI'S BIGGEST HIT

By Jack Zimmerman

According to opera lore, Gioachino Rossini liked to compose in bed. Occasionally he'd drop a sheet of completed manuscript on the floor, and rather than throw back the covers and get up to retrieve it, he'd simply compose a new page.

The composing-in-bed story sounds farfetched, until you listen to Rossini's music. Just a few bars of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* are all it takes to realize that music simply poured out of the man. For him, composing was second nature – and certainly easier than climbing out of a warm bed! Every note of his *Barbiere* sounds wonderfully spontaneous, as if its creation was accomplished without the usual birthing pains that accompany most musical masterpieces.

Rossini was a leap-year baby and an only child. He came into the world on February 29, 1792, in Pesaro, on the shores of the Gulf of Venice. Mozart had died the previous December, and one month after Rossini's birth Haydn's *Symphony No. 94* premiered in London. That year Americans elected George Washington to a second term, and in France the guillotine was used for the first time ever (it wouldn't be the last). In the 1790s the winds of change were howling throughout Europe.

Swept up in the revolutionary spirit of the time was Rossini's father, Giuseppe, a trumpeter and horn player who involved himself in political activities. More than once he was questioned by authorities and jailed, but by 1801 things had improved for him: The Bologna Accademia appointed him *"professore di corno di caccia"* – French horn instructor.

Rossini's mother by all accounts was quite beautiful. She also had a pleasant soprano voice and something of an operatic career, which she pursued with fervor to feed herself and her son while her husband was in jail. Despite their unstable circumstances, Rossini's parents saw that their son was educated – reading, writing, mathematics, and Latin.

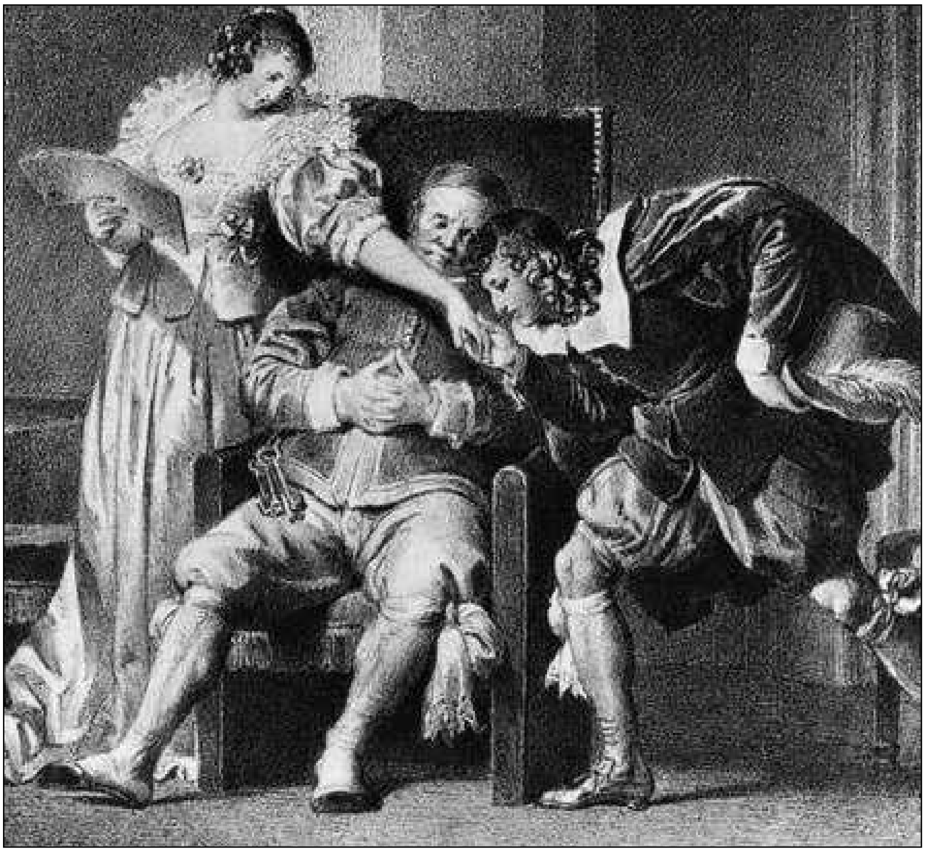
In 1805 Rossini appeared in a stage role at Bologna's Teatro del Corso in *Camilla*, an opera by a very popular composer of that era, Ferdinando Paër (he played the title character's son). The following year he entered Bologna's Accademia Filarmonica – he was 14 at the time. During his first year there, he studied with Padre Angelo Tesei and soon was admitted to the Liceo Musicale, where he studied singing, cello, piano, and counterpoint under the remarkable Padre Stanislao Mattei. But more important than his instructors or his course of study was the fact that he now had access to a library containing 17,000 volumes of music.

Italian baritone Mario Sammarco (1876-1950) as Figaro

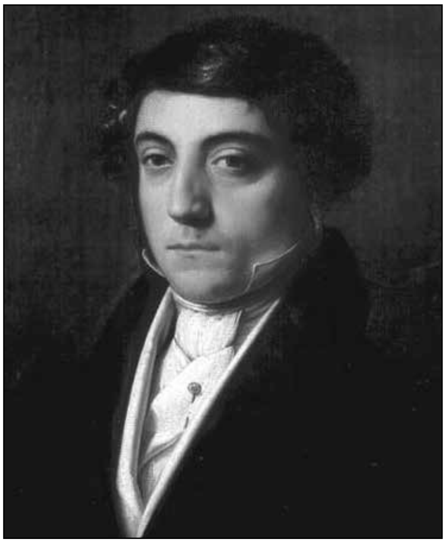
It was in that library that Rossini pored over the music of Haydn and Mozart, whose influence on him is obvious. More than one scholar has alleged that it was Haydn and Mozart, more than anyone else, who were Rossini's real teachers in Bologna. The influence of Haydn's *Creation* and *The Seasons* can be sensed in many Rossini works. Late in life Rossini disclosed that Mozart was "the admiration of my youth, the desperation of my mature years, and the consolation of my old age."

Rossini was a consummate melodist, but melody alone is not what distinguishes him from his contemporaries. He used the orchestra in the same way that Haydn and Mozart did. It wasn't a simple accompanying mechanism but an essential component of his operas, supporting the melody in expressing all form of emotion. Most notable, though, was his use of the orchestra to build tension and excitement. He'd write long *crescendi* under a passage that he'd repeat several times and each time intensify the *crescendo* with the addition of more and more instruments. Like Haydn and Mozart, Rossini conveyed a sense of joy in his music – a sense that it did not come from his intellect but from a wellspring of mirth and levity deep inside him.

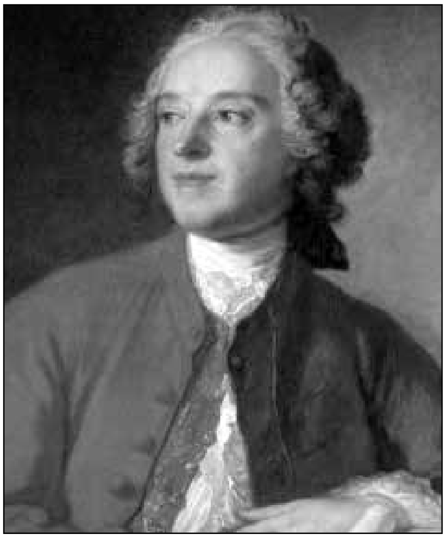
Rossini had begun composing when he was only 11. By 21, having produced *Tancredi* and *L'italiana in Algeri*, he was the most successful composer in Italy. He wrote *Barbiere* before he was 24. It took him all of three weeks, and the work became a cultural landmark, known even to



An engraving by Alfred Léon Lemercier, inspired by Beaumarchais's play, shows Rosina being wooed by Almaviva as Bartolo dozes.



An atypically somber look from the youthful Gioachino Rossini.



Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais at his most elegant.

people who have never seen the inside of an opera house. The work has transcended the medium for which it was created.

Although opera has so often been perceived as purely highbrow, occasionally a bit of it trickles into pop culture. A few famous movies reference one opera masterpiece or another. The Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera* (1935) finds Groucho, Chico and Harpo doing what they do best with *Il trovatore*. More recently there's the 1987 Oscar-winning Cher vehicle *Moonstruck*, which has Cher and Nicholas Cage in love and at the Metropolitan Opera taking in *La bohème*. We owe it to Robert Duvall's famous scene in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* that the "Ride of the Valkyries" will be forever linked with attacking helicopters.

No less cinematically notable is *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, which made a big splash in the waters of pop culture thanks to Warner Bros. and their Looney Tunes classic, "The Rabbit of Seville." Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd carry out a cartoon battle with the *Barbiere* overture as the soundtrack. The cartoon was released in 1949 and has had perpetual life via the Internet. *Seinfeld* gives a nod to *Barbiere* with an episode that has Jerry looking for a new barber while a bit of the Rossini score is played between scenes. There's even a *Barbiere*-infused episode of *The Simpsons* titled "Homer of Seville."

Of course, the inspiration for all this comedy is Rossini's enduring masterpiece, which premiered in 1816. But the story on which it's based originated four decades earlier, the creation of French playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais.

Beaumarchais is one of those colorful historical characters who at one time or another had his hand in everything – his résumé makes for impressive reading. Born in 1732, he was first an apprentice watchmaker in his father's shop. At that time pocket watches were crude devices, serving more as fashion accessories than timepieces. Beaumarchais changed that: at 21 he invented the escapement mechanism, which made pocket watches far more accurate and moved watchmaking into the modern era.

Beaumarchais was a restless sort and at one time or another was a musician, diplomat, fugitive, spy, publisher, horticulturalist, arms dealer, and financier. He turned to playwriting when he was 35. His first staged work, *Eugénie*, premiered at the Comédie Française in 1767, but it is his trio of "Figaro plays" for which he is most vividly remembered: *Le barbier de Séville* (1775), *Le mariage de Figaro* (1781), and *La mère coupable* (1792). His *Le mariage de Figaro* became Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. All three plays mirror the changing social attitude around the time of the French Revolution and parts of them are autobiographical.

On December 15, 1815, Rossini signed a contract for a new opera with Rome's Teatro Argentina. Standard practice of the time dictated that the composer would write an opera using a libretto furnished

TONY ROMANO

DAVID H. FISHMAN

NANCY SORENSEN

Several generations of Rosinas: (clockwise from top left) Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani, Dame Nellie Melba, Elvira de Hidalgo, and – at Lyric Opera – Giulietta Simionato, Marilyn Horne, and Maria Ewing.

NANCY SORENSEN

Barbiere *at Lyric Opera in 1958, with Tito Gobbi as Figaro.*

TONY ROMANO

Finale of Act One at Lyric Opera, 1989-90 season. Pictured, left to right, are Frederica von Stade (Rosina), Frank Lopardo (Almaviva), Cynthia Lawrence (Berta), and Sir Thomas Allen (Figaro).

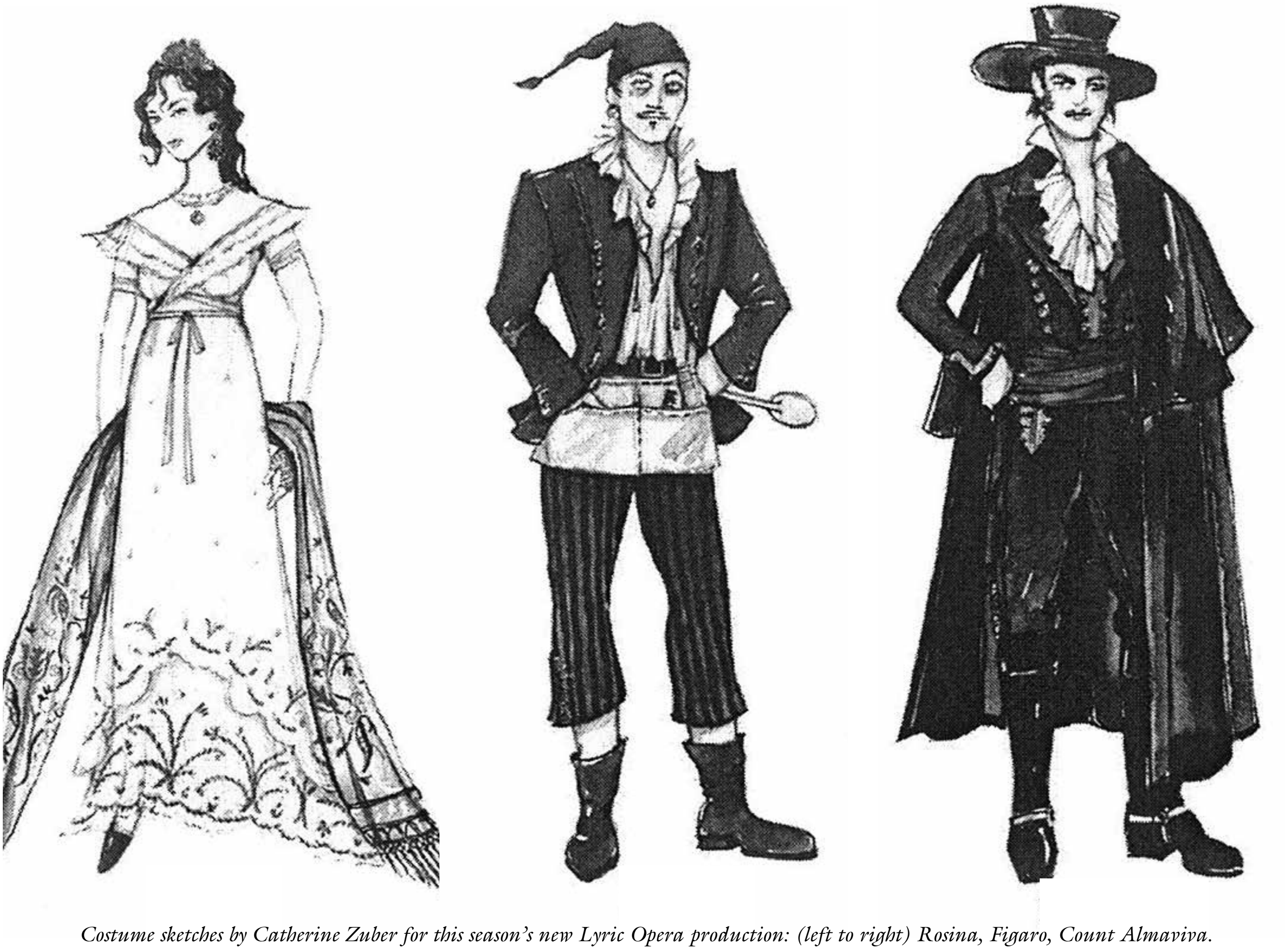
TONY ROMANO

Two legends of opera, bass Cesare Siepi (Don Basilio) and baritone Sesto Bruscantini (Dr. Bartolo), at Lyric Opera, 1984.

by the theater's impresario. Holding that position was Francesco Sforza-Cesarini, a direct descendant of Duke Francesco Sforza-Cesarini who had built the Argentina 80 years earlier. The text provided to Rossini – based on Beaumarchais's *Barbier* – was by Cesare Sterbini, an Italian librettist who had already given Rossini the libretto for another work, *Torvaldo e Dorliska*. It was an unsuccessful "rescue opera," premiered in late 1815. According to his contract with the Argentina, Rossini's new opera was to premiere in February 1816.

Rossini's problem with *Barbiere* had nothing to do with his abilities as a composer and musician – nor was there a problem with the libretto. Rather, it was the simple fact that a successful *Barbiere* opera had already existed for 34 years.

Giovanni Paisiello (1740-1816) composed 94 operas during his lifetime. In 1782 he penned *Il barbiere di Siviglia, ovvero La precauzione inutile* (*The Barber of Seville, or The Useless Precaution*). The librettist for his *Barbiere* was Giuseppe



Costume sketches by Catherine Zuber for this season's new Lyric Opera production: (left to right) Rosina, Figaro, Count Almaviva.

Petrosellini, a Roman abbot who was a librettist for many well-known composers of his day (some scholars maintain that he furnished 18-year-old Mozart with the libretto for *La finta giardiniera*). Based on the Beaumarchais play, Paisiello's opera was performed throughout Europe, and even made it to New Orleans in the early 1800s. Naturally, many people (especially friends of Paisiello!) took a dim view of the 20-something Rossini writing a "new" opera based on the same Beaumarchais source material.

From the start Paisiello's *Barbiere* was well received, and 34 years later, not only was his opera still alive and kicking – so was Paisiello! He had many supporters and, of course, they turned up at the premiere of Rossini's *Barbiere* on February 20, 1816. Hoping to win over Paisiello fans or at least soften them a bit, the Teatro Argentina management printed a public announcement in the new opera's libretto, stating that the work had been rewritten out of "respect and admiration" for the "greatly celebrated Paisiello." There was further bowing and scraping in the next paragraph; Paisiello was referred to as "the immortal composer."

It did no good. At the premiere, the Paisiellists carried on as if the theater were an unsupervised junior-high lunchroom. There were catcalls and shouting, plus a good deal of mocking and ridiculing of Rossini (who, according to his contract, was leading the orchestra from the harpsichord). By any estimation, the *Barbiere* premiere was a fiasco, so bad that the following night the young Rossini feigned illness and didn't show up. But unlike the premiere, *Barbiere*'s second performance was a huge success! A crowd buoyed with enthusiasm for the new work left the theater and made its way to where Rossini was berthed. According to one account, Rossini had feared the worst and when he heard the approach of the overly stimulated operatic masses, and he ducked out a rear entrance.

It didn't matter. Rossini's *Barbiere* became one of the most successful operatic comedies of all time, enduring for so many years because it's a flawless coupling of a delightful story that's full of extraordinarily human characters, ideally matched with Rossini's music – straightforward, easily comprehended by the listener, and bursting with energy and joy and an unbridled sense of spontaneity. It's charmed its way into the hearts of generations of operagoers. As Figaro says early on in the opera, "I am a bringer of good tidings." Indeed he is.

Jack Zimmerman, Lyric Opera's subscriber relations manager, has written for several music journals, is a published novelist, and is the 2012 recipient of the Helen Coburn Meier and Tim Meier Arts Achievement Award.