

Chapter 15: Opera in the Age of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Weber: 1810–50

I. Rossini

A. Introduction

1. Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) was the most popular composer in Europe in the first decades of the nineteenth century.
2. Serious opera became the preferred genre after Rossini with his successors Vincenzo Bellini (1810–35) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848).
 - a) Bellini is associated with *bel cano*, “beautiful singing.”
3. Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) wrote the opera *Der Freischütz*, which is considered the consummate Romantic opera and reflects the growing importance of nationalism.
4. At the same time, Beethoven’s popularity in Vienna peaked, the operas of Rossini were winning acclaim, and Schubert was writing his most famous *Lieder*.
 - a) Each of these composers represents the epitome of the genres with which they are most associated.

B. The popularity of Rossini

1. Rossini inherited the legacy of opera after Mozart.
2. His light, effervescent music was amazingly popular.
3. Rossini composed an average of two operas per year, and several of the early ones (including the *Barber of Seville*) were written in a month or less.
4. The conditions under which Rossini composed aided the quick presentation of his operas:
 - a) He was part of a team in the theater with a theatre producer (*impresario*), a librettist, and a performing cast.
5. Rossini and Beethoven differed substantially in many ways.
 - a) Rossini tossed off brilliant pieces effortlessly and was involved in the practical music world.
 - b) Beethoven worked hard in his pieces and was removed from the practical music world.
6. In opera circles, Rossini was seen as a great figure.
7. The opera *Guillaume Tell* (1829) expanded the scope of his operas in every aspect.
8. The success of *Guillaume Tell* allowed Rossini to retire soon after its premiere, although he wrote a few works in later years.

C. Rossinian conventions: the overture

1. Rossini worked within genres, and his formulas for various genres (overture, aria) became standards for everyone.
2. By the end of the eighteenth century, the opera *sinfonia* was similar to the first movement of a symphony, but a short one.
 - a) Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* overture is in the typical three parts.
 - b) This does not mean that all Rossini overtures sound alike, and the details that distinguish them make for enjoyable listening.

D. Imbroglione: the comic finale

1. The finales of acts in Italian comic operas usually included comic ensembles, and Rossini surpassed all predecessors.
2. The finale is the best place to highlight buffa style, and the best example is the finale to the first act of Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri*.
 - a) This piece comes at the height of the comic complication that drives the plot—the imbroglione.
 - b) Rossini has the drama conveyed not through the meaning of the words but through their sounds, within creative melodic lines that remain in the memory. This exemplifies his genius.

E. The serious aria

1. Rossini was also influential in opera seria, even if it is his comic operas we remember most today.
2. His formula for the serious aria (*scena ed aria*) was two main sections in contrasting tempos.
 - a) The cantabile, a lyrical section
 - b) The cabaletta, a brilliant section
 - c) Often it grew even further, with an orchestral introduction and accompanied recitative to start and a turn of plot inserted to motivate the change of mood (*tempo di mezzo*).
 - d) When all were put together, an aria could be built into a whole scena, or dramatic scene, with a self-contained dramatic trajectory.
 - e) The work that put this new style permanently on the map was “Di tanti palpiti,” the hero's entrance aria (known as a cavatina) from *Tancredi*.
3. The author Stendhal wrote a biography of Rossini that is useful for what it has to say as music criticism. Placing it alongside Hoffmann's remarks on Beethoven encapsulates the Romantic divide between instrumental music (German, Protestant North) and vocal music (largely Italian, Catholic South).

II. Vincenzo Bellini and bel canto

A. Bellini and bel canto

1. Rossini's immediate successors, Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti, are the chief proponents of opera seria.
2. In less than ten years, Bellini composed ten operas, most with Felice Romani as librettist.
 - a) In essence, these two operas defined bel canto style.
 - b) The cavatina (opening, slow, beautiful melodic part) becomes the most important part of the aria.
3. “Casta diva” represents the expansive aria of bel canto: it requires another soloist (bass), full chorus, orchestra, and band on stage. The spectacle of all these parts is a new dimension for the formerly reflective aria.

III. Gaetano Donizetti

1. Donizetti wrote sixty-six operas, but most have been forgotten.

- a) Three comic ones remain in the repertory: *L'elisir d'amore*, *La fille du régiment*, and *Don Pasquale*.
- 2. The most significant serious opera was *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), based on the novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* by Sir Walter Scott.
 - a. Essentially, the plot follows the Romeo and Juliet theme of family opposition to a young couple's union.
 - b. The sextet imbroglio from Act II is one of the most famous in opera.
 - c. *Lucia* provided the prototype "mad scene," in which the character, usually a soprano, expresses her madness through coloratura singing.

IV. German Romantic opera: Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz*

- A. German opera had some difficulty getting established, in part due to the popularity of Rossini. The composer who succeeded with it was Carl Maria von Weber.
 - 1. *Der Freischütz* (1821) represents a new type of Romanticism in opera, one that embraces orchestral sound and nationalism.
 - 2. *Der Freischütz* also contains attractive Romantic aspects in its story, particularly the supernatural.
 - 3. One of the most innovative elements of *Der Freischütz* is how Weber approaches the German people, *das Volk*.
 - 4. Individual parts of the opera were also new.
 - a) The overture pits light against dark, slow against fast, major against minor.
 - b) The Wolf's Glen is signaled throughout the opera with a diminished seventh chord and drum strokes.
 - c) Weber's vocal writing is between song and "melodrama"—actual speaking over an orchestra.

V. Nationalism

- A. *Der Freischütz* was the first opera to achieve the status of national emblem.
 - 1. The opera raises important issues of nationalism that would assume ever greater significance all over Europe, America, and beyond during the nineteenth century.
- B. Folk song, folklore, and folk tales
 - 1. Folklore, which had been associated with the peasantry, was increasingly seen as embodying the essential authentic wisdom of a language community of people or nation.
 - 2. German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) invented the word *Volkslied* (folk song) and published a large anthology of folk songs from different countries.
 - 3. The Grimm brothers also partook of this fascination with German folk culture with their famous collection of folk tales.