

# Synopsis

## Act I

Seville. Count Almaviva comes in disguise as a poor student named Lindoro to the house of Doctor Bartolo and serenades Rosina, whom Bartolo keeps confined to the house. Figaro the barber, who knows all the town's secrets and scandals, explains to Almaviva that Rosina is Bartolo's ward, not his daughter, and that the doctor intends to marry her. Figaro devises a plan: the count will disguise himself as a drunken soldier with orders to be quartered at Bartolo's house so that he may gain access to Rosina. Almaviva is excited and Figaro looks forward to a nice cash pay-off.

Rosina reflects on the voice that has enchanted her and resolves to use her considerable wiles to meet the man it belongs to. Bartolo appears with Rosina's music master, Don Basilio. Basilio warns Bartolo that Count Almaviva, who has made known his admiration for Rosina, has been seen in Seville. Bartolo decides to marry Rosina immediately. Basilio suggests slander as the most effective means of getting rid of Almaviva. Figaro, who has overheard the plot, warns Rosina and promises to deliver a note from her to Lindoro. Bartolo suspects that Rosina has indeed written a letter, but she outwits him at every turn. Bartolo warns her not to trifle with him.

Almaviva arrives, creating a ruckus in his disguise as a drunken soldier, and secretly passes Rosina his own note. Bartolo is infuriated by the stranger's behavior and noisily claims that he has an official exemption from billeting soldiers. Figaro announces that a crowd has gathered in the street, curious about the argument they hear coming from inside the house. The civil guard bursts in to arrest Almaviva, but when he secretly reveals his identity to the captain, he is instantly released. Everyone except Figaro is amazed by this turn of events.

## Act II

The Bartolo suspects that the "soldier" was a spy planted by Almaviva. The count returns, this time disguised as Don Alonso, a music teacher and student of Don Basilio, to give Rosina her singing lesson in place of Basilio, who, he says, is ill at home. "Don Alonso" then tells Bartolo that when visiting Almaviva at his inn, he found a letter from Rosina. He offers to tell her that it was given to him by another woman, seemingly to prove that Lindoro is toying with Rosina on Almaviva's behalf. This convinces Bartolo that "Don Alonso" is indeed a student of the scheming Basilio, and he allows him to give Rosina her lesson. With Bartolo dozing off, Almaviva and Rosina declare their love.

Figaro arrives to give Bartolo his shave and manages to snatch the key that opens the doors to Rosina's balcony. Suddenly Basilio shows up looking perfectly healthy. Almaviva, Rosina, and Figaro convince him with a quick bribe that he is in fact ill and must go home at once. While Bartolo gets his shave, Almaviva plots with Rosina to meet at her balcony that night so that they can elope. But the doctor overhears them and, realizing he has been tricked again, flies into a rage. Everyone disperses.

The maid Berta comments on the crazy household. Bartolo summons Basilio, telling him to bring a notary so Bartolo can marry Rosina that very night. Bartolo then shows Rosina her letter to Lindoro, as proof that her student is in league with Almaviva. Heartbroken and convinced that she has been deceived, Rosina agrees to marry Bartolo. A thunderstorm passes. Figaro and the count climb a ladder to Rosina's balcony and let themselves in with the key. Rosina appears and confronts Lindoro, who finally reveals his true identity as Almaviva. Basilio shows up with the notary. Bribed and threatened, he agrees to be a witness to the marriage of Rosina and Almaviva. Bartolo arrives with soldiers, but it is too late. He accepts that he has been beaten, and Figaro, Rosina, and the count celebrate their good fortune.

*Gioachino Rossini*

# Il Barbiere di Siviglia

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*Premiere: Teatro Argentina, Rome, 1816*

Rossini's perfectly honed treasure survived a famously disastrous opening night (caused by factions and local politics more than any reaction to the work itself) to become what may be the world's most popular comic opera. Its buoyant good humor and elegant melodies have delighted the diverse tastes of every generation for two centuries. *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* was the first opera heard in Italian in the United States, when Manuel García, who had sung Count Almaviva in the premiere, brought his family of singers, including his daughter, Maria (who years later became famous as the mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran), and his son, Manuel Jr., to perform the opera in 1825 at New York City's Park Theater. Several of the opera's most recognizable melodies have entered the world's musical unconscious, most notably the introductory patter song of the swaggering Figaro, the titular barber of Seville. The opera offers superb opportunities for all the vocalists, exciting ensemble composition, and a natural flair for breezy comedy that has scarcely been equaled since.

### *The Creators*

Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) was the world's foremost opera composer in his day. Over the course of just two decades, he created more than 30 works, both comic and tragic, before retiring from opera composition in 1829, at the age of 37, after his success with the grand *Guillaume Tell* (best known today for its overture). Librettist Cesare Sterbini (1784–1831) was an official of the Vatican treasury and a poet. He wrote a handful of other libretti, but his literary fame rests squarely on *Barbiere*. Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732–1799) was the author of the three subversive Figaro plays, of which *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775) was the first. Beaumarchais led a colorful life (he was, for instance, an active arms smuggler supporting both the American and French Revolutions). His character Figaro, the wily servant who consistently outsmarts his less-worthy masters, is semi-autobiographical.

### *The Setting*

Seville is both a beautiful city and something of a mythical Neverland for dramatists and opera composers. (Lord Byron, writing about the city at the time of this opera's composition, summed it up nicely: "What men call gallantry, and the gods adultery, is much more common where the climate is sultry.") The intricate, winding streets of the city's old quarters, the large Gypsy and

Moorish-descended population, the exotic traditions, and the mystique of the latticed “jalousie” windows have added to the city’s allure. The Don Juan legend has its origins in Seville, and some of the steamiest operas (such as Bizet’s *Carmen*) make their home in this most beguiling of cities. Beaumarchais’s play was revolutionary: Set “in the present day,” which meant just before the French Revolution, the work unveiled the hypocrisies of powerful people and the sneaky methods that workers devise to deal with them.

### *The Music*

The paradox of Rossini’s music is that the comedy can soar only with disciplined mastery of vocal technique. The singers must be capable of long vocal lines of attention-holding beauty (as in the tenor’s aria “Ecco ridente” directly after the curtain rises on Act I), as well as the rapid runs of coloratura singing (Rosina’s well-known “Una voce poco fa,” also in Act I). The score features solos of astounding speed in comic, tongue-twisting patter forms, especially the title role’s well-known Act I showstopper “Largo al factotum.” Beyond the brilliant solos, the singers must blend well with one another in the complex ensembles that occur throughout the opera.

### *Met History*

*Il Barbiere di Siviglia* appeared in the first month of the Met’s inaugural 1883–84 season, featuring Marcella Sembrich, who sang Rosina 65 times. In 1954, Roberta Peters, who sang the role of Rosina 54 times, was the first at the Met to ignore the tradition of interpolating other music into the “Music Lesson” scene, opting instead for Rossini’s original “Contro un cor.” This became standard at the Met until another notable (and very different) Rosina, Marilyn Horne, revived the old practice by singing “Tanti affetti” from Rossini’s *La Donna del Lago*. *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* has featured the talents of such diverse stars as Cesare Valletti, Salvatore Baccaloni, Robert Merrill, Fyodor Chaliapin, Ezio Pinza, Kathleen Battle, Amelita Galli-Curci, Leo Nucci, and Lily Pons. The current production, directed by Bartlett Sher, had its premiere on November 10, 2006, with Diana Damrau as Rosina, Juan Diego Flórez as Count Almaviva, Peter Mattei as Figaro, John Del Carlo as Dr. Bartolo, and Samuel Ramey as Don Basilio. Maurizio Benini conducted. Other singers who have since appeared in it include Joyce DiDonato, Elina Garanča, Isabel Leonard, Javier Camarena, and Lawrence Brownlee.

## Program Note

Giochino Rossini was just 23 years old when he wrote his most famous opera, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*), but he was already becoming remarkably famous, even outside of Italy. Operas like *Tancredi* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* (both written when he was only 20) had clearly signaled that an important new voice in Italian opera had arrived.

It's not surprising that the young composer would set Beaumarchais's play *Le Barbier de Séville* to music. The play had started as an opera libretto, and when the Opéra Comique rejected it, Beaumarchais rewrote it, first as a five-act play (which flopped at its premiere) and then as the four-act version with songs that became a hit in 1775. So popular were its characters that Beaumarchais wrote two more Figaro plays, *Le Mariage de Figaro* in 1784 (turned into an opera by Mozart and Da Ponte in 1786) and *La Mère coupable* (*The Guilty Mother*) in 1797 (the source for John Corigliano and William M. Hoffman's opera *The Ghosts of Versailles*, which had its world premiere at the Met in 1991).

There was no doubt in the minds of people who knew him that Beaumarchais and his most famous creation—the character Figaro—were the same person: impudent, undaunted, quick-witted, passionate, ingratiating, cocksure, with an eye toward his own purse and survival, and always with some scheme up his sleeve. Beaumarchais was born in 1732, the seventh of ten children. Like his father, he became a watchmaker, but that was only the beginning. At one time or another, he was harp teacher to the daughters of King Louis XV, dramatist, musician, pamphleteer, inventor, secret agent and spy for the French government, importer of tobacco and slaves from the New World, and a member of the French Royal Household in a variety of positions. He was constantly in and out of the courts and was even jailed for a period of time. He made and lost fortunes and was a passionate early supporter of the rebellious American colonies, raising vast sums of money for American independence (much of it his own) even before he was able to persuade the French king to officially support the cause.

When Rossini signed a contract on December 15, 1815, for a new opera to be given at Rome's Teatro Argentina, he needed a libretto in a hurry. The conditions in the contract with Duke Francesco Sforza Cesarini strike us today as daunting, to say the least, but they were fairly typical for the time. Rossini was required to deliver his opera within a month, to adapt it to singers who would be engaged for the Teatro Argentina's season and to make any changes they deemed necessary, to supervise the rehearsals (stage directors were unknown at the time), and to conduct the first three performances himself. For this, the duke would provide him lodging and a fee of 400 scudi. Of the opening night cast, only the Bartolo and the Berta were paid less than the composer. But there were two major problems: there was not yet a libretto, and no singers had yet been engaged.

The first choice of librettist was the experienced Jacopo Ferretti, who would later provide Rossini with the libretto for *La Cenerentola*. But his tale about

a love triangle between the hostess of an inn, a lawyer, and an army officer was rejected. In desperation, the duke turned to Cesare Sterbini, despite the fact that his libretto for Rossini's *Torvaldo e Dorliska* had not only been his first libretto but was largely blamed for the opera's failure.

It's not known who first came up with the idea of an opera based on Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier de Séville*, but there were several things to recommend it. The play was well-known, so the plot and characters would be familiar to the audience, and there was already a very successful opera on the subject whose libretto could be adapted. But that also posed a problem. One of the most popular—and respected—of all Italian operas at the time was Giovanni Paisiello's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. It had premiered in 1782 in St. Petersburg, where Paisiello was court composer for Catherine the Great, and the composer was still alive. For a young man to blatantly challenge such a respected, and now elderly, composer could easily backfire.

Rossini later claimed that he had written to Paisiello saying he had no wish to compete with him, only to set a subject he found pleasing, and that Paisiello had replied that he had no objections to Rossini's opera. Neither letter has been found. But Rossini and Sterbini did write a "Notice to the Public" that was printed at the beginning to their libretto, insisting on their veneration of Paisiello and enumerating ways in which their new opera differed from his. They also used a different title. Rossini's opera premiered as *Almaviva, or The Useless Precaution*.

It didn't help. The opening-night audience was spoiling for a fight, and a number of stage mishaps only fueled their hostility. Some people took exception to the Spanish-style jacket with large gold buttons that Rossini wore for the occasion. The Almaviva, famous Spanish tenor Manuel García, broke a string while tuning his guitar for his first number, which set off the audience again. When Figaro entered carrying another guitar, the audience laughter meant that most of the aria went unheard. After that, it was all downhill. They objected to the fact that Rosina's first entrance included only a few words, rather than the expected aria. When Basilio stumbled over a trap door and bloodied his nose, he was forced to sing his aria while holding a handkerchief to his face. At the beginning of the Act I finale, a stray cat got onto the stage and ran around, and was chased by Figaro and Basilio before hiding under Rosina's skirts. The audience hooted and hollered. Rossini applauded the cast, trying to encourage them. The audience decided the brash young composer was applauding his own work and took exception. Almost none of Act II was heard thanks to the general ruckus in the theater.

Rossini refused to attend the second performance, and, according to his own later account, when the enthusiastic audience—which had been able to actually hear the opera that evening—went *en masse* to his lodgings to applaud him, he thought they were coming to lynch him and hid.

One of the ways Rossini was able to write *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in just 13 days (some accounts even claim nine days) is because some of the music already existed. At a time when few people traveled more than a few miles from their homes, it was accepted practice for composers to reuse their music. If an opera flopped in Milan, why not save some of the best numbers and use them in a new work for Naples, where almost no one would have heard them before? The famous overture to *Il Barbiere* was originally written in 1813 for Rossini's *Aureliano in Palmira*, then used again (with some changes) for his 1815 *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*. Parts of more than half a dozen selections in *Il Barbiere* can be traced to earlier Rossini works, but there is no doubt that in their new context they work perfectly.

It is no wonder that *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* has become one of the most popular operas of all time. Rossini's music, like Figaro himself, simply bursts with vitality. It possesses a rhythmic assertiveness that commands the listener's attention and an extraordinary level of writing for the voice that firmly defines each character as an individual. He combines that with an increased emphasis on delicious instrumental colors and textures in the orchestra, which won him the derisive nickname "Il Tedesco" ("the German") from his detractors.

The basic plot of the opera is not new. Plays about a young man in love who outwits an older rival with the help of a quick-witted servant have been around since antiquity. It's the depth of character that Beaumarchais originally gave Figaro that makes him such an immediately engaging presence on stage—and that is enhanced by the music Rossini wrote for him. We're never quite sure what he's going to do next, how he's going to wiggle out of an unexpected difficulty. We are as riveted by him as are the other characters. And it is in the relation of the other characters to Figaro that makes us see them as three-dimensional individuals.

Yet Rossini only gives Figaro one aria—but what an aria it is. "Largo al factotum" is the first thing we hear from him, and it has become one of the most recognizable tunes in the world, turning up in numerous animated cartoons, commercials, and other forms of mass media. But for all of his élan and brio, Figaro is a very practical guy, and the music Rossini gives him reflects this. Most of his vocal line is written with one syllable per note. It can be fast and exciting, but the music is firmly rooted in the words. By contrast, Count Almaviva's vocal line is often quite florid, with cascades of notes drawing out words to great length. Rossini brilliantly contrasts these two ways of writing for the voice—and demonstrates the difference between the two men—in the Act I duet "All' idea di quel metallo." The Count sings of the delights of being in love, his airy vocal line rippling with as many as six notes per syllable, while the more down-to-earth Figaro anchors the duet rhythmically with his pulsating eighth- and sixteenth-notes, each a complete syllable, commenting about how nice it feels to have money in his pocket. With every number in the opera conveying the emotion

and drama in such musical detail, it is no wonder that *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* has never lost its place on stage.

For all the high-jinks and humor of Rossini's opera, it is actually a very deft, sophisticated comedy of manners, a child of the *commedia del arte*. Loading down Rossini's effervescent music with extraneous sight gags merely distracts the audience from its inherent humor. Any performance that instead showcases Rossini's ebullient music, allowing people to savor the composer's genius at conveying three-dimensional characters reacting to each other in a variety of situations, is likely to leave an audience agreeing with Verdi, who, as an elderly man, said that *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, "with its abundance of real musical ideas, its comic verve, and its truthful declamation is the most beautiful *opera buffa* in existence."

—Paul Thomason

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