

Synopsis

Act I

SCENE 1 A room in the run-down mansion of Don Magnifico

SCENE 2 A hallway in Don Ramiro's palace

SCENE 3 The royal wine cellar

SCENE 4 The throne room in the prince's palace

SCENE 5 The seaside near the prince's palace

Intermission

Act II

SCENE 1 Don Ramiro's country house

SCENE 2 A room in Don Magnifico's mansion

SCENE 3 Don Ramiro's palace

Act I

Clorinda and Tisbe, daughters of Don Magnifico, are in the middle of one of their usual arguments. Their stepsister Angelina, who is called Cenerentola (Cinderella) and serves as the family maid, sings her favorite song, about a king who married a common girl. Suddenly Alidoro, tutor to the prince Don Ramiro, enters, dressed as a beggar. The stepsisters want to send him away, but Cenerentola gives him bread and coffee. Courtiers announce that Ramiro will soon pay a visit: he is looking for the most beautiful girl in the land and will hold a ball to choose his bride. Magnifico hopes that it will be one of the stepsisters: marriage to a wealthy man is the only way to save the family fortune. When everybody has left, Ramiro enters alone, dressed in his servant's clothes so he can freely observe the prospective brides. Cenerentola returns, and the two are immediately attracted to each other. He asks her who she is, and Cenerentola, confused, tries to explain, then runs away. Finally, the "prince" arrives—in fact Ramiro's valet, Dandini, in disguise. Magnifico, Clorinda, and Tisbe fall over themselves flattering him, and he invites them to the ball. Cenerentola asks to be taken along but Magnifico refuses. Ramiro notes how badly Cenerentola is treated. Alidoro says there should be a third daughter in the house but Magnifico claims she has died. Left alone with Cenerentola, Alidoro tells her he will take her to the ball and explains that God will reward her for her good heart.

Dandini shares his negative opinion of the two sisters with the prince. But both men are confused, since Alidoro has spoken well of one of Magnifico's daughters. Clorinda and Tisbe appear again, following Dandini, who still pretends to be the prince. When he offers Ramiro as a husband to the sister the prince does not marry, they are outraged at the idea of marrying a servant. Alidoro enters with a beautiful unknown lady who, strangely, resembles Cenerentola. Unable to make sense of the situation, they all sit down to supper, feeling as if in a dream.

Act II

Magnifico fears that the arrival of the stranger could ruin his daughters' chances to marry the prince. Cenerentola, tired of being pursued by Dandini, tells him that she is in love with his servant. Overhearing this, Ramiro is overjoyed and steps forward. Cenerentola, however, tells him that she will return home and does not want him to follow her. If he really cares for her, she says, he will find her. The prince resolves to win the mysterious girl.

Meanwhile Magnifico, who still thinks that Dandini is the prince, confronts him, insisting that he decide which of his daughters he will marry. When Dandini reveals that he is in fact the prince's servant, Magnifico is furious.

Magnifico and the sisters return home in a bad mood and order Cenerentola, again in rags, to prepare supper. During a thunderstorm, Alidoro arranges for Ramiro's carriage to break down in front of Magnifico's mansion so that the prince has to take refuge inside. Cenerentola and Ramiro recognize each other, as everybody comments on the situation. Ramiro threatens Magnifico and his daughters, who are unwilling to accept defeat, but Cenerentola asks him to forgive them.

At the prince's palace, Ramiro and Cenerentola celebrate their wedding. Magnifico tries to win the favor of the new princess, but she asks only to be acknowledged at last as his daughter. Born to misfortune, she has seen her life change and declares that the days of sitting by the fire are over.

Gioachino Rossini

La Cenerentola

Premiere: Teatro Valle, Rome, 1817

The story is simple: a young woman is denigrated by her own family but ultimately exalted by a prince who sees her true value. Rossini's operatic version of the Cinderella tale ("Cenerentola" in Italian) is charming, beautiful, touching in parts, and dramatically convincing. Jacopo Ferretti—on a tight schedule, juggling gigs with various theater managers, and contending with censors—resorted to a cut-and-paste method, pulling from a number of sources for his libretto. Though hastily assembled, the result was something new and well suited to Rossini's special talents. Instead of the fairy godmother of the familiar version, the character of Alidoro ("wings of gold") is introduced, a figure who manipulates the action and seems to possess magic qualities, though he is unmistakably human. Indeed, the story is less about magic and more about human nature. The opera, as a result, transcends its roots as a children's tale in its humane and fundamentally realistic approach, making the title heroine's transformation one of character rather than stereotype.

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 inexplicably stopping opera composition in 1829, at the age of 37. His operas have always been admired for their charm, musical polish, and opportunity for extravagant vocalism. It is only within the past few decades that they have once again been recognized for their sophistication and dramatic insights. The libretto for *La Cenerentola* was provided by Jacopo Ferretti (1784–1852), a poet who also supplied librettos for Donizetti and other composers. Charles Perrault (1628–1703) penned the most famous version of the Cinderella story, in his still-popular collection *Tales of Mother Goose*, adding such now-popular features as the pumpkin carriage and the fairy godmother, neither of which appears in previous versions.

The Setting

Unlike most other versions, the opera places the story in a real locale, with the prince not a generic Prince Charming, but the prince of Salerno, an ancient seaside town in southern Italy.

The Music

The score of *La Cenerentola* seethes with the elegant buoyancy that is the hallmark of Rossini's style. The solo parts require astounding vocal abilities, though the pyrotechnics always serve a larger dramatic purpose. The beautiful line with which the prince introduces his duet with Cenerentola, "Un soave non so che," is a variation and expansion of the simple "Once upon a time..." ditty she sings in her first entrance. He is, quite literally, her dream come true. There is also genuine pathos, notably in the stately aria "Là del ciel nell'arcano profondo," in which the bass consoles Cenerentola with the promise of divine justice. Great comedy, an area in which Rossini stands supreme, runs throughout the score. It is most apparent in the dexterous patter of the duet for two basses in Act II. The art of ensemble writing is another realm in which Rossini proved himself a master: his ensembles are reflections on a moment frozen in time, which examine a feeling, idea, or situation from every conceivable angle. Two remarkable examples are Act I's "Signor, una parola," when Cenerentola begs to go to the ball, and especially "Questo è un nodo," the "ensemble of confusion" preceding the finale, in which each character tries to untangle the baffling knot of the situation with a florid vocal phrase. The final word, however, belongs to the title character, who concludes the evening with the solo "Nacqui all'affanno." This musical depiction of latent heroism bursting out of the humblest character is an elegant encapsulation of the power of this archetypal fairy tale.

La Cenerentola at the Met

The opera had its Met premiere in 1997 in the current production, with James Levine leading a cast that included Cecilia Bartoli, Ramón Vargas, Simone Alaimo, and Alessandro Corbelli in his company debut. (The opera had previously been given 56 times by the short-lived Metropolitan Opera National Company, including six performances at the former New York State Theater.) *La Cenerentola* has been revived in recent seasons with such singers as Jennifer Larmore, Sonia Ganassi, Olga Borodina, and Elīna Garanča in the title role, Juan Diego Flórez and Lawrence Brownlee as Ramiro, and John Relyea and Ildar Abdrazakov as Alidoro.

Program Note

January 25, 1817, Teatro Valle, *La Cenerentola, ossia La Bontà in Trionfo*—another Roman premiere of dubious success for Gioachino Rossini. Not as bad as a year before at the Teatro Argentina, when *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* got shaved, pelted, and massacred. But poor Cinderella didn't do much better.

To commemorate the event, Jacopo Ferretti, *La Cenerentola*'s librettist, composed a "tragedy," *Jacopo*, in which the ghosts of two poets (including Giuseppe Petrosellini, the librettist of Paisiello's earlier *Barbiere*) are summoned to judge Ferretti's sins. First, triviality—the servant-prince Dandini compares himself to a "cavolo," or cabbage. Next, anachronism—Ferretti names a 19th-century Roman madhouse in a story set in Salerno in an earlier period. And finally, blasphemy—Cupid is named "il guercetto amore," the squinting God of Love. The fictitious Jacopo pleads in vain: it's only an opera buffa. As punishment, he is forced to listen to an opera seria libretto by a rival, Michelangelo Prunetti. One stanza suffices. "Barbarous Rome! What a volley of stones! I die," Jacopo laments, falling senseless.

Such spirited literary hijinks reflect only a momentary setback in the history of *La Cenerentola, ossia La Bontà in Trionfo* ("Cinderella, or Goodness Triumphant"). By the end of the first season, the work had enchanted the Romans, as Rossini predicted it would. It is one of his few operas to remain in print and, with the exception of a period around the beginning of the 20th century, to have been performed regularly. Its popularity today dates from the legendary production by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle at Milan's La Scala in 1973, conducted by Claudio Abbado.

We have the prudishness of Roman censors to thank for the existence of *La Cenerentola*. Rossini had originally planned a comic opera to a libretto by his previous collaborator Gaetano Rossi, based on a French farce that Ferretti—hardly impartial—described as "one of the least moral comedies of the French theater." So many changes were demanded by the censors that Rossini asked Ferretti to choose a new subject. On December 23, 1816, they agreed on *La Cenerentola*; a little more than a month later, the opera had its premiere.

Both composer and librettist had help in achieving this minor miracle. Ferretti turned to earlier librettos derived from Charles Perrault's fairy tale, especially the 1814 *Agatina, o La Virtù Premiata* by Francesco Fiorini, with music by Stefano Pavesi. The absence of magical elements like pumpkins, talking cats, mice, lizards, and fairy godmothers in Ferretti's libretto simply repeats the similar situation in Fiorini's version. The absence of a glass slipper, on the other hand, is attributable to the inevitable Roman censors: no bare feet, please—bracelets will do. (These were the same censors who insisted that *Otello* and *Desdemona* reconcile at the end of Rossini's *Otello*.)

In composing the music to *La Cenerentola*, Rossini chose as a collaborator Luca Agolini, a Roman musician of some repute. Agolini wrote the secco recitative and three numbers: an aria for the prince's tutor, Alidoro; a chorus

to open the second act; and an aria for one of the sisters, Clorinda. Alidoro's aria was replaced by Rossini himself in 1821–22 with a new piece for the same character, "Là del ciel nell'arcano profondo." Both the chorus and the Clorinda aria disappeared from the score early on. Except for the secco recitative, then, all the music performed here is Rossini's. With two exceptions, all of it was newly composed for *La Cenerentola* in that frenetic January. Only the sinfonia was borrowed from *La Gazzetta*, a comic opera Rossini had just written for Naples, and Cinderella's final rondo, the most famous piece of the score, is derived from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*.

The history of this rondo is interesting. Rossini wrote a difficult aria, "Cessa di più resistere," for the great tenor Emanuele García, the original Count Almaviva, for the conclusion of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. His first Rosina, Geltrude Righetti-Giorgi, clearly liked the piece. In the next series of performances of *Il Barbiere*, given in Bologna during the spring of 1816, it recurs, but sung by Rosina, again Righetti-Giorgi. And who was the original Cinderella? Righetti-Giorgi, of course. Who could resist the wiles of a prima donna assoluta?

Later, in the second half of the 19th century, *La Cenerentola* was subject to violent manipulations, together with many of Rossini's operas. The orchestration was altered to bring it into line with later works. Rossini's occasional use of a single trombone yielded to the oppressive presence of three trombones; two horns became four; percussion was sprinkled everywhere (there is no percussion in Rossini's opera). In the original score two musicians alternate between playing flutes and piccolos; in the late-19th-century version, the piccolos are silenced, and the main tune of Cinderella's rondo is announced by a flute.

There were changes to the vocal parts as well. Rossini wrote florid melodic lines for Cinderella, Ramiro, and Dandini, but even with access to his manuscript it can be difficult to be certain what notes he had in mind. Late-19th-century editors, who didn't have the option of consulting the sources, invented what can only be called the most extraordinary nonsense, causing generations of singers to question their own sanity or that of the composer. In fact, while Rossini's music is difficult to sing, it is always logical.

In the early 1970s, Alberto Zedda prepared the first edition of *La Cenerentola* based on Rossini's autograph manuscript, housed today at the Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna. Only since then has it been possible to hear the opera again in a form Rossini would have recognized. That edition, prepared for republication by the present writer for the Fondazione Rossini of Pesaro, appeared in the *Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini*. The edition of the Fondazione was presented for the first time in 1997 at the Metropolitan Opera with the premiere of this production and is the one performed here.

My favorite error in earlier editions is in Don Magnifico's cavatina in Act I, where Cinderella's stepfather, narrating the contents of his remarkable dream,

complains to his daughters about the racket they've made: "Col cì cì, ciù ciù di botto mi faceste risvegliar" ("With your 'cì cì, ciù ciù' you suddenly woke me up"). Rossini's differentiated nonsense syllables ("cì cì, ciù ciù") were mistakenly printed as "cì cì cì cì," and when Don Magnifico should let loose his repeated sequence of "col cì cì, col ciù ciù," he was forced instead to declaim again and again "col cì cì, col cì cì." Ask any singer which version is more humane.

Finally, a word about cuts. Through much of the 20th century it was common practice to eliminate repeated passages in Rossini operas. Those passages, however, are intended to be opportunities for singers to introduce ornamentation. Rossini actually left a manuscript of variations that he prepared for a singer to use in the final rondo of *La Cenerentola*. While adopting Rossini's added ornamentation is never obligatory for a modern singer (who must have the freedom to develop ornamentation appropriate to his or her voice), Rossini's own suggestions for the rondo are made available for the first time through the critical edition.

La Cenerentola is one of Rossini's most thoroughly delightful works. Rooted solidly in the opera buffa tradition, it also allows ample room for sentiment and wonder. The transformation (musically and dramatically) of Cinderella from her fireside home and her simple nursery song, "Una volta c'era un rè," to the royal palace and luxuriant coloratura is lovely to behold. And what characters surround her: Don Magnifico, one of Rossini's most fully realized buffo roles; the two chattering sisters; Dandini, the servant as prince, whose gross imitation of the style of his master is hilarious; and the prince himself, a dashing figure who actually gets to sing a love duet with Cenerentola—which is more than Lindoro and Isabella or Almaviva and Rosina are allowed.

While *La Cenerentola* shares with *L'Italiana in Algeri* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* much of the exuberance of Rossini's style, its treatment of the heroine reveals a range of emotions that makes Rossini's opera a precursor of the sentimental comedies for which Donizetti is renowned.

—Philip Gossett