



Semiramide, the Culmination of an Italian Career

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Zingarelli, Nicolini, Mayr, Gazzaniga, Portogallo, Orlandi, Pollini, Puscita, Nasolini, Mosca - these were the composers whose works were presented in the 1800-1801 season at La Scala. Of the most popular composers of the late 18th century (Mozart not among them), Piccinni and Cimarosa were dead and the active career of Paisiello, composer of the original Barber of Seville, was over. Other Italian composers had established themselves abroad. It was not the finest hour of opera in Italy: according to Julian Budden, Norton History of Opera, p.168, "the prevailing idiom inclined to monotonous mellifluity." Rossini was 8 years old.

By the time he was 21 he had exploded on the scene. In 1813 two operas in particular, *Tancredi*, an opera seria, and *L'italiana in Algerie*, a comedy, established him as a *maestro di cartello*, a composer whose name alone guaranteed an audience for any new production. In addition to his gifts for melody, rhythm and orchestral color, Rossini transformed the structures of Italian opera, providing a model that was ignored by other composers at their peril in the ensuing decades. He composed 39 operas in 19 years, and retired at a time when Romantic opera was beginning to demand a type of more dramatic singer, different from the light, flexible voices of the *bel canto* style required by his works.

In 1815, Rossini signed a contract with the San Carlo Theater in Naples that allowed him to produce operas for other cities as well. He was based in Naples until 1822, but during this time he wrote *Barbiere* and *Cenerentola* for Rome and *La gazza ladra* for Milan.

During these years he continued to define his style. His vocal line became more ornate, but unlike former composers, he wrote out the embellishments for his singers. The embellishments themselves became part of his musical thought, helping express a range of moods from amusement to flirtatiousness to triumph and sadness. He consolidated and refined the trends in opera which made the basic unit of composition the scene rather than the alternation of aria or ensemble and recitative. In the Rossini scena, dramatic events took place during an often extended aria, duet and/or chorus, advancing the trend toward the integration of the music and the drama, the latter formerly carried only by the recitative. Along the way, Rossini abandoned barely-accompanied recitative in favor of orchestral accompaniment and even essayed into the territory of tragedy, providing both a tragic and a seria ending for his *Tancredi* and *Otello*. (In the 18th century, all operas, both comic and serious had happy endings, at least for the protagonists that deserved them.) The era of the castrati was over, but in Italy the allure of the high-voiced hero was perpetuated by contraltos or mezzos in travesti,

like Arsace in *Semiramide*. In his dedication to form, balance, and contrast, Rossini was neo-classical, but he prepared the way for many developments of the Romantic period to come.

After his time in Naples, Rossini had a successful season in Vienna and returned to compose *Semiramide* for Venice's La Fenice at his country home outside Bologna. It is Rossini's last opera in Italian and his last written in Italy.

Semiramide does not include so many ensembles as had become usual for Rossini. However, most significant dramatic events, such as the appearance of the dead king's ghost, do occur in one of the three great ensembles, namely, the introduction and the Act I and Act II finales. Memorable melodies are found in the cabalettas (second, faster sections) of the duets for Arsace and Assur, and *Semiramide* and Arsace in Act I. The finale of that act encompasses the appearance of the ghost of the dead king Nino, and the musical idea associated with Nino is recalled in Act II. Assur's mad scene just preceding the Act II finale is full of original musical and dramatic effects, effectively conveying his disordered emotions. The opera was a great success, was presented all over Europe, and unlike Rossini's other serious operas, remained in production for most of the 19th century.

Epilogue.

Rossini spent some time in London, then settled in Paris as Director of the Theatre-Italien, where his operas formed the backbone of the repertory. New (or revised old) operas were written in French. His one entirely new work was *Guillaume Tell* (1839), considered a masterpiece in which the elements of French and Italian style are beautifully integrated. After *Tell*, he retired from writing for the stage and died in 1868.

While *The Barber of Seville* has been in the repertory since its premiere, Rossini's other operas, especially the serious ones, were forgotten with the advent of Romanticism and the change in singing associated with it. Singers were no longer trained in the *bel canto* style and these works were very difficult to mount because of their length and the number of excellent singers required. It wasn't until the 1950's that the Fondazione Rossini, located in Pesaro, the composer's birthplace, precipitated an interest in reviving his work. During the 1980's, critical editions of the operas began to be published. Talented singers began to be trained, and since then some of the best singers specialize in this repertory. Its lovely melodies and beautiful writing for the voice, to say nothing of the wit and zaniness of the comedies, inspire gratitude to those who were dedicated to this legacy.

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