

Evviva l'opera buffa! (Hurray for buffa!)

THE PLAYERS

With *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart, 1786), *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*, Rossini, 1816), and *L'elisir d'amore* (*The Elixir of Love*, Donizetti, 1832), we have the culmination of an opera form that began in the early 18th century with Neapolitan and other local comedies in dialect. The structures and conventions of opera buffa were standardized by the work of a mid-century partnership: Carlo Goldoni, librettist, and Baldassare Galuppi, composer. Over the course of the century, opera buffa overcame serious opera in popularity and influence, and was produced by many composers, such as Paisiello and Cimarosa, with whom the modern opera audience is usually unfamiliar.

Mozart's genius was, contrary to convention, to infuse his comedies with a human warmth and depth of character which it had not known before and would not know again. Rossini, however, with his endless supply of musical spirit, wit and melody, brought the conventional buffa to different heights, composing what is generally regarded as its best, and certainly its most popular, work, *The Barber of Seville*.

Donizetti continued the tradition. One of his last operas, *Don Pasquale*, is considered the last opera buffa of significance. It's a gem which was staged by the Met in 2010, a brilliant romp for Anna Netrebko and Mariusz Kwiecien.



Florentine Opera performs Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*.

THE PLOT

The whole plot of opera buffa is that the course of true love never does run smooth. Will the two lovers overcome (or outflank) the obstacles to their union? George Bernard Shaw once said that, in an opera, the soprano and the tenor want to make love but they are prevented by the baritone. In buffa, it is often a mezzo-soprano and a tenor that want to make love and the obstructing male is a buffo bass. But by means of tricks, deceptions and disguises, happily the lovers always do overcome the opposition, often of a parent or guardian who desires another match.

THE PROGRAM

Here are some things to watch for in *The Barber of Seville*:

*Act I, sc. 1. Figaro's cavatina (entrance aria), "Largo al factotum," in which he exults in his position as the go-to person of the town. A model of the buffa "patter song" in which many, many, words are rapidly declaimed on one note per syllable, it builds to a finale of fast words and music mirroring his frantic response to the demands for his services.

*Act I, sc. 2. Rosina's cavatina (entrance aria), "Una voce poco fa" in which she sings of the "cento trappole" (hundred tricks) she will use to get her way. This ends with some of the most famous bel canto coloratura (high-flying vocal decoration) in the repertory.

*Act I, sc. 2. Don Basilio (the music teacher) advises Dr. Bartolo (Rosina's guardian) to damage the Count's reputation in "La calunnia." The music and orchestration again mirror the meaning of the words as he describes how the slander begins as a gentle breeze and builds to a violent storm. A notable example of Rossini's use of the crescendo, for which he was well known as "Signor Crescendo."

*Act I, finale. The finale is about 20 minutes long, written in several sections with varying tempos. By convention, all the characters gather on the stage and ultimately express their total confusion as the chaotic situation develops. You will know when it starts because it is continuously orchestrated – the accompaniment does not stop and start with the flow of the recitative (dialogue).

*In Act II, sc. 1, we have the delightful 'music lesson' scene and in scene 2, the 'elopement trio' of the Count, Rosina and Figaro, "Zitti, zitti, piano, piano" (Hush, hush, softly, softly), with its typical buffa repetition.

If you like *The Barber of Seville*, you will also like *L'Italiana in Algerie (The Italian Girl in Algiers)*, a less-performed Rossini comedy, which some think even better than *The Barber*. It's especially good when the Italian girl is sung by the incomparable Marylyn Horne. (Available on DVD with the Met Orchestra and Chorus, James Levine, Deutsche Grammophon, 1986.)

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