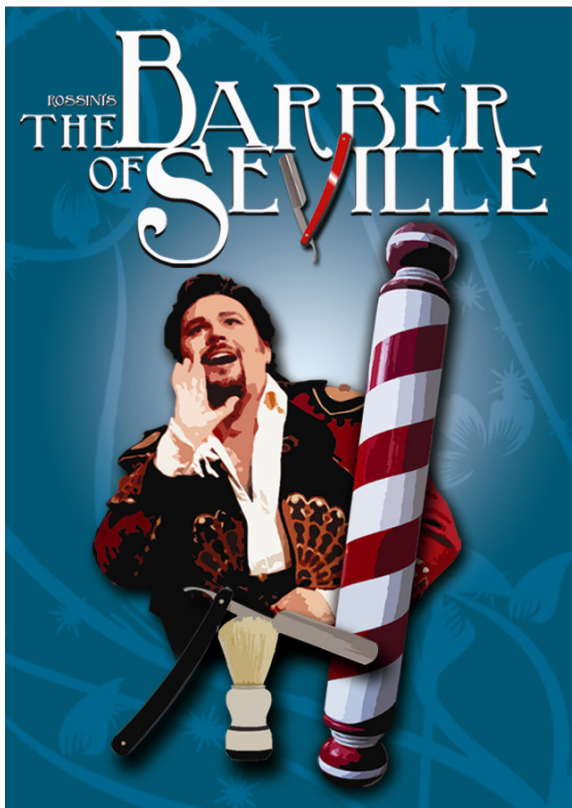


# DAYTON --- Opera

## ***THE BARBER OF SEVILLE*** **ULTIMATE STUDY GUIDE**

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Gioachino Rossini

**Anyone who thinks opera is sad** – that it is one long, lugubrious lament sung by an expiring soprano after another – **has never seen *The Barber of Seville***. It is a *very* funny opera. Composed in typically speedy fashion by twenty-four year-old Gioachino Rossini (some say as few as thirteen days), it is a masterpiece of the *opera buffa* genre and has held the stage since its premiere on February 20, 1816 at the Teatro Argentina in Rome.

*Opera buffas* were written for a popular audience and performed in the vernacular. *Buffa* featured characters from everyday life: servants like Figaro and other working-class types. Their plots are complex, often involving trickery, disguises, and switches at birth. Other famous *buffas* include *The Marriage of Figaro* (which is more than comical – Mozart and da Ponte added drama and pathos to the rough-and-tumble antics of their *buffa* character types) and Verdi’s *Falstaff*, considered to be the latest example of the genre. Rossini did not *only* write comic operas, although Beethoven famously advised him to “write more *Barbers*.” He wrote thirty-nine operas in all, many of which fall into the *opera seria* genre: unlike *buffa*, *opera seria* is – you guessed it – *serious*. It is peopled with mythological, historical, and heroic characters who sing about their emotions in highly stylized songs called da capo arias. Rossini is best remembered today, however, for his comic operas.

A definition of *opera buffa* fails to capture the essence of Rossini. It takes a great writer to even begin to describe it in words, so Stendhal will do. The French author and man of letters was an unabashed Rossini worshipper and he put it this way: “The most striking quality in Rossini’s music is a peculiar *verve*, a certain stirring rapidity which lightens the spirit.” Consider the “Lone Ranger” theme: Duh duh duh / duh duh duh / duh duh DUH DUH DUH. It manages to convey a kind of galloping excitement that stirs the heart. Well, that music was not written for the Lone Ranger, although it suits him perfectly. It was written by Rossini; it is the overture to his last opera, *William Tell*. The venerable Italian opera scholar Julian Budden characterized Rossini’s comedies as full of mischief and ribaldry. You’ll find this is true in *The Barber*. The term “belly laugh” also applies: his comedies inspire more than mere chuckles. An exploration of the ways Rossini tells jokes through music follows in a subsequent section.

*The Barber of Seville* features characters that might already be strangely familiar. That is because the same characters appear in Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*. If you know that opera, then you have already met Figaro, Count Almaviva, and Rosina, although you encountered them later in their lives, after the Count has married Rosina and the honeymoon has been over for a long time. (It’s sad to learn how quickly the Count’s ardor for Rosina fades.) The story of Rossini’s opera takes place prior to Mozart’s chronologically, even though it was written *after* Mozart’s. This is because it is based on the first play in Beaumarchais’s trilogy and Mozart’s is based on the second. If you got your hopes up that there is a third operatic masterpiece based on the final installment of

the trilogy, you will be disappointed: there have been attempts to create an opera based on that third play, *The Guilty Mother*, but none approach (none are within the same ballpark) the efforts of Mozart and Rossini. Perhaps that's why more composers have not attempted it: look at the company into which they would immediately be thrown and compared.

Both operas are based on plays by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, the brilliant, irascible, gun-running Frenchman. This study guide is not the place to explore the intriguing misadventures of this watch-maker, inventor, musician, politician, pamphleteer, fugitive, spy, arms-dealer, and revolutionary (both French and American) that happened to also write two plays that have been immortalized in two operas. So I must refer you to one of the many biographies of Beaumarchais. Here is a tantalizing hint that might send the amateur historians among you his way: the American Revolution might have failed and we would be speaking with English accents today were it not for the intervention of Beaumarchais, who was responsible (through his organization, energy, and his own personal funds) for guns and ammunition for 25,000 troops to be distributed to American soldiers at a crucial moment in 1777. These arms allowed the insurgent colonialists to win the decisive battle of Saratoga. For our purposes it will suffice to say that Beaumarchais's zestfully drawn characters that burst off the page with life, his revolutionary sentiments, and his sparkling wit inspired two great operas.



Beaumarchais

Have a look at the story Rossini's librettist Cesare Sterbini concocted from Beaumarchais's play:

## SYNOPSIS

**ACT I.** Count Almaviva comes in disguise to the house of Dr. Bartolo to serenade Rosina ("Ecco ridente"). Dr. Bartolo keeps Rosina confined to the house. Almaviva pays the musicians and decides to wait until daylight in the hope of seeing her. Figaro the barber, who has access to the houses in Seville and knows the town's secrets and scandals, arrives and describes his busy life ("Largo al factotum"). The Count sings another serenade to Rosina, calling himself Lindoro, a poor student. Figaro devises a plan: the Count will disguise himself as a drunken soldier quartered at Dr. Bartolo's house to gain access to Rosina, whom Dr. Bartolo



The legendary soprano Roberta Peters as Rosina and tenor Cesare Valletti as Count Almaviva. The pair recorded the opera together in 1958, with Robert Merrill as Figaro.

intends to marry. The Count is excited about this plan while Figaro looks forward to a nice cash pay-off from the grateful Count (“All’idea di quel metallo”).

Rosina reflects on the voice that has enchanted her heart and resolves to use her considerable wiles to meet Lindoro (“Una voce poco fa”). Dr. Bartolo appears with Rosina’s music master, Don Basilio, who warns him that Count Almaviva, Rosina’s admirer, has been seen in Seville. Dr. Bartolo decides to marry Rosina immediately. Basilio praises slander as the most effective means of getting rid of Almaviva (“La calunnia”). Figaro overhears the plot, warns Rosina, and promises to deliver a letter from her to Lindoro (“Dunque io son”). Suspicious of Rosina, Dr. Bartolo tries to prove that she has written a letter, but she outwits him at every turn. Dr. Bartolo is angry at her defiance and warns her not to trifle with him (“A un dottor della mia sorte”).

Almaviva arrives, disguised as a drunken soldier, and passes Rosina a note, which she manages to hide from Dr. Bartolo. The old man argues that he has exemption from billeting soldiers. Figaro announces that a crowd has gathered in the street, curious about all the noise coming from inside the house. The civil guard burst in to arrest the drunken soldier. The Count reveals his true identity to the captain and is instantly released. Everyone except Figaro is amazed by this turn of events, and everyone comments on the crazy events of the morning.

**ACT II.** Dr. Bartolo suspects that the “drunken soldier” was a spy planted by Almaviva. The Count returns, this time disguised as Don Alonso, a music teacher and student of Don Basilio (“Pace e gioia sia con voi”). He has come to give Rosina her music lesson in place of Basilio who, he says, is ill at home. “Don Alonso” also tells Dr. Bartolo that he is staying at the same inn as Almaviva and has found the letter from Rosina. He offers to tell Rosina that it was given to him by another woman, proving that Lindoro is toying with her on Almaviva’s behalf. This convinces Dr. Bartolo that “Don Alonso” is a true student of Don Basilio, and he allows him to give Rosina her music lesson (“Contro un cor”).

Figaro arrives to give Dr. Bartolo his shave and manages to snatch the key that opens the balcony shutters. The shaving is about to begin when Basilio shows up looking perfectly healthy. The Count, Rosina, and Figaro convince Basilio, with repeated assurances and a quick bribe, that he is sick with scarlet fever (“Buona sera, mio signore”). Basilio leaves for home, confused but richer. The shaving begins, sufficiently distracting Dr. Bartolo from hearing Almaviva plotting with Rosina to elope that night. Dr. Bartolo hears the phrase “my disguise” and furiously realizes he has been tricked again. Everyone leaves.



The Barber of Seville at San Diego Opera. Photo: Ken Howard

The maid Berta comments on the crazy household (“Il vecchiotto cerca moglie”).

Basilio is summoned and told to bring a notary so Dr. Bartolo can marry Rosina that very evening. Dr. Bartolo then shows Rosina her letter to Lindoro. Heartbroken and convinced that she has been deceived, she agrees to marry Dr. Bartolo and tells him of the plan to elope with Lindoro. A storm passes. Figaro and the Count climb over the wall. Rosina is furious until Almaviva reveals his true identity. Basilio arrives with the notary. Bribed with a valuable ring and threatened with a couple of bullets in the head, Basilio agrees to be a witness to the marriage of Rosina and Almaviva. Dr. Bartolo arrives with soldiers, but it is too late. Count Almaviva explains to Dr. Bartolo that it is useless to protest and Dr. Bartolo accepts that he has been beaten. Figaro, Rosina, and the Count celebrate their good fortune.

-courtesy of Opera News

## OPENING NIGHT

Although *The Barber of Seville* has never left the international repertoire, it suffered one of the most brutal opening night receptions in operatic history. There are reasons for this, and they have nothing to do with the quality of Rossini’s work. He did not run home the first night and furiously rewrite the entire opera. The problem was that *The Barber of Seville* had already been turned into an opera, in 1782, by the beloved old man of Italian opera, Giovanni Paisiello. The fact that a twenty-four year-old upstart dared set the exact same story enraged partisans of Paisiello. Rossini, a confident young man, had done precisely the same thing a year earlier with his opera *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, and again his version represented an improvement over the previous version by Luigi Mosca in every way.

He probably did not expect that Paisiello’s angry fans would fill the theatre that night. According to a contemporary account, all the whistlers of Italy were in attendance. They were jeering and whistling before the curtain even rose. The difficulties the rowdy crowd created were compounded by difficulties on stage. The first Almaviva (the renowned Spanish tenor Manuel García, whose singing fee was considerably larger than what Rossini was paid to write the opera) spent far too long tuning his guitar prior to his first serenade. After an interminable tuning session he went on to immediately break a string, which had to be replaced...and tuned. When Figaro entered later with his own guitar the crowd began booing immediately, drowning out the first performance of “Largo al factotum.” Basilio tripped on a trapdoor and cut his face and nearly broke his nose. A cat jumped onstage from the prompter’s box and settled downstage, at which point the audience stopped whistling and started meowing. Rossini was expected to conduct and play the continuo on the harpsichord but did not return after the first night. He feigned illness. Audiences, however, started listening on the second night and applauding on the third.

## COMEDY IN MUSIC

So what makes Rossini's operas so funny? As the preeminent Rossini biographer Richard Osborne noted, "The best jokes [in a Rossini opera] are the musical ones." And *The Barber of Seville* is Rossini at his inspired, comedic best. In TV close-ups, film, or even intimate theatres, the singing actor can emote through subtle gestures: we see them as they roll their eyes and bat their eyelashes, or curl their lips into a pout or a sneer. In the vastness of most opera houses, the singing actor must rely in large part on music to carry the comic message and to assist in the telling of jokes. There are three musical devices in particular that have come to characterize Rossinian comedy: crescendos, coloratura, and patter.

### *Crescendos*

Rossini was so adept at crescendos (and he employed them so often) that he was known as "Signor Crescendo." Crescendo is an Italian word that means, simply, increasing. Things get LOUDER! Rossini's use of the crescendo generally involves repeating a simple musical figure again and again, each time at an increase of volume, often by adding another set of instruments, layering the colors of the sound as the volume is increased. In particular, he uses this device throughout his overtures and finales – be sure to listen for it in the overture to *The Barber*. When used in a finale it adds immeasurably to the chaos and comedy as things fall apart in confusion at the end of the first act and are righted by the end of the second.



Juan Diego Flóres as Almaviva

### *Coloratura*

Coloratura is an Italian word and it refers to elaborate ornamentation or embellishment in a vocal passage. In the case of Rossini, a coloratura passage consists of vocal melismas in which many notes are spread out over one syllable. Written during an age when singers were not expected to be brilliant actors – they were expected to be brilliant singers – the music did some of the acting for them by notating comedy through rhythm, orchestration, and color. When a singer commits to acting within these musical phrases – wholeheartedly committing to the notion that the kind of verisimilitude opera has to offer an audience lies only within musical phrases – we begin to see a living, breathing person on the stage, not an opera singer. That is the magic of opera: the seamless integration of music and drama, of musical phrase and emotional situation. The coloratura passages of the buffo men of *The Barber* are particularly funny: listen to Figaro's "Largo al factotum" and Bartolo's "A un dottor della mia sorte."

### *Patter*

Patter is an English word that means patter. (Could Rossini have made this joke funny by setting it to music?) Patter songs feature a humorous text sung very rapidly. The works of Gilbert and Sullivan are full of patter songs: lines like, "I am the very model of a modern major general" might ring a bell. In Rossini, the text of patter songs is often made up of nonsense sounds or onomatopoeia: listen to the "sounds" of slander spreading in Basilio's

aria “La calunnia.” Patter is also deftly employed in nearly every ensemble section of *The Barber*.

## SELECTED MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Before sitting down in the Schuster Center for a performance of *The Barber of Seville* it’s helpful to have selected musical moments in mind to listen for. However, this is an opera for which it is difficult to select highlights, since every moment of its sparkling score is a highlight. The best advice is to pick up a recording of *The Barber of Seville* (see recommended recordings below) and listen to the whole thing. Get Rossini’s “peculiar verve” into your bones. There is no better housecleaning music, as his crescendos and driving rhythms will propel you around the house from task to task. Here are three moments from Act One that merit special attention.

### Overture

This overture is perfectly suited to this opera, despite the fact the Rossini borrowed it from *two* of his earlier operas. He composed it for an *opera seria* called *Aureliano in Palmira* 1813 and then used again for *Elisabetta, Regina d’Inghilterra* in 1815. Its wealth of catchy melodies will make you think you’ve heard it before – and you have, if not in the opera house then on commercials and cartoons. Listen for the outstanding crescendo about four minutes into it.

### Largo al factotum

Even if you haven’t heard the Bugs Bunny version, you know this melody: Figaro, Figaro, Figaro! This patter aria always sounds fresh and is a tour de force for the baritone, who has to manage verbal and vocal acrobatics throughout. Figaro describes himself as the factotum of Seville. A factotum does many jobs; but we learn not so much about Figaro’s talents as what he thinks of himself. This is a musical ego trip, one of the most delightful ego trips you’ll ever take. It explodes with concentrated energy. Any baritone worth his salt has this difficult showpiece in his repertoire.

### Una voce poco fa

When we hear Rosina sing this aria, we know she is going to win – she has so much verve, spunk and self-determination that there is no way Doctor Bartolo will have his way. “Una voce poco fa” refers to how thrilled Rosina is at the sound of her lover’s voice, for he just serenaded her. As one writer eloquently put it, “Almost every resource known to the coloratura singer’s art must be called upon to render this glittering number. Rapid scales and arpeggios united with contrasts of rhythm and dynamics express with a bubbling gaiety the tender emotions of the girl in words that in the Italian seem to have wings.”



Beverly Sills as Rosina

## RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS AND DVDS

- Two great Figaros were Sherrill Milnes and Robert Merrill, so if you can locate a recording featuring either of them it will be worth it.
- A wonderful Rosina we recently lost was Beverly Sills. There are several recordings featuring her in the role (one of them with Milnes!). If you're bored at work, there are some delightful videos of her singing "Una voce poco fa" on YouTube.
- Finally, an excellent Almaviva who is currently performing the role around the world (a DVD exists) is Juan Diego Flóres, the superstar bel canto tenor.
- A DVD version that captures the essence of Rossini's comic vision is one directed by the Italian director, actor, and comic genius Dario Fo. It was recorded in 1992 and was released on DVD in 1999 by Image Entertainment.