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Opera: The 19th century

Guillaume Tell

THE DIALECTICAL ANTITHESIS

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Real Worlds, and Better Ones
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All these heady considerations notwithstanding, *Fidelio* had a negligible impact on the operatic culture of its time, nor did Beethoven loom very large in the consciousness of the theater-going public. Within that world, within that consciousness, and within Beethoven's own career, the work was something of an aberration. Its pedigree was decidedly off the main operatic line, which remained Italian or at least Italianate. So it would remain, arguably, for another hundred years, or as long as opera retained its cultural potency. In this sense, at least, Beethoven did not come anywhere near "receiving Mozart's spirit," to recall the behest of Count Waldstein, his early patron. To claim, as many (beginning with Wagner) have done, that Beethoven's impact on opera came belatedly, through Wagner, is to regard Wagner as in some sense Beethoven's direct or ordained successor. As we shall see, there were many claimants to that title.

fig. 1-2 Gioacchino Rossini, in a photograph taken long after his retirement.

The man who did inherit the Mozartean operatic legacy (albeit not “from the hands of Haydn”) was cast immediately—and in terms that resonated far beyond the confines of the opera house—as Beethoven's opponent, his rival, or (to use the language of German philosophy), his dialectical antithesis. In Gioacchino Rossini, the hardy pre-romantic temper survived into the romantic age, and thrived to the point where even Raphael Georg Kiesewetter (1773–1850), an Austrian nobleman who in 1834 published the first scholarly history of music in German (thus becoming the first “musicologist” in the present-day sense of the term), found he had to title his concluding chapter not “The Age of Beethoven,” as national pride might have prompted him to do, but “The Age of Beethoven and Rossini.” This is well worth pointing out because a century and a half later, in 1982, the eighth volume of the authoritative and impeccably scholarly *New Oxford History of Music* was issued, its title page emblazoned “The Age of Beethoven, 1790–1830.” The only apology came in the form of an editorial introduction, which began, “The title of no other volume of the *New Oxford History of Music* includes the name of a composer. But no other period of musical history is so completely dominated by one composer.”[4] Nobody during the period in question would have agreed with that statement. The word “history” in the second sentence should obviously have been replaced by “modern historiography.” A historiography of early

nineteenth-century music that allows itself to be completely dominated by Beethoven is one that has deliberately read his antithesis out of the canon.

Kiesewetter's recognition of Rossini as a counterweight to Beethoven is first of all an acknowledgment of opera's continuing importance, indeed its dominance, among musical genres, which accounts for Rossini's dominance among composers. As the Rossini scholar Philip Gossett has emphatically stated, “no composer in the first half of the nineteenth century enjoyed the measure of prestige, wealth, popular acclaim or artistic influence that belonged to Rossini.”[5] But Kiesewetter's recognition of Rossini can also be taken as an indication that German nationalism had not yet reached its most aggressive and intolerant phase. (For one of the dogmas of German nationalism was that “prestige, wealth, and popular acclaim” are inimical to true artistic values, which lie entirely within the artist and are vouchsafed to every artist by his national patrimony.)

Nationalism, in the modern sense, was as much, and as importantly, a creation of the nineteenth century as was historiography. Indeed, neither concept can be understood except in terms of the other. Modern historiography was the product of nationalism, and modern nationalism was crucially supported by modern historiography. This nexus will be an important subtext to all the chapters that follow, not only those that deal with it overtly. Hence this little digression. Like anything else when viewed historically, Kiesewetter's title tells us more than it told its contemporaries.

At the time Kiesewetter wrote, Beethoven had been dead for several years, but Rossini was still very much alive. And yet, as Kiesewetter may have known, both their careers were over, even though Rossini still had more than thirty years of life ahead of him.

Rossini was born on 29 February 1792 in the central Italian town of Pesaro on the Adriatic, then part of what were known as the Roman or Papal States, ruled directly by the Holy See. His father was a professional horn player in local bands, his mother a soprano. By the age of thirteen, the future composer was already appearing as a boy singer in operatic performances. He was sent the next year to the Liceo Musicale in Bologna for as well-rounded a traditional musical education as could then be had anywhere in the world. He wrote his first opera the year after that.

A lucky break in 1810 landed the eighteen-year-old Rossini a contract with the Teatro San Moisè in Venice, and during the next eighteen years he would compose under contract some thirty-eight operas for houses all over Italy and eventually abroad, for a career average of better than two a year. Naturally, the frequency was at its greatest at the beginning, and became sparser near the end, when the composer commanded greater compensation and was no longer so driven by material need. Many of the early operas were composed in a month or less. The contract for *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (“The barber of Seville”), perhaps Rossini's masterpiece and surely his most famous work both then and now, was signed on 15 December 1815. The first performance took place on 20 February 1816. Composition could not have begun immediately after signing, since another opera of Rossini's (a now-forgotten rescue opera called *Torvaldo e Dorliska*) was nearing its hectic premiere, which took place on 26 December. During the eight weeks that remained the new opera had not only to be composed, but also copied, designed, and rehearsed. The actual writing probably occupied three weeks at most.

These facts and figures bear eloquent testimony to the conditions under which Rossini, like all composers for the Italian commercial stage, then worked. Italian operatic life was a maelstrom of commissions, revivals, revisions, triumphs, fiascos, and pastiches, in which composers worked as part of a team with a theater impresario, a librettist, and a performing staff. His product, like any commercial product, was subject to all kinds of exigencies and prerogatives once it left his hands, with the result that, as Gossett puts it, “an Italian opera in the first half of the nineteenth century,” and no matter how distinguished the composer, “was treated as a collection of individual units that could be rearranged, substituted or omitted depending on local conditions of performance, local taste or, on many occasions, whim.”[6] Nor did only impresarios and singers so treat it. Composers’ attitudes were no different. Rossini reused a duet from his first opera in five subsequent works. The very famous overture to *Il barbiere* was borrowed wholesale from a previous opera that had flopped.

It was a kind of factory system, the economy in which Rossini flourished—music's industrial revolution. It was centered not on scores but on performances, and so the central figures in the musical economy were the performers, and among performers the *prima donna* (leading lady) above all—which is how the term acquired the meaning it now has, applied to persons of either sex who expect others to cater to their every whim.

Needless to say, no composer could afford to act like a prima donna. Nobody was about to treat a mere hired hand with that sort of deference. His was essentially a service role. Like the librettist's, his primary aim was to please—the impresario, the singers,

and (finally and most importantly) the paying public. He regarded his activity as a career, not a calling. Often enough he did not even get to choose his subject, and only rarely did he choose his librettist. Up to the very raising of the curtain on opening night he was busy with last-minute alterations at the request of all and sundry, and thereafter would be compelled to make endless revisions, at top speed, if the opera's reception fell short of a triumph. The vocal lines had to be written in such as way as to accommodate the singers' personalized ornaments (unless he was required to write the ornaments himself, as Rossini was compelled to do for at least one famous singer).

Never did composers enjoy—if that is the word—a more practical, hands-on involvement with the rest of the musical economy. At the same time, rarely was there a musical economy that offered novice composers so many opportunities. And while any commercial undertaking will throw up its share of duds, by no means did it preclude "quality," by whatever standard one measures. More than eighty years after its premiere, Giuseppe Verdi, Rossini's undisputed successor as Italian opera king, looked back on *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, that three-week wonder of 1816, as "the most beautiful *opera buffa* there is."[7]

Mozart would have understood this life, these activities, these exigencies and these aims (as, more recently, would a composer of Broadway musicals). Once he moved to Vienna, Mozart lived a life not unlike Rossini's, though a less successfully adapted one since commercial prospects were fewer and he had to act as his own impresario (which is why he produced more piano concertos than operas). Indeed, Mozart was Rossini's chosen role model: "the admiration of my youth, the desperation of my maturity, and the consolation of my old age,"[8] as he put it, famously, in retirement. The reclusive Beethoven, by the end of his life, for reasons both within his control and very much outside of it, had become wholly estranged from the practical world of music. Thus the dialectical relationship in which Beethoven and Rossini have been cast is fully warranted.

Every facet of Rossini's musical life and activity thus far described stands in the maximum possible contrast to Beethoven's—beginning with the contrast between a career average of two operas a season and an output consisting of a single opera thrice revised over a period of a dozen years. It is the latter that is now regarded of course as "great composer behavior," with Beethoven's sketchbooks, a living record of agonizing labor, providing the ethical yardstick by which the work of all composers now tends to be measured.

The score produced by such exacting toil is now regarded (or if the composer is great enough, venerated) as a definitive text embodying the "work," of which performances can only be imperfect representations. Rossini—who did not leave a single sketch behind (which of course does not mean that he never made them), and who once boasted that, composing (as usual) in bed, he started a new overture rather than get out from under the blankets to retrieve one that the wind had blown away—represented a completely different value system, in which little importance was attached to the score as a document. All the score was, to a composer like Rossini, as to the impresario and the cast, was part of the equipment that made an opera performance possible.

fig. 1-3 Title page of the first edition of the vocal score of Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* (Mainz: Schott, 1819).

Within his own world, of course, Rossini was recognized as a great figure indeed. During his lifetime he achieved a prestige and authority that easily rivaled Beethoven's. His first international successes came in 1813, when he was twenty-one: *Tancredi*, an *opera seria* (or *melodramma eroico*, in the newer language of the time) based on Voltaire, and *L'Italiana in Algeri* ("The Italian girl in Algiers"), the frothiest of farces. To write in direct (and, of course, lightning-swift) succession two masterpieces at opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum marked Rossini as by far the most "universal" master of his highly specific craft.

A signal triumph was his appointment in 1815 (aged twenty-three) as director of all the opera theaters in Naples, then still the operatic capital of the world. He still answered to the impresario, but now had a say in the hiring of librettists and the casting of roles, both for his own operas and for those of other composers. That was real power, such as composers rarely enjoyed. During the seven years of his Neapolitan reign Rossini composed nine operas for the theaters under his jurisdiction, and another nine for other cities ranging as far afield as Lisbon. All but one of the Neapolitan operas were large tragic works, quite belying Rossini's posthumous reputation as a jester. That reputation was in part the result of the survival patterns of early nineteenth-century opera generally, in part the result of the composer's own later life in retirement (when his reputation as a "character" began to rival his reputation as composer), but also the result of insistent "northern" propaganda that continues to this day, inhibiting the revival of Rossini's serious operas.

After 1822, Rossini, by now (aged thirty) an international celebrity, worked mainly abroad. His last five operas were written for the theaters of Paris, the wealthiest in Europe. For one year (1824–25), Rossini served as director of the Théâtre-Italien, where operas were given in Italian. There he produced a single opera (*Il viaggio a Reims*, "The Journey to Rheims") to celebrate the coronation of King Charles X, the surviving grandson of Louis XV, who succeeded his brother Louis XVIII on the restored Bourbon throne. Thereafter Rossini transferred his allegiance to the main Paris opera house, the Académie Royale de Musique.

His first two productions there were adaptations of works from his Neapolitan period to French librettos, and to the incredibly lavish production values of what the French called *grand opéra*, a term that has gone virtually untranslated (as “grand opera”) into English to denote opera as extravagant or downright excessive spectacle. These operas certainly lived up to that billing, but all were cast into the shade by Rossini's last opera, the vast historical epic *Guillaume Tell* (“William Tell”), after a play by Schiller.

fig. 1-4 “Oath of the Three Cantons,” illustration by Celestin Deshayes for Rossini's opera *Guillaume Tell*.

This was a work of unprecedented scale. The arias were of a newly expanded scope, composed according to a formula that Rossini had perfected in Italy. And yet the musical texture is dominated not by them but by the ensembles, many of them including the chorus for a truly huge frescolike effect. There are also two ballet episodes and several grand processions of a kind the French had been using for some time, making the opera an eclectic summary, a kind of operatic “state of the art” as of the third decade of the nineteenth century.

Guillaume Tell had its premiere performance on 3 August 1829. Rossini, aged a mere thirty-seven, then retired from the operatic stage; so that although he lived (luxuriously, in the Paris suburb of Passy) until 13 November 1868, when he died at the age of seventy-six, his actual career was of a downright Mozartean precocity, intensity, and brevity. And yet, it appears that Rossini regarded it, even at the peak of inspiration and innovation, as a job; having made his fortune—not only from the fruits of his pen but also from investments, one of them in a gambling casino—he could reward himself with a life of leisure.

While it would not be fair to repeat without qualification the old jape that Rossini gave up composing for eating (for all that he was indeed a famous amateur chef and gourmet, albeit frequently impeded in these activities by bad health), his early retirement does confirm the essentially commercial nature of his career, one completely out of joint with the new romantic temper—possibly another reason for Rossini's decision to quit. In 1854, in a letter to an admirer, Rossini referred to himself in retrospect as “the last of the classics.”[9] On one level, of course, this was just an ironic comment on his inactivity; on another it was a boast that his art had weathered a quarter of a century of change in style and fashion and still remained viable in the repertory.

On perhaps the most profound level, Rossini's comment was an affirmation of the artist's status as a social animal in solidarity with his audience, in opposition to the romantic cult of the lonely, alienated hero. On the most spurious level, the one Rossini meant to mock, it signaled the spread of the anachronistic notion, associated with German critics of the 1830s, that there had been a “classical period” in music that had ended with Beethoven. To claim in the 1850s to have been a part of that was to acknowledge that one was indeed a walking anachronism.

Rossini did not give up composing altogether during the last forty years of his life. But he did it increasingly as a sort of hobby—to amuse himself and the friends who attended his exclusive Paris salon at a time when to amuse or “please” was no longer considered a worthy aspiration for a self-respecting artist in the public arena. Most characteristic of all were the 150 or so little songs and piano pieces, composed between 1857 and 1868 but never published during his lifetime, to which Rossini gave the nickname *Péchés de vieillesse*—Sins of Old Age (a takeoff on the cliché *péchés de jeunesse*, sins of youth).

A few of these elegantly silly pieces found their way into print in an album called *Quelques riens* (“A few nothings”), published in Paris in the 1880s. They immediately acquired a cult following among connoisseurs, and were finally orchestrated in 1919 (by the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi) for a popular ballet called *La boutique fantasque* (“The magic toy shop”). Later the *Péchés de vieillesse* became the basis of another ballet—or rather two ballet suites, *Soirées musicales* (1936) and *Matinées musicales* (1941), by the English composer Benjamin Britten. These arrangements take their place in the anti-Beethoven discourse of the cynical and disillusioned period between the two World Wars. Rossini, though no longer given recognition as such, was still Beethoven's dialectical antagonist.

The only large-scale works Rossini attempted during his retirement were religious ones: an oratoriolike setting of the thirteenth-century hymn *Stabat mater* (“The mother stood by the cross”) for soloists, chorus, and orchestra, composed at a snail's pace between 1831 and 1841, and a thoroughly idiosyncratic *Petite messe solennelle* (“Little solemn mass”), for soloists, chorus, two pianos, and harmonium, composed a few years before his death. (Almost his last work was an orchestration of the Mass, done in order to foil “pirates” in an age that did not yet provide international copyright protection to composers.)

Unlike Beethoven (but again, quite like Mozart), Rossini did not make any substantial alteration in his style when writing sacred music. The immensely popular *Stabat mater*, in particular (and especially the aria “Cujus animam,” belted out by a *tenore di forza*), became an emblem of “secularized” or “operatic”—that is, sensuously appealing—sacred music, and a frequent target of abuse from the clergy (though a favorite with choirs). It was finally banned in the wake of a *motu proprio* or personal pronouncement by Pope Pius X, promulgated in 1903, famous (and popular) among music historians for its restoration of the Gregorian chant to active church use and its discouragement of polyphonic music (a battle the Church hierarchy had been fighting with composers and singers since the fourteenth century).

The *motu proprio* contained the warning that

> since modern music has risen mainly to serve profane uses, greater care must be taken with regard to it, in order that the musical compositions of modern style which are admitted in the Church may contain nothing profane, be free from reminiscences of motifs adopted in the theaters, and be not fashioned even in their external forms after the manner of profane pieces.[10]

Accordingly, a convention of the Society of St. Gregory of America, meeting in Rochester, New York, in 1922, drew up an index of “disapproved music,” in which Rossini's name headed all the rest. A whole paragraph was devoted to the *Stabat mater*, in which it was directed that “all of Rossini's compositions should be excluded from the Catholic choir. These works are unchurchly, to say the least. The *Stabat mater* is most objectionable from a liturgical standpoint.”[11]

So yet again it appears that Rossini and Beethoven stood as dialectical antagonists: the one as a composer of secularized church music, the other as a composer of sacralized secular music. And the Vatican's objections to Rossini's “profanity” are (as we shall see) directly comparable to romantic objections to his sensuality—his *Sinnlichkeit*, to use E. T. A. Hoffmann's language, as against the *Geist* or spirituality of Beethoven. And yet the fact that Rossini's *Stabat mater* still needed banning more than eighty years after its first performance is only another indication of Rossini's equal, if opposite, rank with Beethoven in the active repertory, if no longer in the official “canon” of great art. His fame surpassed that of any previous composer, and so, for a long time, did the popularity of his works. Audiences took to his music as if to an intoxicating drug—or, to put it decorously, to champagne, with which Rossini's bubbly music was constantly compared.

One inkling of his unbelievable vogue is the fact that it almost drove the 1824 premiere of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony out of Vienna, a city Rossini had then just conquered. Reaction to the Rossini craze cemented the association of Beethoven's art with spirituality on the one hand and with Germanness on the other, thus forging a fateful nexus between idealism and nationalism. Another choice indication of Rossini's wingspread came from far-off St. Petersburg, the capital of Imperial Russia, where between 1828 and 1831 eighteen different Rossini operas were performed, eleven in 1829 alone. (*Semiramide*, the last and largest of Rossini's serious Italian operas, first performed in Venice, came to St. Petersburg in 1836, and launched a period of absolute Italian operatic hegemony in the Russian capital, with severe consequences for the development of indigenous opera there.) The Rossini craze has been associated with the spirit of imperial restoration; indeed, Prince Metternich, the arbiter supreme of post-Napoleonic Europe and the very apostle of political reaction, personally commissioned a pair of cantatas from Rossini for performance at the Congress of Verona (a sequel to the more famous Congress of Vienna) in 1822. The Rossini craze in Imperial Russia, and in the Paris of the Bourbon Restoration, would seem to give credence to this association. And yet this was one sphere—perhaps *the* one sphere—in which Rossini and Beethoven were not dialectical antagonists but comrades. Beethoven also supplied music for Metternich's consumption, and was also especially popular in Imperial St. Petersburg (where the *Missa solemnis* actually had its premiere). Beethoven's heightened, somewhat archaic spirituality (as exemplified by his fugal style) and Rossini's flighty nonchalance—or at least their reception by European society—were thus responses to a common antiheroic or pessimistic stimulus. Both stances, as the music historian Carl Dahlhaus wisely pointed out, signaled a resigned detachment.[12]

Notes:

(4) Gerald Abraham, "Introduction," in *New Oxford History of Music*, Vol. V (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. v.

(5) Philip Gossett, "Rossini," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. XXI (2nd ed.; New York, Grove, 2001), p. 734.

(6) Philip Gossett, "The Operas of Rossini: Problems of Textual Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Opera" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1970), p. 21.

(7) Giuseppe Verdi to Camille Bellaigue, 2 May 1898; *Verdi: The Man in His Letters*, ed. F. Werfel and P. Stefan, trans. E. Downes (New York: Vienna House, 1973), p. 431.

(8) Quoted in Richard Osborne, "Rossini," in *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. IV (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 57.

(9) Rossini to Count Fay (1854); quoted in Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 58.

(10) Pius X, *Motu proprio*, on sacred music; in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music since 1900* (4th ed.; New York: Scribners, 1971), p. 1286.

(11) "The Black List of Disapproved Music," in Slonimsky, *Music since 1900*, p. 1291.

(12) Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, pp. 58–59.

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