

## ALLA CORRENTE

### Gioachino Antonio Rossini

*For my Alla Corrente this month, I thought it would be interesting to look at a great Italian composer who was born during the month of February. Of course, Rossini was a “leap-year child” who would have been 222 years old at the end of February, 2014. No one knows for certain whether Rossini celebrated his birthday on February 28 or March 1, but we will assume that he celebrated it in February to make the presentation of his life in the February Bulletin consistent with my plan!*

**Gioachino Antonio Rossini (February 29, 1792–November 13, 1868) was an Italian composer who wrote 39 operas as well as sacred music, chamber music, songs, and some instrumental and piano pieces. His best-known operas include the Italian comedies *Il Barbiere di Siviglia (The Barber of Seville)* and *La Cenerentola (Cinderella)*, and the French-language epics *Moïse et Pharaon (Moses and Pharaoh)* and *Guillaume Tell (William Tell)*. A tendency for inspired, song-like melodies is evident throughout his scores, which led to the nickname “The Italian Mozart.” Until his retirement in 1829, Rossini had been the most popular opera composer in history.**

**He was born into a family of musicians in Pesaro, a town on the Adriatic coast of Italy. His father, Giuseppe, was a horn player and inspector of slaughterhouses. His mother, Anna, was a singer and a baker’s daughter. Rossini’s parents began his musical training early, and by the age of six he was playing the triangle in his father’s musical group.**



*Gioachino Rossini, painted c. 1815  
by Vincenzo Camuccini*

**Rossini’s father was sympathetic to the French Revolution and welcomed Napoleon Bonaparte’s troops when they arrived in northern Italy. When Austria restored the old regime in northern Italy in 1796, Rossini’s father was sent to prison and his mother took Gioachino to Bologna, where she made a living as a leading singer at various theaters of the Romagna region. Her husband would ultimately join her in Bologna. During this time, Gioachino was frequently left in the care of his aging grandmother, who had difficulty supervising the boy.**

**Rossini remained at Bologna in the care of a pork butcher while his father played the horn in the orchestras of the theaters at which his wife sang. He had three years of instruction in the playing of the harpsichord from Giuseppe Prinetti, originally from Novara, who played the scale with two fingers only. Prinetti also owned a business selling beer and had a propensity to fall asleep while standing. These qualities made him a subject for ridicule in the eyes of the young Rossini.**

**He was eventually taken from Prinetti and apprenticed to a blacksmith. In Angelo Tesei, he found a congenial music master, and learned to sight-read, play accompaniments on the piano and sing well enough to take solo parts in the church when he was ten years old. During this period he composed six *sonate a quattro*, or string sonatas, composed in three days, unusually scored for two violins, cello and double bass. (The original scores were found in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC after World War II, dated from 1804 when the composer was twelve). Often transcribed for string orchestra, these sonatas reveal the young composer’s affinity for Haydn and Mozart, already showing signs of operatic tendencies, punctuated by frequent rhythmic changes and dominated by clear, songlike melodies.**

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In 1805 he appeared at the theater of the Commune in Ferdinando Paer's *Camilla*, his only public appearance as a singer. He was also a capable horn player, following in the footsteps of his father. Around this time, he also composed individual numbers to a libretto by Vincenza Mombelli, called *Demetrio e Polibio* (*Demetrius and Polybius*), which was given piecemeal to him. Though it was Rossini's first opera, written when he was thirteen or fourteen, the work was not staged until he was twenty years old, premiering as his sixth official opera.

In 1806 Rossini became a cello student under Cavedagni at the Conservatorio di Bologna. The following year he was admitted to the counterpoint class of Padre Stanislao Mattei (1750–1825). He learned to play the cello with ease, but the pedantic severity of Mattei's views on counterpoint only served to drive the young composer's own views toward a freer school of composition. His insight into orchestral resources is generally ascribed not to the strict compositional rules that he learned from Mattei, but to knowledge gained independently while scoring the quartets and symphonies of Haydn and Mozart. At Bologna, he was known as "il Tedeschino" ("the Little German") because of his devotion to Mozart.



*Portrait of Gioachino Rossini in 1820, International Museum and Library of Music, Bologna*

Through the friendly interposition of the Marquis Cavalli, Rossini's first opera, *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* (*The Marriage Contract*), was produced in Venice when he was 18 years old. But two years prior to this performance, he had already received the prize at the Conservatorio of Bologna for his cantata *Il Pianto d'Armonia sulla Morte d'Orfeo* (*The Crying of Harmony on the Death of Orpheus*). Between 1810 and 1813 at Bologna, Rome, Venice and Milan, Rossini produced operas of varying success, most notably *La Pietra del Paragone* and *Il Signor Bruschino*, with its brilliant and unique overture. In 1813, *Tancredi* and *L'italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Girl in Algiers*) were even bigger successes, and catapulted the 20-year-old composer to international fame.

The libretto for *Tancredi* was an adaptation of Voltaire's tragedy *Tanocrède* by Gaetano Rossi. Traces of Ferdinando Paer and Giovanni Paisiello were undeniably present in fragments of the music. But any critical feeling on the part of the public was drowned by appreciation of such melodies as "*Di tanti palpiti... Mi rivedrai, ti rivedrò,*" which became so popular that the Italians would sing it in crowds at the law courts until called upon to desist by the judge.

By his 21st birthday, Rossini had established himself as the idol of the Italian opera public. He continued to write operas for Venice and Milan during the next few years, but their reception was muted and in some cases unsatisfactory after the success of *Tancredi*. In 1815 he retired to his home in Bologna, where Domenico Barbaia, the impresario of the Naples Theater, contracted an agreement that made Rossini the musical director of the Teatro San Carlo and the Teatro Del Fondo in Naples. He would compose one opera a year for each of the *teatri*. His payment was to be 200 ducats per month; he was also to receive a share from the gambling tables set in the theater's *ridotto* (lobby), amounting to about 1000 ducats per year. This was an extraordinarily lucrative arrangement for any professional musician at that time.

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Some older composers in Naples, notably Zingarelli and Paisiello, were upset with young Rossini's success and tried to denigrate him in any way they could. However, all hostility was rendered futile by the enthusiasm that greeted the court performance of his *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra* (*Elizabeth, Queen of England*), in which Isabella Colbran, who later became Rossini's wife, took a leading part. The libretto for this opera, written by Giovanni Schmidt, was in many of its parts an anticipation of what was presented to the world a few years later in Sir Walter Scott's historical novel *Kenilworth*. The opera was the first in which Rossini wrote out the ornaments of the airs instead of leaving them to the fancy of the singers, and also the first in which the *recitativo secco* was replaced by a recitative accompanied by a string quartet.



*Isabella Colbran*

### *THE BARBER OF SEVILLE (IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA)*

Rossini's most famous opera was produced on February 20, 1816, at the Teatro Argentina in Rome. The libretto, a version of Pierre Beaumarchais' stage play *Le Barbier de Séville*, was newly written by Cesare Sterbini and was different from the one already used by Giovanni Paisiello in his own *Barbiere*, an opera that had enjoyed European popularity for more than a quarter of a century. Much is made of how quickly Rossini's opera was written; scholars generally agree that it was completed in two or three weeks. Later in



*From the 2013 San Francisco Opera production of  
The Barber of Seville*

life, Rossini claimed to have written the opera in only twelve days. It was a colossal failure when it premiered with the title *Almaviva*. Paisiello's admirers were extremely indignant and sabotaged the production by whistling and shouting during the entire first act. However, not long after the second performance, the opera became so successful that the fame of Paisiello's opera was transferred to Rossini's instead. Thus, assuming the title *The Barber of Seville* passed to Rossini's work as an inalienable heritage.

Later in 1822, a 30-year-old Rossini succeeded in meeting Ludwig van Beethoven, who was then 51 years old, deaf, cantankerous, and in failing health. Communicating in writing, Beethoven wrote: "Ah, Rossini. So you're the composer of *The Barber of Seville*. I congratulate you. It will be played as long as Italian opera exists. Never try to write anything else but opera buffa; any other style would do violence to your nature."

### MARRIAGE AND MID-CAREER

Between 1815 and 1823 Rossini produced 20 operas. Of these *Otello* formed the climax to his reform of serious opera, and offers a suggestive contrast with the treatment of the same subject at a similar point of artistic

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development by Giuseppe Verdi. In Rossini's time the tragic close was so distasteful to the public of Rome that it was necessary to invent a happy ending to *Otello*.

The poor conditions of stage production in 1817 show why Rossini only accepted the subject matter of *Cinderella* for a libretto on the condition that the supernatural element be omitted. With this caveat, the opera *La Cenerentola* (*Cinderella*) was thus as successful as *Barbiere*. However, the absence of a similar precaution in stage construction of his *Mosè in Egitto* (*Moses in Egypt*) led to disaster in the scene depicting the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea, when the defects in stage contrivance always caused laughter. This finally forced Rossini to introduce the chorus "*Dal tuo stellato soglio*" ("*From Your Starry Throne*") to divert attention from the "dividing" waves.

In 1822, four years after the production of this work, Rossini married the renowned opera singer Isabella Colbran. In the same year, he moved from Italy to Vienna where his operas were the rage of audiences. He directed his *Cenerentola* in Vienna, where *Zelmira* was also performed. Subsequently, he returned to Bologna, but an invitation from Prince Metternich to come to Verona and "assist in the general re-establishment of harmony" was too tempting to refuse, and he arrived at the Congress of Verona in time for its opening on October 20, 1822.



*Gioachino Rossini, photographed by Étienne Carjat, 1865*

In 1823, at the suggestion of the manager of the King's Theatre in London, he came to England. While en route, he was much fêted on his way through Paris. In England he was given a generous welcome, which included an introduction to King George IV and, after a residence of five months, he received £7000. Following this brief sojourn in London, in 1824 he became musical director of the Théâtre des Italiens in Paris at a salary of £800 per annum. Rossini's popularity in Paris was so great that Charles X gave him a contract to write five new operas a year, and at the expiration of the contract he was to receive a generous pension for life.

During his Paris years, between 1824 and 1829, Rossini created the comic opera *Le Comte Ory* and *Guillaume Tell* (*William Tell*). The production of his *Guillaume Tell* in 1829 brought his career as a writer of opera to a close. He was thirty-eight years old and had already composed thirty-eight operas. *Guillaume Tell* was a political epic adapted from Schiller's play (1804) about the thirteenth century Swiss patriot who rallied his country against the Austrians. The libretto was by Étienne Jouy and Hippolyte Bis, but their version was revised by Armand Marrast. The music is remarkable for its freedom from the conventions discovered and utilized by Rossini in his earlier works, and marks a transitional stage in the history of opera, the overture serving as a model for romantic overtures throughout the 19th century. Though an excellent opera, it is rarely heard uncut today, as the original score runs more than four hours in performance. The overture is one of the most famous and frequently recorded works in the classical repertoire. (And anyone growing up from the 1930s-1950s remembers the "*March of the Swiss Soldiers*" finale of Rossini's *William Tell Overture* as the theme music for the *Lone Ranger* radio and television programs.)

In 1829 Rossini returned to Bologna. His mother had died in 1827, and he was anxious to be with his father. Arrangements for his subsequent return to Paris on a new contractual agreement were temporarily upset by

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the abdication of Charles X and the July Revolution of 1830. Rossini, who had been considering the subject of Faust for a new opera, did return, however, to Paris in November of 1830, but he never did write this new opera.

Six movements of his *Stabat Mater* were written in 1832 by Rossini himself and the other six by Giovanni Tadolini, a good musician who was asked by Rossini to complete the work. However, Rossini himself composed the rest of the score in 1841. The success of the work bears comparison with his achievements in opera, but his comparative silence during the period from 1832 to his death in 1868 makes his biography appear almost like the narrative of two lives—the life of swift triumph followed by the long life of seclusion, of which biographers give us pictures in stories of the composer’s cynical wit, his speculations in fish culture, his mask of humility and indifference.

#### END OF ROSSINI’S CAREER

Rossini’s first wife, Isabella Colbran, died in 1845 after 13 years of marriage. On August 16, 1846, he married Olympe Pélissier, who had posed for Vernet for his painting *Judith and Holofernes*. Political disturbances compelled Rossini to leave Bologna in 1848. After living for a time in Florence, he settled in Paris in 1855, where his house was a center of artistic society. Rossini had been a well-known gourmand and an excellent amateur chef his entire life and he indulged these two passions fully once he retired from composing. (Today, there are a number of dishes with the appendage “alla Rossini” to their names that were either created by him or specifically for him. Probably the most famous of these is “Tournedos Rossini,” still served by many restaurants today).

During this time, after years of various physical and mental illnesses, he had slowly returned to music, composing obscure little trifles intended for private performance. These *Péchés de Vieillesse* (“Sins of Old Age”) are grouped into 14 volumes, mostly for solo piano, occasionally for voice and various chamber ensembles. Often whimsical, these pieces display Rossini’s natural ease of composition and his gift for melody, showing obvious influences of Beethoven and Chopin, with many flashes of the composer’s long buried desire for serious, academic composition.

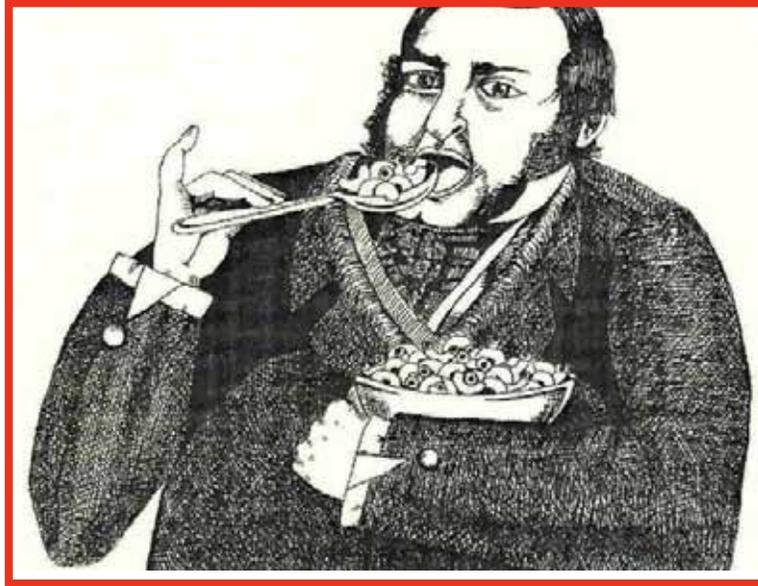
After a short and painful illness, Rossini died in his country house at Passy on Friday, November 13, 1868. He was 76 years old. His funeral at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité was virtually a state occasion, and he was buried in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. In 1887, his remains were moved to the Basilica di Santa Croce di Firenze, in Florence, at the request of the Italian government. Today, one can see his elaborate tomb in Santa Croce, where he rests in peace.



*Study of Olympe Pélissier by Vernet for his Judith and Holofernes*

—Adapted by James Boitano, PhD from *Classic Cat: the Free Classical Catalogue*; *Grove Concise Dictionary of Music*; *Wikipedia*; and *Classical Net*.

## QUOTABLE



**“ I know of no more admirable occupation than eating, that is really eating. Appetite is for the stomach what love is for the heart. The stomach is the conductor, who rules the grand orchestra of our passions, and rouses it to action. The bassoon or the piccolo, grumbling its discontent or shrilling its longing, personify the empty stomach for me. The stomach, replete, on the other hand, is the triangle of enjoyment or the kettledrum of joy. As for love, I regard her as the prima donna par excellence, the goddess who sings cavatinas to the brain, intoxicates the ear, and delights the heart. Eating, loving, singing and digesting are, in truth, the four acts of the comic opera known as life, and they pass like the bubbles of a bottle of champagne. Whoever lets them break without having enjoyed them is a complete fool. ”**

*—Gioachino Antonio Rossini*