

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

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Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Overture from the Opera “The Italian Girl in Algiers”

Overture from the Opera “Cinderella”

Overture from the Opera “The Barber of Seville”

Rossini had composed nearly three-dozen operas by the time he was about the same age. During the years 1812-1819 he had written twenty-eight of these, though he had begun creating his first works for stage at the mere age of eighteen. In 1823, Rossini moved to Paris where he was under contract by the French government to compose for the Théâtre Italien as well as the Opéra. It would be there, in 1829, that he would write the last of his operatic works, “William Tell”, originally written and entitled in French as *Guillame Tell*.

“**The Italian Girl in Algiers**” (1813) was one of the first operas composed before his move to Paris, and is believed by some scholars to have determined the form for many of Rossini’s overtures to follow, with its dramatically slow introduction (here featuring a lyrical oboe solo) that leads into a more energetic and exciting *Allegro*. In addition, the Overture for this opera became linked thematically with the musical themes from the opera itself, which was an exception to the composer’s usual practice. For example, one of the themes in the *Allegro* section is used in an Act II aria “*Sullo stil de’ viaggiatori*.”

Alternating light pizzicato passages with surprising blasts from the full orchestra, some have compared this overture with Haydn’s “Surprise Symphony.” The oboe solo leads into another *fortissimo* surprise and multiple instances of Rossini’s famous ‘crescendo’. The full opera premiered

in Venice on May 22nd, 1813 with libretto by Angelo Anelli and, under a time constraint, Rossini is said to have completed the work in less than a month.

“**Cinderella**” was also composed in a brief amount of time, with Jacob Ferretti the librettist writing the libretto within several weeks and Rossini completing the score in just over three weeks himself. Apparently part of the reason for the speed of writing was due to other work that had been commissioned, which needed to be completed following the success of “The Barber of Seville.” And although the premiere in January of 1817 was not an immediate success, revivals in London (1820) and New York (1826) were received more warmly and led to it becoming one of the most popular of Rossini’s operas along with “The Barber of Seville” and “The Italian Girl in Algiers.”

Apparently assisting the speed of writing, Rossini borrowed from earlier works, which was a relatively common practice of the time. A great deal of the Overture was taken from excerpts of the opera “*La Gazzetta*” (The Newspaper), which had been composed for audiences in Naples, so it was determined that audiences in Rome would not yet have been familiar with it. In addition, Rossini incorporated part of an aria from “The Barber of Seville” into this Overture as well. Once again, Rossini opens with a slow introduction followed by a more upbeat *Allegro*, tinged with surprises along the way, one of which is an extended ‘Rossini crescendo’ at the close of the third theme.

“**The Barber of Seville**” (1816) also included recycled musical material for its Overture, which was added following the premiere when revisions were made. Originally composed for an earlier opera “*Aureliano in Palmira*”, Rossini is believed to have used this material several times before finally settling on its use for the introduction to ‘Figaro’s’ opera. The result is that no material from the opera itself can be found in the Overture, but instead sets the tone for the coming scenes with its sense of dramatic anticipation for the ‘*opera buffa*’.

Following the composer's usual form, the Overture opens with a slow introduction. The main section presents a quicker pace with two repeated themes, the second lyrical theme leading to the famous Rossini 'crescendo' each time, highlighting not only an increase in dynamics, but an increase in the number of instrumentalists performing, as well as higher pitch levels and faster rhythmic patterns. Becoming one of the most well-known opera overtures, Rossini's musical themes from this work found a home in popular culture, including Woody Woodpecker's version (1944) as well as Bugs Bunny's variation "The Rabbit of Seville" (1949). Even television sitcom's "Seinfeld" couldn't resist the Rossini reference in 1993 during an episode that involved a barber.

After moving to Paris, Rossini would not compose another opera after *William Tell* stating, in hindsight, that "retiring in time requires genius too" when discussing his early retirement with the painter Guglielmo de Sanctis in 1862. Although he would come out of semi-retirement to compose in other genre, including his sacred work *Stabat Mater* (1832/rev. 1841), as well as some works for piano, Rossini would allow these operatic works to remain some of his final works on the stage, and the Overtures from all three continue to be audience favorites to this day.

Overture from Opera "The Italian Girl in Algiers"

Work composed: 1813 World premiere: 22nd May, 1813, Venice

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bassoon, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, percussion (bass drum, triangle, cymbals), strings

Overture from Opera "Cinderella"

Work composed: 1817 World premiere: 25th January, 1817, Rome

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, strings

Overture from Opera "The Barber of Seville"

Work composed: 1816 World premiere: 20th February, 1816, Rome

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals), strings

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Symphony in C major, D. 944 “The Great”

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Referred to as ‘The Great’ Symphony, only because of its relative size compared to its younger ‘sibling’, the 6th symphony of the same key, this work has been catalogued as the 7th, 8th and 9th symphonies at various points in history, due to the confusion that ensued after Schubert’s first six symphonies were completed (and numbered) in chronological order. This last complete symphony was discovered after his death and was premiered in 1839. At that time, it was given the designation of the 7th symphony. Subsequently, the B minor symphony was brought to light in 1865, and was initially catalogued as the 8th symphony until scholars determined that it had been written prior to the Great C major symphony. At that point, the Unfinished B minor Symphony was dubbed the 8th, while the Great C major symphony became known as the 9th symphony. (A symphony in E major, sketches of which were found to be composed between the 6th and the unfinished B minor symphony, was often numbered as the 7th symphony, though it too was incomplete).

In the most recent edition of the Otto Erich Deutsch’s thematic catalog of Schubert’s works, an attempt to clarify and establish order to the symphonic works of the composer now refers to the Unfinished Symphony as No. 7 and this, The Great as No. 8. However, it seems most listeners simply clarify the issue by referring to their familiar nicknames. In any case, it was an amazing feat for the composer to have composed a work of such depth, given his extremely poor health in the years prior to putting his creative thoughts to pen.

In the summer of 1825, Schubert seemed to have a respite from his illness and, on a holiday traveling through northern Austria, found his creative juices flowing. Together with several musician friends, he traveled, spending six weeks at the lakeside town of Gmunden, where they found themselves

surrounded by immense rock cliffs and a peaceful lake filled with swans. This seemed to be the inspiration Schubert needed, and though the manuscript shows the year 1828, it has been determined that this was the symphony that was composed during that summer holiday. Throughout much of that year, Schubert continued to revise the C major Symphony, apparently hoping to have it performed by the Gesellschaft orchestra. He presented the work to the group with the dedication: “Persuaded of the Austrian Musical Society’s noble intention to support any artistic endeavour as far as possible, I venture, as a native artist, to dedicate to them this, my symphony, and to commend it most politely to their protection.” Though they paid him a small fee, they did not end up performing the work, to the composer’s great disappointment.

Even shortly after his death, the orchestra of the Friends of Music attempted to perform The Great Symphony, only to proclaim it was too difficult, resorting to the “Little” C major symphony in its stead. It was Schumann who eventually brought this, The Great Symphony in C major, to audiences when he convinced Mendelssohn that it should be performed, the premiere finally occurring in Leipzig on March 21, 1839. In describing The Great Symphony in C major, given that the composer had scarcely heard any of his orchestral works performed in his short lifetime, Schumann is quoted as saying:

"I'll say it most frankly: he who does not know this symphony, knows but little of Schubert, and after that, which Schubert has already given to Art, this may be perceived as praise that is hardly to be believed...

Here there is, beyond the masterful musical technique of the composition, yet life in every fibre, color even in the most delicate nuance, significance

everywhere, the keenest expression of the particular, and finally the whole suffused with a romanticism, that Schubert is known for from elsewhere. And the heavenly length of the symphony...

It must always be called an extraordinary talent, that he, who heard so few of his instrumental works during his lifetime, succeeded in such an idiomatic treatment of the instruments on the scale of the orchestra, that often speak all at once like human voices and the choir. This likeness to the singing voice have I never come across, outside of many a Beethoven work, in such a striking and surprising way..."

Work composed: 1825-1826 **World premiere:** 21st March, 1839, Leibzig
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings

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