

# The Barber of Seville – Gioacchino Rossini

**Spunky young Rosina** lives under lock and key on a secluded square in Seville with her guardian, Dr. Bartolo. Dr. Bartolo has secret plans to marry Rosina, but she has her eye on another suitor, a poor student named Lindoro, who is actually Count Almaviva, a Spanish nobleman in disguise.

Outside Rosina's window the voice of a blustering, swaggering fellow can be heard. Figaro arrives, boasting that he is always in demand because he is simply the best barber in Seville (*Largo al factotum*). When Almaviva learns that Figaro is barber, wigmaker, surgeon, gardener, vet, apothecary and general handyman to the Bartolo household, he sees his chance to meet Rosina. Figaro recognizes an opportunity to make some money helping Almaviva.

Almaviva disguises himself as Rosina's music teacher in order to meet her. During the music lesson, Bartolo dozes in a chair while Almaviva and Rosina express their love for one another. They plan to escape together at midnight. Figaro steals the key to the house as he shaves Bartolo but the plan is foiled when Bartolo sends Figaro and Almaviva from the house and Rosina to her room.

Later that night when Figaro and Almaviva spring over the balcony to whisk her away, Rosina confronts them in a rage. Bartolo has tricked Rosina into thinking Almaviva is an impostor. Almaviva reveals his true identity and all is forgiven. Figaro warns that the ladder has been removed from the balcony and they are trapped. To make matters worse, the real music teacher, Don Basilio, arrives with a notary to marry Rosina and Bartolo. Don Basilio is easily bribed and agrees to be a witness to the marriage of Rosina and Almaviva instead. Bartolo arrives with soldiers, but it is too late. He accepts defeat and Figaro, Almaviva and Rosina celebrate their good fortune.

- ◇ A comic opera in two acts. Originally titled "Almaviva" or "The Useless Precaution"
- ◇ First performed: Teatro Argentina, Rome, February 20, 1816 in Italian
- ◇ Librettist: Cesare Sterbini (1784-1831)
- ◇ Based on the comedy *Le barbier de Séville* (the prequel to *Le mariage de Figaro*) by Pierre Augustine de Beaumarchais in 1775
- ◇ Role: Figaro, the barber

## Gioacchino Rossini (1792 – 1868)

**Gioacchino Rossini** was born into a musical family; his father played the trumpet and French horn and his mother was an opera singer. At age twelve, Rossini received his first commission for six instrumental sonatas and performed one of his own compositions on stage with his mother. He wrote his first opera, *La cambiale di matrimonio* (*The Bill of Exchange of Marriage*), when he was eighteen years old and living in Venice. Although he moved around, living or working in Milan, Naples, Rome, Paris, London, Bologna, Madrid and Florence, the Venetians were devoted fans throughout his career and offered him a steady stream of commissions.

While living in Bologna in 1815, Rossini gave singing lessons to Napoleon's niece. Later that year he moved to Naples where he experienced the most artistically stimulating environment of his career. He wrote *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*) the next year in perhaps as few as thirteen days, just before his twenty-fourth birthday. This opera became one of the most successful of his thirty-nine operatic works and influenced the next generation of opera composers, including Verdi. Rossini retired from opera composition at age thirty-six but continued composing in other genres such as sacred and instrumental music until his death at age seventy-six.

Rossini is known not only for his comic operas, like *La Scala di Seta* (*The Silken Ladder*), *L'Italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Girl in Algiers*), *Il Turco in Italia* (*The Turk in Italy*), and *La Cenerentola* (*Cinderella*), but also for his serious works, including *Otello*, *Mose in Egitto* (*Moses in Egypt*) and his last work, *Guillaume Tell* (*William Tell*), written in French.

## La Prima Performance

**On February 20, 1816**, *The Barber of Seville* had its *prima* (first) performance in the Teatro Argentina, one of the three principal theatres in Rome. It was a miserable experience for Rossini, who was conducting the opera. His **impresario** had died two weeks before opening night, accidents occurred on stage distracting and upsetting his singers, and to make matters worse, he was heckled by the audience. They even made fun of the jacket he had received as part of his payment.

Rossini refused to conduct subsequent performances but it turns out that he had nothing to fear. The next night, the audience poured into the streets and shouted up to him outside his bedroom window to come down and receive their congratulations, but Rossini declined.

Rossini had a sense of humor about his failures and his hurt feelings would not have lasted long. In 1812 his opera *Ciro in Babilonia* (*Ciro in Babylon*) was a complete flop. When he returned home he ordered a ship made out of **marzipan**. Rossini wrote: "...on the pennant there was the name *Ciro*. The ship's mast was broken, its sails were in tatters, and the whole thing lay shipwrecked in an ocean of cream. Amid great hilarity, the happy gathering devoured my shattered vessel."<sup>1</sup>

Later *The Barber of Seville* achieved international popularity through performances in London, Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg and New York, making it the first Italian opera performed there, at the Park Theatre in November, 1825.

Even more impressive were compliments from his contemporaries; Beethoven allegedly told Rossini "write more Barbers!" and Verdi said the opera had an "abundance of true musical ideas."