

Gioachino Rossini

Gioachino Rossini was the most popular and prolific operatic composer of his day. He was adored all over Italy and eventually across Europe as he moved to Vienna and Paris. He became such a center of the operatic world that composers like Cimarosa and Paisiello were nearly forgotten and contemporaries like Bellini and Donizetti were simply overshadowed. And then, at the age of 37, Rossini simply stopped writing. It was not until he was much older that Rossini picked up the pen again, to write mostly short pieces, never again composing in the operatic form that had won him so much fame.

Gioachino Rossini's remarkable existence began on a fairly remarkable day - February 29, 1792 - in Pesaro, Italy. From the outset, Rossini had little chance of *not* making a successful career in music. His father, Giuseppe Rossini, was an accomplished horn player and his mother, Anna Guidarini, was a locally famous operatic singer. Not surprisingly then, young Gioachino learned the horn from his father and singing from his mother (and a local canon, whose vast collection of scores had some influence on the boy's musical taste). Rossini must have been incredibly gifted as a singer because at 14 he was invited to join the same music academy of which his father was a member. (Or maybe it was nepotism - who knows?)

Rossini soon studied counterpoint and composition and also pursued further voice and instrument study. Except for Mozart, Rossini reportedly didn't generally care for the "serious music" he was forced to study, but there's no doubt he benefited from the exposure; his achievements in harmony, part-writing and orchestration would not have been so great had he limited himself to the music which prevailed in Italian theaters of the day.

Rossini didn't write much as a student. Some say he composed numerous arias for insertion into operas around Bologna, but no proof exists. His first definitive commission for an opera was in 1807 for a libretto entitled *Demetrio e Polibio*. Unfamiliar with the plot, Rossini proceeded anyway, one piece at a time, until the entire score was finished. For Rossini, opera was easy.

Rossini received numerous commissions from a theater in Venice (some successful, some not) and requests from other theaters followed rapidly. Rossini wrote in *opera buffa* or comic

opera style (i.e. *The Barber of Seville*) and *opera seria* (i.e. *Demetrio e Polibio* and *Tancredi*) and... everywhere in between. Because of the lack of copyright law in Italy at the time, Rossini's earnings were limited to performances in which he participated. Forced to support both himself and, increasingly, his parents, Rossini delved into one opera after another. He traveled and wrote constantly, often spending less than a month on each work.

But it wasn't just his need for cash that spurred Rossini on. The only thing more seemingly endless than Rossini's knack for writing operas was the Italian public's desire for new works. So Rossini wrote and wrote - *An Italian in Algiers*, *The Turk in Italy*, *Cinderella*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *William Tell* - one opera followed another.

In 1822, Rossini married soprano Isabella Colbran. That same year the couple traveled to Vienna where Rossini composed for a theater owned by a friend. After a brief return to Italy and a few more operas, the couple set out for Paris and England. Rossini held a couple of posts in Paris, first as director of the Italian Theater there and then as a composer for the Paris Opera.

After six years in Paris, Rossini simply stopped writing opera. His last was *William Tell*. He was 37. There doesn't seem to be one clear reason why Rossini stopped composing. Certainly, the number of operas he composed annually *had* decreased with each passing year. Also, by now, Rossini had found financial security. Finally, Rossini was ill, apparently from a venereal disease (though there is evidence that some of Rossini's ills were purely psychosomatic). All told, he had simply run out of energy. Despite numerous requests and even begging at times, Rossini would write no more operas.

Rossini returned to Bologna in 1837, but not to happier times. In fact, Rossini was miserable there. His marriage to Isabella was troubled from the start and, around 1830, Rossini took a mistress named Olympe Pélissier. A year after Isabella's death in 1845, Rossini married Olympe. But Rossini's poor health continued. He wrote very little save his *Stabat Mater*, which was received very well and may be one of the few highpoints of this chapter in Rossini's life.

By 1855 Rossini had had enough of Italy (and his Italian doctors) and decided to move back to Paris. The idea was a good one. Rossini was renewed in Paris. His health improved and his sense of humor returned. Testaments to the new and improved Rossini are his 150 or so piano

pieces he titled '*Sins of Old Age.*' This collection of "wit and parody" was a welcome return to the *buffo* style for which Rossini had become famous. They were a tremendous hit in Paris.

Rossini lived out the rest of his life in his villa in Paris with Olympe where he enjoyed celebrity status. When he died (presumably of cancer) in 1868, thousands attended his funeral and memorial services were held throughout France and Italy. He was 76.

- Tim Lanter