

## A light-hearted interlude

### Gioachino Rossini

*We can all take ourselves too seriously. Some of us do, often. In my case I often think poems are very important and a serious part of life. (They are, and they are.) Still, it is helpful to remember that poems and art are not only about serious things.*

One and a half years ago I was at a New Year's party and found myself in conversation with a composer who lives in Vermont. I love to talk about music, which more and more seems to me the greatest of the arts. And I particularly love talking with serious musicians because I am not at all afraid to say I am a rank amateur, that I don't read music, that the only thing I play is the radio. Intellectually, it doesn't get better than this: one can talk, and not feel one has to master the subject under discussion; one can offer ideas and at the same time indicate that one's companion probably knows a lot more than oneself; one can offer not conclusions but attentive judgements, and at the same time acknowledge how tenuous they probably are.

The composer and I talked happily about music, and then he said to me, "The best book on music is the history of music by Richard Taruskin" So I wrote Taruskin's name down, figuring, hey, I can read his book.

Ouch. When I looked up the book – *The Oxford History of Western Music* – it turned out that it was five volumes. And each volume comprised 700 to 800 pages. Oh well, I thought, and bought first one and then a second, and read and read.

It was in its own way kind of easy reading. Not being able to read music, I could skip the lengthy scores used as examples – one fifth or so of the book, done and finished with without any need to read! Not knowing what a 'French sixth' was, I could plow through a multitude of sentences and pretend I was moving along. Heck, not knowing much about keys and harmony, I could plow through a lot and still keep going without feeling any great effort.

Strangely, I learned a lot. Music is different from literature: it is more formal, less referential. Shape and not meaning is central, although I am always quick to throw away 'meaning' when I read or teach poems, since the search for

meaning obscures everything else, and falsifies the whole experience of what we call 'literature.'

I worked extensive through later nineteenth and early twentieth century music, and then through music in the second half of the twentieth century. I learned that I was wrong to be so dismissive (as I have been) of Debussy; I learned how Schoenberg had no edge on complexity or cutting-edge-ness when one compares him to his contemporary Bartok.

Now that I am retired, I figured I would read Taruskin's nineteenth century volume. I ordered it, and began. Much to my shock, it did not begin with Beethoven, but with Rossini. And the point Taruskin made was that Rossini was the anti-Beethoven, just as popular in his day as the great Ludwig. Even today, as many people go to hear *The Barber of Seville* or *The Italian Woman of Algiers* as go to hear Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*.

There were, of course, lots of excerpts from Rossini and his bel canto followers Bellini and Donizetti. But one page about Rossini entranced me, and so I will copy it out for you here, below. For it led me to listen to the septet Taruskin describes: I listened to it on my computer by going to YouTube, and I was amazed. You can make great music out of sounds, literal sounds – the human mimicking of bells and hammers and cannons. ***Art does not require content.*** At all. In the conclusion of this septet, the characters are making noises – bells, hammers, crows, cannons – to indicate their confusion. What we hear are all these sounds, and yet they come at us as, well, music. Yes, I know, all music is composed of sounds; but in Rossini, the sounds don't seem to need to signify. When I listen to Bach or Beethoven I think about the spirit, and mind, and striving, and perfection. When I listen to Rossini, all I hear is fun

[Let me be a little too much of an opera buff: the antecedents of this septet in Rossini seems to me to lie in two strange and wonderful opera scenes of Mozart's. Both have content, yet in both the repetition of words almost to the point (in the first case) and to the point of nonsense (in the latter) predominates. These are highlights in Mozart's *oeuvre*, and both are like the Rossini which would follow, great fun. The first is the Sextet which concludes Act 3 of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Figaro's mother and father reveal themselves, and repeat 'tua madre... tua padre' – your mother, your father – so that their phrases take over the sextet, temporarily. Some years later, in his last opera *The Magic Flute*, the bird-catcher Papageno is united with his love, Papagena. In one of the most beloved of all duets, near the end of the opera they sing to each other. Nonsense syllables:

pa...pa...pa...pa...pa...pa culminating in “Papageno...Papagena.” As if anticipating Rossini, not long afterwards there is a sort of reprise, as they alternate between the names of their future children: Papageno... Papagena... Papageno... Papagna... Yes, these are their names, and the names perhaps of their future offspring; but the wonder of the duet derives from the sheer joy of the repetition of the sounds of PA-PA-PA-PA and of Papageno-Papagena as the two lovers coo in recognition of one another. Sounds, not signification, dominate.]

Wow. What a corrective to the ‘spiritual’ searching of Beethoven, and of the whole Germanic tradition – Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler – a Germanic tradition that has its analogue, it seems to me, of the deeper resonances I search for in poems. Rossini reminded me of the need to listen to other orientations than our own, to other concerns than the ones that drive us onward.

Thus, I will share with you the end of Act I of Rossini’s *L’Italiana in Algeri*. I hope you will be as delighted with the music as I am, and as unnerved by its rejection of signification as I am. (Although there is signification, as a review I cite at the end makes very clear...)

Here, below, is what Taruskin wrote. Afterwards, I will append three YouTube video locations, one which was beautifully sung (but is a stage version) at a Metropolitan Opera gala under conductor James Levine; the next a performance by the Opera Company of Philadelphia which has, happily, English subtitles; and a third, which is perhaps the best available performance on the web of the scene which closes Act I, but which has subtitles which are alas in Spanish.

The excerpt from Taruskin below may be a little off-putting to some. There are a bunch of operatic terms, there are references to the history of opera. But all you need to know is that *opera buffa* is comic opera.

Wow. Nonsense, onomatopoeic words. And then, for those for whom the end of the septet makes no sense, the characters sing them again, faster. It is this second rendering, faster, that blew me away. Rossini does not illuminate, he just does it over again – faster. This is comic opera indeed, very far from the Hopkins and Arnold poems I sent out recently . . . It is always worth not taking oneself too seriously, perhaps.

Or, put in literary terms, farce is as wonderful as *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. We often forget that....

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## Taruskin:

The first-act finale, we remember, portrays the height of the imbroglione—the moment of greatest, seemingly hopeless tangle in the plot line. So here is what has happened: Mustafà, the Bey of Algiers, has grown tired of his wife Elvira and decides to marry her off to his Italian slave Lindoro. He sends his pirate commander to find him an Italian girl. The pirates sink a ship, on which Isabella, the Italian girl of the title, is cruising in search of her fiancé (Lindoro of course), and bring the survivors to the Bey's court as captives. The commander announces her capture, and the Bey tells Lindoro he can go home if he takes Elvira with him. [*Huck adds, here: The plots of operas are almost never believable. They are like fairy tales or dreams. Not like the lives we think we know. Yet we all understand, but often do not acknowledge, that dreams and fairy tales often speak of "thoughts that lie too deep for tears," as Wordsworth wrote in another context.*]

That is the setup. Things come to a head as the captive Isabella, on her way into the throne room, catches sight of Lindoro, on his way out. (Here is where the first-act finale begins.) The moment of recognition has a very conspicuous Mozartean resonance. Like the moment of recognition in the ballroom finale to the first act of *Don Giovanni*, it takes place over the strains of an unusually slow movement—the trio (*andantino*) in which Lindoro, Elvira, and Zulma (Elvira's slave) had been singing their farewells to Mustafà. A Rossini finale always takes to extremes the tempo trajectory of which Da Ponte had written. The *Andantino* is, so to speak, the launching pad.

The lovers' emotion is reflected in a wrenching flatward turn in the harmony, but just as the expected cadence to *Eb* is about to happen [*Hey, says Huck, this is the kind of stuff I gloss over*] (and a love duet seems imminent), Mustafà chimes in with a typically bouncing, satirically florid mood-shattering *buffo* aside to express his befuddlement. The threatened duet turns into a septet, set against the continuing strains of the *Andantino*, in which all the assembled characters take part, Lindoro and Mustafà (as it were competing in confusion) take the lead.

The moment of frozen perplexity having passed, the quick-witted Isabella confronts the Bey in a fast tempo that from here on will only get faster. With what we are now apt to recognize as the "arrogance of the

Enlightenment” (arguably the butt of Rossini’s humor, depending on how it is played), she berates the cowering Mustafà for his barbarian transgressions against universal human norms. How can he simply order Lindoro to marry a woman he does not love? Then, immediately contradicting herself, she insists that Lindoro, a fellow Italian, be made her retainer forthwith. A hopeless impasse has been reached: as the assembled singers declare, “Va sossopra il mio cervello, sbalordito in tanti imbrogli!” (“My little head is topsy-turvy, dumbfounded at such imbroglios!”). It is time for metaphors.

The first metaphor, expressed *allegro vivace*, is the time-honored shipwreck, familiar to us since the days of Farinelli. Then, in a *stretta* marked *piu mosso*, everybody goes into an onomatopoeical tizzy. This is Rossini’s favorite comic device, the idea (as Budden puts it) of “human beings transformed by emotion into puppets,” and this ensemble set a benchmark of mechanical grotesquery never to be surpassed. The ladies compare their mental agitation to a little bell a-ringing (“din din”); Lindoro compares his to a little clock a-ticking (“tic tic”); Taddeo, Isabella’s chaperone, compares his to a little crow a-cawing (“cra cra”); the pirate commander Ali to a hammer pounding (“tac tac”); and Mustafà to a cannon firing (“bum bum”).

For twenty or so pages of vocal score they continue shouting and gesticulating in this vein, the chorus of Algerian harem girls and Italian sailors finally joining in to raise the hubbub to an even higher pitch of furious futility. **And then the masterstroke: contrary to all reasonable expectations, the whole *stretta, din-din, bum-bum* and all, is played *ancora piu mosso* –yet faster! [My bolding.]** In a good performance, the audience will not believe its ears. Rossini has taken bootless delirium, the jewel in the *buffa* crown, about as far as it can go. (Just in case anyone is worrying, though, the opera ends with Isabella and Lindoro in each other’s arms, and Mustafà and Elvira reconciled.)

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### On the web:

James Levine conducting a wonderfully sung concert performance of the conclusion of Act I. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0\\_bgStnHc0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0_bgStnHc0) I love the whole ten minutes, but if you want to cut right to the chase, to the sounds, start at 6:22 (six minutes, 22 seconds).

Opera Company of Philadelphia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCeLF3wSyMo> Start at One hour six minutes: 1:06. If you want just the sextet, start at 1:09:35

A fine recording of conclusion of Act I, but the subtitles are in Spanish, featuring Marilyn Horne. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhMoUIIBe2s> The whole seven minute excerpt of the end of Act I is great, but if you want only the final noises, start at 4:24 (four minutes and 24 seconds).

Ah, but even the senselessness of the septet can have signification. Just after I wrote this, *The New York Times* published a review of the opera as it was recently performed in Salzburg, Austria. There IS signification in the opera, even though I have been concentrating on the ‘nonsense.’ “For a modern audience, this story treads on territory that is quite sensitive, sociologically speaking. There are sexual politics, colonial implications and a clash of Eastern and Western values. Not to mention harems and eunuchs and Ottoman rulers, which don’t seem so relevant today,” as the review notes. You can read the review here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/17/arts/music/litaliana-in-algeri-salzburg-festival.html>