

Giachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Overture to *L'italiana in Algeri*

Between 1750 and 1880 to live a long and productive life was not assured to the extent that modern medicine allows today. This makes the extraordinary lives of luminaries like Haydn, Lorenzo da Ponte and Rossini all the more remarkable, when compared with the many that were tragically cut short, from Mozart to Chopin. But it is not just a long survival span that makes for good historiography.

In the case of Rossini, who was to revolutionize Italian Opera, and by doing so influence all subsequent opera – there is precious little information to go on, whilst he was actually at work on compositions. He wrote thirty-six operas, until he was the age of thirty six and then stopped composing almost altogether for the next thirty-six years. He took up again, at the very end, with enough import to influence the young Saint-Saens and a budding new generation. It is in the latter 30 year period that the anecdotal, exaggerated, larger than life, humourous, self aggrandizing, self deprecating, deliberately askew and largely fascinating version of Rossini bursts forth, helped along by his mischievous personality.

Opera, at this point, had evolved into two specific forms, *Opera Seria* and *Opera Buffa*. As one might expect, *Opera Seria* concerned itself with lofty ideals, occasional mythology, the triumph of good over evil, kings and potentates and the occasional '*deus ex machina*' – literally an intervening 'god' who was lowered by mechanical device from on high. In contrast, *Opera buffa* concerned itself with the low born struggles of the common man, the humour and plight of the servant classes, the love match and subsequent jealousies and betrayals, the real life drama of existence in the 1800's. It is clear to see why Italian *verismo* – true to life- was the winning format for the future and the fact that it has its origins in the dramatic force of *Opera buffa*.

Despite the tags, Rossini was already dismantling the two forms, by mixing elements in one that audiences would have expected in the other. He also did it prosaically and deftly establishing total mastery over his cultural world, where Donizetti and Bellini, though writing with their individual prowess, remained largely in his vast shadow. Not until Verdi, would the Italians give up the primacy of Rossini, and by then it was his influences that made the Verdian age possible.

In 1813 Rossini wrote two great operas, his opera seria *Tancredi* and his opera buffa *L'italiana in algeri*. Their close proximity and his deliberate attempt to muddle the lines between them is of historic importance. *Tancredi* was to provide in Opera Seria a culmination in form, and yet, here at the same time was his most zany, irreverent Opera Buffa, *The Italian in Algiers*, bringing back memories of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*. The sheer 'din-din, bum-bum, cra-cra,

tac-tac', appeal - once more gave Eurocentric audiences a good laugh at the supposed foibles of the near east. By the time this period of writing was over, lasting up to his opera *La Gazza Ladra*, Rossini was undoubted master of European Opera.

There is another remarkable feature of this period – one which Rossini shares with Beethoven, amongst others. He was writing within the rise and fall of the first Napoleonic empire. As much as 1813 marks these two operas, it also marks Beethoven's *Wellington's Victory* and come 1815 Europe was to abort its Napoleonic instincts, set up so vividly back in 1799. Rossini would outlive the Napoleonic struggle by a staggering fifty three years and by the time of his death in 1868 had personally connected the *Age of Enlightenment* to the *Industrial Age*.

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