

Opera in the Early 19th Century: Rossini, Donizetti, Weber

4/6/17

Opera means Italian Opera

- “To most people at the beginning of the beginning of the 19th century, music meant Opera, and Opera meant Italian opera.”
(Nicholas Till, *Rossini: His Life and Times*, p. 20)
- In 19th C. Italy, 200 towns have opera houses.
- In larger cities, three seasons per year of Opera; essentially year-round.

Opera atmosphere

- “In their boxes, people could...chatter, play cards, ‘or anything else.’”
- Food, champagne, privacy (sex?)
 - ‘sometimes the curtains are drawn, and you may imagine what you please’ (Samuel Rodgers, english poet, quoted in Till, p. 22)
- Gambling! (outlawed in Milan, 1815)

Giachino Rossini (1792 - 1868)

- Musical family; father Giuseppe played horn and mother Anna was a soprano.
- Traveled with Anna, early exposure to operatic tradition
- Enrolls in Accademia Filarmonica at age 14, gets lucky break at Teatro San Moise, eventually lives all over Italy and France, makes lots of money.
 - Wrote 38 operas in 18 years **then retired.**

Career Landmarks

- *La pietra del paragone*, 1812 in Milan
- *Tancredi*, 1813 in Venice – achieves national recognition
- *L'italiana in Algeri* (1813)
- *Il Turco in Italia* + *Aureliano in Palmira* + *Sigismondo* (all in 1814)

Joy?

- Overtures
- Template:
 - three part **introduction**
 - **bithematic exposition** (woodwind solo)
 - “bubbling crescendo **codetta** marking end of exposition”
 - **truncated recapitulation with “Rossini crescendo.”**
 - **La scala di seta** (1812) – romantic comedy of errors
 - **Il signor bruschino** (1813) – romantic comedy of errors
 - **Aureliano in Palmira** (1813) – opera seria set in Persia
 - **Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra** (1813) – political drama set in England
 - **Il Barbiere di Siviglia** (1816) – ‘prequel’ to the Marriage of Figaro of Pierre Beaumarchais
 - **Semiramide** (1823) - opera seria, libretto based on Voltaire, set in Assyria
 - **Guillaume Tell** (1829) - seria based on Schiller’s rendition of the William Tell fable; fabled Swiss patriot who assassinates Gessler, local despot.
 - Dawn
 - Storm
 - Call to Dairy Cows
 - Finale (“march of the swiss soldiers”)
 - **Il turco in Italia** (1814) – buffa. crazy horn solo!
- “Opera,” not *this* opera, is what is being marked as festive.” (Taruskin)

Codified vocal virtuosity

- Start no later than age 12
- “Aphonic gymnastic” – months!
- The “page”: *Vocalises, gruppetti, roulades* – **3 years**
- Putting it into practice – **another three years!**
- Then, acquisition of style.

(from Taruskin, History of Western Music, complete edition)

Self-borrowing

- Taruskin's account?
- Philip Gosset, "Compositional Methods," in *Cambridge Companion to Rossini*:
 - ...Rossini notated ever one of these borrowed pieces anew. Some changes are obligatory...but throughout the composer recast his orchestration in large and small ways, modified vocal lines and rewrote cadenzas. There is nothing mechanical about his work, in short: he was both borrowing and recomposing. It hardly seems as if he saved very much time by engaging in this kind of self-borrowing, yet the practice may have eased somewhat the pressure of writing one new work after another, as many as five operas in a single year. (p. 82)

Rossini crescendo

- La calunnia e un venticello
- Don Basilio and Dr. Bartolo scheming about how to defeat the wily Almaviva
- libretto
- Notice:
 - Self-referentiality
 - Sophisticated/knowing frivolousness
 - Skill in tone painting
 - Orchestration imagination

No development: *Geist* vs. *Sinnlichkeit*

- Rossini antagonizes the Romantic sensibility; sparks debate that breaks down along national lines:
 - *Geist*
 - *Sinnlichkeit*: “sensuality” or “sensuousness”
 - Debussy, cigarettes during development section.

Tancredi

- First real hit, esp. “di tanti palpiti”
- Opera seria (or, “melodramma eroica”)
- *Travesti* hero
- Plot: convoluted
 - Set in Sicily at 1005, under threat from Muslims and warring Italian factions. Amenaide loves Tancredi, but it’s forbidden by two warring families, headed by Argirio and Orbazzano (so typical). **overture**
 - Amenaide promised to the wrong guy (Orbazzano), along with Tancredi’s property.
 - Tancredi returns from exile to defend the city from moors, sings of his country and the too-famous **“di tanti palpiti.”**
 - Establish importance of protagonist
 - Orchestral tone-painting
 - Musica ficta, extemporaneous bel canto vocal virtuosity.

Di tanti palpiti: a *scena* (and a *cavatina*)

Oh patria! dolce, e ingrata patria!
alfine a te ritorno!
Io ti saluto,
o cara terra degli avi miei : ti bacio.
E questo per me giorno sereno :
comincia il cor a respirarmi in seno.
Amenaide! o mio pensier soace,
solo de' miei sospir,
de' voti miei celeste oggetto,
io venni alfin : io voglio,
sfidando il mio destin,
qualunque sia, meritarti,
o perir, anima mia.

Tu che accendi questo core,
tu che desti il valor mio,
alma gloria, dolce amore,
secondate il bel desio,
cada un empio traditore,
coronate la mia fà.

Di tanti palpiti, di tante pene,
da te mio bene, spero mercà.
Mi rivedrai... ti rivedrà...
ne' tuoi bei rai mi pascero.
Deliri, sospiri...
accenti, contenti!
Sarà felice, il cor mel dice,
il mio destino vicino a te.

Oh Homeland! Sweet, ungrateful homeland!
At last I come back to you!
I greet you,
oh dear land of my ancestors: I kiss you.
This is for me a happy day:
My heart begins to breath in my chest.
Amenaide! My suave thought,
the only cause of my sighs,
of my vows, at last I came; I want to earn you,
defying my fate, whatever it was,
or die, my soul.

You who kindle this heart,
you who awake my valour,
blessed glory, sweet love,
heed my desire,
may an impious traitor fall,
crown my faith.

For all these heartbeats, for all these pains,
from you, my beloved, I hope for mercy.
You'll see me again... I'll see you again...
in your beautiful radiance I will have plenty.
Deliriums, sighs...
happy voices!...
It will be glad, my heart tells me,
my destiny - near to you.

Tancredi, continued

- Tancredi appears, greets Amenaide, who, fearing for **his** safety, appears to spurn him.
- Tancredi feels betrayed, shows up in disguise at wedding of Orbazzano and Amenaide.
- Amenaide and Tancredi have a love duet, which Orbazzano overhears. Amenaide refuses to marry Orbazzano. Orbazzano produces the letter intended for Tancredi, which implicates her in treason. Amenaide is condemned by everyone (her father, Orbazzano, Tancredi) and sentenced to death. **End of Act 1: imbroglio** – huge finale, producing confusion.
- Amenaide is in prison. Anonymous Tancredi defends Amenaide from the charge of treason, kills Orbazzano in a duel. Still doubts the loyalty of his beloved. He is persuaded to lead the Italian troops against the invading troops, does so, but is mortally wounded. On his deathbed, he learns that the Amenaide has not in fact betrayed him.

Labor Conditions for 19th century Italian Opera: “Music’s industrial revolution.”

- First significant works are for Teatro San Moise, starting in 1810
- *Farse*: one-act operas of approx. 80 minutes; his first gigs at Teatro San Moise.
- Fast turnover; between 1812 and 1813, Rossini writes four *farse*.
- Strictly limited budget, no chorus, limited scenery and staging.
- Work on a team: impresario, librettist, copyist, staff, singers, etc
- Contract for Barber signed 15 December 1815, for a scheduled performance on Feb 20 1816
 - Taruskin: his product, like any commercial product, was subject to all kinds of exigencies and prerogatives once it left his hands, with the result that, as Gossett puts it, “an Italian opera in the first half of the nineteenth century,” and no matter how distinguished the composer, “was treated as a collection of individual units that could be rearranged, substituted or omitted depending on local conditions of performance, local taste or, on many occasions, whim.”
- Composer is *not* the prima donna.
- “lazy” Rossini – bed anecdote – “l’aria del riso”

9 part “prototype” of Rossini structural plan - “Code Rossini”

- 1 overture
- 2 *introduzione*, a 3-part group usually involving a duet, an aria with a concluding trio, and two *allegro* sections framing a central *cantabile*
- 3 a duet
- 4 aria
- 5 A central ensemble, usually a trio
- 6 aria
- 7-8 a duet and aria
- 9 a 3-part finale

(from Richard Osbrone, “Rossini,” *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*)

Antithetical with Beethoven

- Inward / outward
- Lonely / social
- Calling / career

Sacred music after retirement

- *Stabat mater, “cuius animus”*
- Banned in 1903 by Pope Pius X:
 - since modern music has risen mainly to serve profane uses, greater care must be taken with regard to it, in order that the musical compositions of modern style which are admitted in the Church may contain nothing profane, be free from reminiscences of motifs adopted in the theaters, and be not fashioned even in their external forms after the manner of profane pieces.
- Cf. Beethoven: sacralized secular music vs secular sacred music?

Domenico Gaetano Maria Donizetti

1797 - 1848

- Born poor, received musical education on a scholarship.
- Parents disapproved of music; serves in the military.
- Worked at a pace like Rossini – composed a total of 66 operas.
- Like Rossini, lived in Paris and Naples.
- Syphillis.

Lucia di Lammermoor

- The sixth operatic rendition of Walter Scott's 1819 *The Bride of Lammermoor*, one of the "waverly novels."
- Scottish setting: romantic titillation.
- Plot: Lucia Ashton loves Edgardo, but he leads the political opposition to her family's house.
- Edgardo has to go to France. They secretly exchange rings.
- While he's away, Lucia is forced to marry Arturo, whose fortunes will save her family's household. They forge a letter from Edgardo that shows that he's found someone new in France. Lucia, heartbroken, agrees to marry Arturo.
- Then Edgardo shows up! Everyone, including Edgardo, blames Lucia.

Act II, scene II

Act II, scene II: realism in *opera seria*

- Integration of buffa techniques for opera seria
- “Realism”: the integration of recitative and aria, more ensembles (used to be just for finales, but now they’re everywhere, including in *seria*)
- Five soloists!
 - Edgardo, Lucy, Enrico, Arturo, Raimondo,
 - cf. the rise of the novel.
- Climax is repeated with thickened orchestration (another buffa technique)
- Still observing cantabile/cabaletta aria structure

Lucia, continued

- Act III: the marriage and the mad scene.
- Lucia kills Arturo and makes a grand delusional entrance to the wedding party. *Il dolce suono*
- Lucia dies, Edgardo is summoned to duel Enrico (Lucia's brother). In the novel, he weirdly falls into quicksand. In the opera, he stabs himself.

Cf. Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, chap 26

- Ashton knocked and called, but received no answer except stifled groans. He hesitated no longer to open the door of the apartment, in which he found opposition from something which lay against it. When he had succeeded in opening it, the body of the bridegroom was found lying on the threshold of the bridal chamber, and all around was flooded with blood. A cry of surprise and horror was raised by all present; and the company, excited by this new alarm, began to rush tumultuously towards the sleeping apartment. Colonel Ashton, first whispering to his mother,---"Search for her---she has murdered him!" drew his sword, planted himself in the passage, and declared he would suffer no man to pass excepting the clergyman, and a medical person present. By their assistance, Bucklaw, who still breathed, was raised from the ground, and transported to another apartment, where his friends, full of suspicion and murmuring, assembled round him to learn the opinion of the surgeon.
- In the meanwhile, Lady Ashton, her husband, and their assistants, in vain sought Lucy in the bridal bed and in the chamber. There was no private passage from the room, and they began to think that she must have thrown herself from the window, when one of the company, holding his torch lower than the rest, discovered something white in the corner of the great old-fashioned chimney of the apartment. Here they found the unfortunate girl, seated, or rather couched like a hare upon its form--- her head-gear dishevelled; her night-clothes torn and dabbled with blood,---her eyes glazed, and her

Il dolce suono

- What is the **dolce suono**?
- Reminiscence motifs
 - “**regnava nel silenzio**” (act 1) Cf. Armonica part.
 - Lucia’s demented past?
 - Who can hear the flute/armonica?
 - “**Verrano a te**” (act I love duet with Edgardo) cf.
The ghost music in Il Dolce Suono
 - Lucia’s entrance music to Act II finale cf.
Reworking in Il Dolce Suono

Taruskin on “il dolce suono”

- The beautiful harmony of voice and flute, conjuring up a better place than the one occupied by the sane characters (or, for that matter, the audience), is a perfect metaphor for romanticism's aspirations. All art—all romantic art, anyway—to the extent that it aspires to “the condition of music” (in Walter Pater's famous phrase) aspires to be a beautiful or comforting lie.
- Or is it the (higher) truth? To say so is plainly utopian, but that seems to be the message many audiences have wished to draw from art. How does such a message compare with other utopian messages, including religious and political ones, and with what consequences? These are questions to keep in mind from now until the end of the book. First broached by romanticism, they have been the most pressing esthetic questions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And music, the most inherently (or at least potentially) unworldly and utopian of the arts, has been their most insistent harbinger.

Weber, *Der Freischütz*

- “inserted opera into the history of nationalism”
- Reception history vs. composer’s intentions?
- doesn’t matter: e.g. Wagner:
 - O my magnificent German fatherland, how must I love thee, how must I gush over thee, if for no other reason than that *Der Freischütz* rose from thy soil! How must I love the German folk that loves *Der Freischütz*, that even now believes in the wonders of artless legend, that even now, in manhood, feels the same sweet mysterious thrills that made its heart beat fast in youth! Ah, thou adorable German daydream! Thou nature-rapture, bliss in forests, gloaming, stars, moon, village clock-chimes striking seven! How happy he who understands thee, who can believe, feel, dream, delight with thee! How happy I am to be a German!
- Wolf’s glen scene:
 - Diminished 7th “**phantasmagoria**” – (See Anthony Newcomb, “New Light(s) on Weber's Wolf's Glen Scene,” in *Opera and the Enlightenment*, eds. T. Bauman and M. P. McClymonds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 61–88.)
 - “coloristic” orchestral writing

Too literal?

- ETA Hoffman:
 - Nothing is more ridiculous than to bring the spectator to the point where he, without needing to contribute anything from his own imagination, actually believes in the painted palaces, tress, and rocks.... First and foremost one must take care to avoid anything unseemly; then one must rely on a deep understanding of the genuinely fantastic, which will work upon and free up the fantasy of the spectator. The stage set should not itself, as an independent striking image, attract the eye of the spectator. Rather the spectator should come to feel, as the action progresses and without being aware of it, the effect of the stage set in which the action takes place. (