1 Introduction: Rossini's operatic operas

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'Since the death of Napoleon, another man has appeared who is talked about every day in Moscow as in Naples, in London as in Vienna, in Paris as in Calcutta. The fame of this man knows no bounds save those of civilisation itself; and he is not yet thirty-two!'[1] The opening words of Rossini's first biography – by none other than Stendhal, and published in Paris in 1824 – help introduce what at first might seem an extravagant claim: Rossini was Europe's most famous composer in the first half of the nineteenth century; his music reached the largest number of listeners, whether in opera houses, or concert halls, or played in countless arrangements printed for all sorts of performing forces, or simply whistled in the streets. In other words, nineteenth-century musical culture cannot be understood without taking Rossini into prominent account; any history that relegates Rossini to a secondary rôle must to some extent ignore the tastes of those who inhabited the period. And yet such histories have been the norm rather than the exception in the past century, especially in the English-speaking world.

The reasons behind this historiographical neglect are numerous and diverse, but chief among them is probably the progressive disappearance of Rossini's works from the repertory of opera houses during the second half of the nineteenth century, a trend not reversed until the later decades of the twentieth. Only a handful of his comic operas were performed, especially *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, which remains the most popular and frequently revived. In the past half century, however, Rossini's fortunes have undergone a substantial and perhaps surprising reversal, with his works, including the *opere serie*, regaining a footing in the operatic canon. Music historiography has followed suit, with an increasing wealth of books and essays devoted to Rossini's *oeuvre*. The inclusion of the present volume in a book series in English devoted to the most important composers of the past, unlikely even thirty years ago, may be taken as a sign that modern Rossini scholarship has come of age. These considerations raise a number of important questions: why were Rossini's operas so famous in the first half of the nineteenth century? Why did they mostly disappear between 1850 and 1950? And why have they now returned to the stage?

Understanding the reasons behind Rossini's meteoric rise and unprecedented success is made particularly difficult by our rather sketchy knowledge of opera in Italy at the turn of the nineteenth century. To judge from what

we know, Rossini's strength seems to have been his prodigious capacity for rationalising and codifying a number of disparate dramatic and musical solutions already explored by his predecessors, and then employing them with single-minded attention to coherence, balance and clarity. In the words of Philip Gossett, 'Rossini's formal procedures were compelling because they fused in a simple yet satisfactory manner the urge for lyrical expression and the needs of the drama'.[2] Similarly, he devised a melodic style that offered the singers scope for both syllabic *cantilena* and melismatic coloratura, each kept within the boundaries of clearly defined formal moulds. Over the past few decades Rossini scholars have extensively and persuasively explored how his operas are made, from overture to *finale ultimo*, from the distribution of numbers within a work to minute details of thematic construction. In fact, the dramaturgy of Rossini's operas has been the main concern of recent scholarship (together with source studies and editing), and the very considerable fruits of this research are evident throughout the present volume.

What has been addressed less strenuously are the motives behind such a dramaturgy, and this makes it all the harder to answer the question of why Rossini was so successful. If we believe that dramaturgy must ultimately be the manifestation of an ideology, of a particular worldview, then the central issue becomes the ideological outlook that lies behind Rossini's operas. The theme has not often been addressed by modern scholars, but recurs in nineteenth-century writings, albeit not always explicitly. Stendhal, for example, tried to explain the relative lack of success of Mozart's operas in Italy in terms that illuminate by reflection the peculiar attractions of Rossini:

> Love is not the same in Bologna as it is in Königsberg; love in Italy is far more dynamic, more impatient, more violent, less dependent upon imagination. It is not a gradual tide which sweeps slowly, but for ever, into the farthest recesses of the soul; it takes the whole being by storm, and its invasion is the work of an instant; it is a frenzy. Now, frenzy knows nothing of melancholy, since frenzy is a wild explosion of all kinds of energy, while melancholy springs from an absence of energy. No novel, as far as I know, has ever described love in the Italian manner; and Italy, as a consequence, is a land without novels. Instead, Italy has her Cimarosa.[3]

Whereas the 'Northern' Mozart puts on the stage characters who evolve and develop but, more importantly, who constantly reflect upon their development – as novelistic characters do – the 'Southern' Cimarosa (read Rossini) presents us with characters whose subjectivity is conceived in terms not of modern sentiment, but rather of a pre-modern ideal of the self as resistant to change, as a 'mere' vessel for emotions. Expression in opera is, then, the expression not of a subject, but rather of a passion, of an emotion that takes over the self and makes it utter this emotion in song. According to

Stendhal, this conception of human character stands behind Rossini's musical dramaturgy, and the success of Rossini's operas is due to their masterly translation into music of this very conception. Saying that Rossini's music is 'the music of the soul' means saying that it is not 'the music of a character', or 'the music of the composer's interiority', and therefore can speak directly to each member of the audience who wants to listen and knows how to do so.

Other prominent contemporary commentators agreed with Stendhal, offering their interpretation of what had doubtless become a critical commonplace. Reviewing the first London performance of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in 1818, Leigh Hunt reminded his readers that 'they [Italian opera composers] take up one passion after another, and give you the genuine elementary feeling of it', but he added that this was not Rossini's most prominent quality:

> We have a strong recollection of the most striking passages. Some of them fairly beat it into us. They were the more hurried parts in general, the entrance of the *Count* in the disguise of a singing master, the groans of old *Bartolo*, and the scene where *Figaro* and his master have so much difficulty in getting rid of a set of fellows who have a prodigious pertinacity. We never met with a composer who gave us such an harmonious sense of discord, who set to music with such vivacity what is vulgarly called a *row*. The rest of the opera is of a piece with this kind of talent, not good in the graver, more sentimental, and graceful parts; but exceedingly promising in the ardent, vehement, and more obviously comic.[4]

Another Englishman, Thomas Love Peacock, writing in 1834, established a link between Hunt's interpretation of Rossini and 'reality':

> There has been an increase of excitement in the world of reality, and that of imagination has kept it company . . . The public taste has changed, and the supply of the market has followed the demand. There can be no question that Rossini's music is more spirit-stirring than Paësiello's, and more essentially theatrical: more suited to the theatre by its infinite variety of contrast and combination, and more dependent on the theatre for the development of its perfect effect.[5]

Rossini's operas, then, do not simply present a succession of sudden, passionate utterances in music; they are not just old-fashioned products of a Southern imagination for a Southern public. Their modernity lies in their privileging of vehement emotions, in staging the excitement of the contemporary world. But the operas are also modern because they are 'essentially theatrical', because they exploit to the full the possibilities of the theatrical medium.

Scholars have recently advanced interesting hypotheses about this heightened theatricality, concentrating on Rossini's comic operas and interpreting them in what might be called 'metatheatrical' terms. Paolo Gallarati contrasts what he calls the 'everyday' realism of Mozart's comic works with the grotesque, deformed version of reality presented in Rossini's *opere buffe*. It is as if Rossini's characters have always worn masks, self-consciously staging their actions in a theatrical (as opposed to real) fashion, constantly aware that they are operatic characters, rather than real human beings. These characters have no past and no future, no memory of who they have been and no anticipation of who they may become; they live exclusively in the theatrical present – in Freudian terms, they have no unconscious.[6] The only reality known to Rossini's comic operas is operatic; in other words, the subject of Rossini's comic operas is comic opera itself.

Gianni Ruffin suggests that this heightened self-referentiality is achieved through a conflict between the diachronic dimension of text and the syncronic dimension of music, which negates development as a compositional and aesthetic principle, operating instead through repetition. This music is openly anti-realistic because openly anti-mimetic: its repetitive mechanisms highlight the gap between the stage and the real world, forcefully negating any realistic dimension to the musical action unfolding on the stage.[7] Alessandro Baricco emphasises how this anti-mimetic quality rests on what he calls Rossini's 'sabotage of the signifying function of words', which are treated instead mostly as phonetic support for the music – hence the crucial importance of coloratura in Rossini's vocal aesthetics.[8] Carl Dahlhaus also notices how 'Rossini not infrequently gives precedence to rhythm over themes, to instrumentation and coloratura over melodic contour, to intensified repetition over motivic manipulation.'[9]

Dahlhaus's observations extend to Rossini's serious operas, which in his analysis share most – if not all – of their musical language with the comic ones. This switching of genres can be interpreted in both historical and psychological terms: 'The extremes meet: the farcical takes on catastrophic proportions in the frenzy of the music; the tragic, in its moments of greatest despair, exposes the marionette strings from which the characters are dangling. For a skeptic like Rossini, whose cheerfulness is simply the obverse of a melancholy that affected not just himself but his entire age, these extremes prove to be complementary.'[10] This interpretation squarely locates Rossini in the historical and ideological context of post-Napoleonic Restoration, an epoch characterised, according to Dahlhaus, by a resigned detachment, 'a detachment of cheerful skepticism or melancholic self-absoption'.[11] Heinrich Heine forcefully expounded this position in his *On the French Stage* of 1837: since Rossini's operas are mostly concerned with the isolated passions of individuals, and since these self-contained passions are best expressed in

melody, Rossini is the absolute master of melodic expression. The ideology behind this approach to opera is, according to Heine, that of the Restoration, when, after the great struggles and subsequent bitter disappointments of the Napoleonic years, individuals retreated from the public arena into the private sphere, forgetting for a while collective interests and 'the destiny of the people'.[12]

Heine contrasts Rossini with Meyerbeer, whose *grands opéras* best epitomise, according to him, the new era in French history ushered in by the 1830 July Revolution. However, if 1830 marks the end of the Bourbon Restoration in France, in Italy the régimes that had gained power in 1815 lasted well into the second half of the century; having survived more or less intact the revolutions of 1848–9 – as was the case in many other European countries – they were finally ousted by the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The first half of the century encompasses therefore both the heyday of Rossini's success and fame, and the Restoration régimes in Italy and other parts of Europe. I am not suggesting that there is a simple cause-and-effect link between these two phenomena; simply that, when discussing Rossini's gradual disappearance from the operatic stage in the central decades of the century, the political and ideological contexts should not be forgotten. As we have seen, commentators of the time had them in vivid focus.

As did Rossini. His few declarations of poetics, all made after he had retired from the operatic agon, sometimes refer to 'modern' music and its performance in political terms, linking contemporary opera and its vocal execution to revolution, 'steam, theft and barricades'.[13] More generally, Rossini's pronouncements measure the distance between his aesthetics and a new conception of opera that emerged after his retirement. As Paolo Fabbri has argued, the central issue is that of imitation. According to Rossini, 'music is not an imitative art, but is at root entirely abstract; its purpose is to arouse and express'.[14] The musical parameter on which this abstractedly expressive function mainly falls is melody, especially the kind of 'beautiful', 'Italian' melody designated *cantilena* at the time. Rossinian *cantilena* expresses general and idealised emotions, never descending to the aesthetic lowliness of giving prominence to single words, since this would ruin its beautiful, 'musical' flow. This, the older Rossini felt, was the ruinous direction taken by modern opera, a direction which he was proud never to have considered himself.[15] Recalling terms mentioned above, we could say that, for Rossini, operatic music ceased to be the music of the soul and became the music of a character, in the process losing its ideal abstraction. This was a fundamental aesthetic shift, linked on the one hand to a political, social and ideological evolution and, on the other, to profound changes in the performance of opera, especially its vocal style. Hence the older Rossini's frequent and loud complaints about the decline of singing standards and the prevalence of

'shouting' among singers who had lost the true art of executing 'beautifully' his dear, old, beautiful *cantilena*.[16]

Perhaps we should be surprised that, in the face of such fundamental changes, a few operas by Rossini managed to maintain a foothold in the repertory of opera houses after the mid nineteenth century. But it is important to remember that the very concept of an operatic repertory appeared first in connection with repeated revivals of Rossini's operas in the same theatre. This fundamental shift is closely connected to the mounting importance of the composer vis-à-vis the librettist. It was with Rossini that, for the first time, the composer was indisputedly considered the author of an opera, with the librettist simply a supplier of words – it is precisely in the early nineteenth century that the word 'librettist', originally derogatory, began to substitute for the eighteenth-century 'poet'.[17] In the eighteenth century the author of an opera was the author of its words, which could be set to music by different composers and be heard in the same theatre repeatedly, always in new settings. Operatic scores had travelled increasingly as the eighteenth century progressed, but were very seldom performed in the same city in more than one season. Some operas by Mozart, especially *Le nozze di Figaro*, *La clemenza di Tito* and above all *Don Giovanni*, became repertory pieces in the German-speaking lands and in London in the early nineteenth century.[18] But it was Rossini's works which were first revived over and over again throughout Europe in the first half of the century, so that for the first time in the history of opera a spectator in Milan, Paris, London and Vienna, but also in many provincial cities, could attend performances of the same opera at more or less regular intervals during the course of his or her life.

The astonishing success of several of Rossini's operas and their rapid conquest of operatic stages in Europe and beyond turned them into 'classics', a word that can be meaningfully applied to Rossini's works for the first time in the history of opera (with the partial exception of Mozart, as mentioned above). The composer himself was taken by surprise by this canonisation; in a recently discovered letter about *Otello* he frankly confessed that he could hardly believe he was the author of such a 'classic'.[19] I would suggest that it was precisely their swiftly acquired status as classics that secured the survival of a handful of Rossini's works in the nineteenth-century operatic repertory.

If we look at the chronology of La Scala, Milan, for example, we can see that *Otello* was frequently performed there until 1870; *Mosè* (an Italian version of *Moïse et Pharaon* rather than the original *Mosè in Egitto*) survived until 1869, but *Semiramide* was performed as late as 1881, and *Guillaume Tell* (as *Guglielmo Tell*) even later, 1899. Among the comic operas only *Il barbiere* remained in the repertory after the 1860s, but it did so in an astonishingly healthy manner: the longest audiences at La Scala went without a *Barbiere* was only fifteen years, between 1890 and 1905; since its house première in

1820 the opera was performed in eighteen years of the nineteenth century; and of course there were other theatres in Milan where *Il barbiere* was performed, at some point even more frequently than at La Scala, especially in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when comic opera was produced more frequently at secondary theatres. *Il barbiere* is, quite simply, the first opera to have been constantly revived all around the operatic world ever since its première.

Il barbiere is, though, the only Rossini opera to have done so. All his others, with the partial exception of *Tell*, at some point lost their status as classics, or, rather, retained that status only in a few music history books. The presence of Rossini's operas in the repertory reached its lowest point from c. 1890 to c. 1920. Then the curve started a slow but steady rise, however, eventually leading in the last few decades to a phenomenon called the 'Rossini Renaissance', explored in detail by Charles S. Brauner in chapter 4. Why have Rossini's operas returned to the stage in the last half century? Brauner points out that several other composers have enjoyed 'renaissances' in the last few decades. The ever-increasing historicism of the culture of opera in the twentieth century is surely a crucial factor. This is not the place to investigate the reasons of this trend – although the fundamental rôle of recordings in shaping it should be mentioned more often than it is. It is clear, in any case, that revivals of old works have taken the place of premières of new ones (and their failure to enter the repertory in most cases). In this sense the Rossini Renaissance has much in common with the so-called early music movement, with the difference that, in the case of Rossini, and of opera in general, the emphasis is on 're-discovered' works rather than on familiar works performed in new styles – the exception being Handel's operas, re-discovered works performed in new styles. On the other hand, the rôle of historically aware performance practice, especially vocal, in making the rediscovery of Rossini's operas possible should not be underestimated. Finally, as Brauner reminds us, musicology has been an important player in the Rossini Renaissance, especially the enterprise of the critical edition and the activities of the Fondazione Rossini and of the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, an institution explicitly devised as a meeting ground between performance and musicology.

There are other reasons, however, aesthetic and ideological, behind Rossini's return to the operatic stages. Perhaps it is precisely the qualities that Stendhal and his contemporaries saw as quintessential to Rossini's operatic aesthetic that have a particular appeal for present-day audiences and critics. According to Herbert Lindenberger, the Rossini of our time is a 'performing figure' who speaks out 'in diverse voices no one of which has any special authority nor reveals the essentials of its creator nor of the voice it purports to represent'.[20] To recall terms introduced above, the very fact that Rossini's

music is 'the music of the soul' and not 'the music of a character' or 'the music of the composer's interiority', perceived as a problem from within a Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetic paradigm, finds in the climate of the present a potentially sympathetic terrain. If, as Lindenberger suggests, 'excess and repetition display themselves as Rossini's guiding principles',[21] it is not difficult to see how a culture which takes excess and repetition as some of its most salient characteristics may hear Rossini with some degree of sympathy, perhaps even of recognition. If the very concept of reality is under scrutiny – as it undoubtedly is at present – the fact that the only reality known to Rossini's operas is operatic may chime with our scepticism towards any form of representation that claims a more or less direct link with reality.

The present volume cannot entirely escape this 'presentist' perspective, nor does it attempt to do so, since in part it owes its existence to this very perspective. Its purpose is rather to give a historically grounded view of Rossini and his works from an early-twenty-first-century point of view, conscious that its object of enquiry is as much part of the present as it is of the past. If it succeeds in mediating between the two, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

PART ONE

Biography and reception