

Meet the composer:

Rossini in a Nutshell

"Give me a laundry list, and I'll set it to music."

--Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)



Rossini as a young man around the time that he wrote *Cinderella*.

Many of Rossini's critics have accused him of being trivial, mistaking popularity for artistic inadequacy. But after 39 operas, 10 of which are masterworks, Rossini's operatic importance cannot be overstated. His innovations created a whole new vocabulary for opera, paving the way for others, including Verdi and Wagner.

Born to musician parents, Rossini was steeped in operatic and symphonic music. At 14, he was accepted into the *Accademia Filarmonica*, where he proved an apt pupil, despite his lack of interest and apparent incompetence in counterpoint.

Accademia seems to have crimped Rossini and he wrote little. After he left his studies, his composition increased. The Teatro San Moisè in Venice commissioned him to write a *farsa*. *Farse* were low budget, chorus-less, 80-minute operas. The San Moisè was a savvy, well-managed opera company, perfect for the fledgling composer to perfect his craft. Rossini wrote four *farse* for San Moisè and developed this effective structure into the first acts of his full-length comedies.

Of his operas in this early period, *Tancredi* stands out as the watershed. An *opera seria* first performed in 1813, *Tancredi* contains not only some of Rossini's loveliest music but also some true innovations. Rossini's *opera buffa*, *L'Italiana in Algeri* exemplifies the composer's inventiveness. For the first time he combined elements of *opera seria* and *opera buffa*, and some critics accused Rossini of blending these elements willy-nilly without regard to effect. An un-biased hearing proves this to be untrue.

1816 marked a new phase in Rossini's career. The Neapolitans had been inured to the Rossini-mania sweeping Italy and Europe, but Domenico Barbaia, an artistic director in Naples sought to capitalize on Rossini's novelty. Rossini churned out 18 operas in 7 years for Barbaia. Compare that to Puccini who wrote 11 operas in his entire 42-year career, or Verdi who wrote 29 operas over 54 years!

Rossini then traveled to Vienna and married the soprano, Isabella Colbran. When returned to Bologna to finish work on *Semiramide*, his Italian career was ending. Offers for lucrative



positions poured in from all over Europe and he accepted the Theatre Italien in Paris. His first opera for the Theatre Italien was *Il Viaggio a Reims*, written for the coronation of Charles X. Rossini's final opera *Guillaume Tell* is a grand summation of a tremendous career. *Guillaume Tell* is so masterful that even Richard Wagner, whose rivalry with Rossini was legendary, felt compelled to compliment Rossini on his admirable marriage of music and drama. Rossini reportedly quipped, "Dear me, I was writing the music of the future and didn't know it." During his remaining 39 years, he never wrote another opera. He had written 39 operas in 19 years, and he spent his last years as a gourmand, a raconteur, a voice teacher, and a marvelous cook.

