

Rossini: *Il barbiere di Siviglia*

(Works of Gioachino Rossini, Vol. 2), Editor: Patricia B. Brauner; General Editor: Philip Gossett. Bärenreiter, 2008. 2 vols. (Score plus Critical Commentary)

Producing a critical edition of a well-loved masterpiece can be much more difficult than resurrecting a hitherto scarcely known work, even if both come from the same composer. *Il barbiere di Siviglia* has enjoyed a continuous performance history from the date of its premier on February 20, 1816, right through to the present. In the case of an unfamiliar or unsuccessful work, whether or not in our view it deserves its obscurity (such as *Torvaldo e Dorliska*, recently published by the Rossini Foundation of Pesaro) sources tend to be more limited, making the job of editing less burdensome. If the composer's autograph manuscript has survived, so much the better; if not, few people outside the scholarly community have the qualifications to question editorial procedures, and even fewer music lovers will care.

Taking on an iconic work like "*The Barber*" is another matter entirely. Not only do we have Rossini's original manuscript score, there are also numerous contemporary copies, additional arias (some not even by Rossini), variants for specific singers--some of which come from the composer's pen and some of which do not--early printed editions, and in general the whole tradition of performance that grew up around the work. All of these factors have been noted, studied, evaluated, described, sampled, and given due weight by Dr. Patricia Brauner in creating this magnificent new edition. The sheer amount of material that she has worked through is staggering: five Rossini autographs, twenty manuscript scores for the opera itself, and fifteen just for the overture alone. It's an amazing feat of scholarship, particularly as the end result, presented with exemplary clarity and organizational elegance, betrays none of the effort that must have gone into its preparation.

This new edition, the second in Bärenreiter's ongoing Rossini project (next up will be the *Petite Messe Solennelle*), offers an optimal mix of idealism and practicality. At its heart, we find the most faithful and accurate transcription yet to appear of the composer's basic text of the work, beautifully printed and spaciously laid out on the page. Then, like a sort of musical solar system, the edition offers a fascinating orbital constellation of planets, including: a historical preface tracing the genesis of the work (with lots of splendid original correspondence); the complete libretto, printed with its original poetic meters respected as they should be; and three appendices consisting of vocal variants by Rossini as well as additional music composed for subsequent revivals. Brauner even retains Bartolo's aria "Manca un foglio," which is actually by Pietro Romani, because it became so much a part of the subsequent performance history of the work.

Supplementing the primary volume, Bärenreiter has also published a 400+ page critical commentary that goes well beyond the usual job of detailing the

editorial choices made in preparing the individual numbers. It also contains an extensive essay by Will Crutchfield on contemporary vocal ornamentation, with numerous examples drawn from the notebooks and scores of famous singers associated with the opera's principal roles, especially (and not surprisingly) that of Rosina. In short, this new edition presents musicians with all of the material they might need in order to prepare performances of *Il barbiere* that are both faithful to the composer's evident intentions, and responsive to the requirements of real-life theatrical productions.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that these twin goals of irreproachable scholarship and practical utility necessarily stand at odds, for Brauner achieves the latter through the medium of the former. Consider the issue of the overture. After debunking the myth of a "lost" original *Barbiere* sinfonia, a story apparently originating with Rossini himself during his later Paris years, Brauner establishes that the correct overture is the version first written for his earlier opera *Aureliano in Palmira*. But there is a problem: the Rome orchestra for which *Il barbiere* was composed had no timpani, and only two players spread among 2 flutes, 2 piccolos, and a single oboe. This disposition of forces, and Rossini's consequent heavy reliance on flutes and clarinets, gives the music much of its Mozartian grace and mellifluousness.

The overture, however, includes parts for two flutes, two oboes, and timpani, and Rossini made no effort to adapt it to its new context. This leaves open the question of where the extra players came from, and what they did during the remainder of the opera. In order to bring the overture in line with the scoring of the rest, Brauner includes both the original parts as Rossini wrote them, plus a conjectural but sensitively made arrangement of the flute and oboe lines (omitting the timpani) for the forces he actually had at his disposal. Here is fidelity to the spirit of the work, rather than just the letter of the text that has come down to us. Opera companies using this edition can thus choose between the two options, as best suits the performance circumstances.

It's also worth mentioning in this regard that the traditional, later 19th century edition of the score published by Ricordi (and still available from Dover) chooses as its source for the overture Rossini's still more heavily orchestrated version, with three trombones, used in *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*. This makes even less sense than keeping matters as Rossini left them. Ricordi did, however, issue a critical edition of *Barbiere* in 1969, under the stewardship of Alberto Zedda. This score represented a watershed in Rossini scholarship. It takes as its principal source the composer's autograph, which is currently housed in Bologna, as does this new Bärenreiter edition. And yet, there are significant differences between Zedda's work and Brauner's that weigh decisively in favor of the latter, and it's interesting to consider some examples.

Start with Basilio's famous "La calunnia" aria. There are small details that simply make better musical sense as Brauner has them, such as her logical (given

the change in texture) directive to the violins to stop playing “sul ponticello” four bars earlier than Zedda indicates. Another instance concerns the cannon-shot in the percussion at the appropriate moment in the text: Brauner’s sforzando dynamic runs less of a risk of blotting out the voice than Zedda’s plain fortissimo. More significantly, though, consider the following passage:

The image shows a musical score for a passage starting at measure 52. It includes a vocal line with lyrics: "-ra - le che fa l'a - ria rim-bom - bar. E il me - schi - no ca - lun -". Below the vocal line are staves for Violin I, Violin II, and Cello/Double Bass. The violin parts are marked with a staccato texture, while the cello and double bass parts are marked with a smoother, portato texture. Dynamics include *pp* and *p*.

Zedda has the violas playing staccato, while Brauner’s slurs, above, require portato articulation—in other words, an accented legato pulsation with only a hint of space between the notes. As an accompaniment to the melody this smoother texture does indeed change the complexion of the music, and surely frames the words more effectively than would the usual, bouncy staccato. For the record, Basilio sings: “And the pathetic victim of slander, beaten and humiliated, whipped by the public, dies--if he’s lucky enough.” It would be difficult to imagine a better justification for a more lugubrious accompaniment, and that is just what Rossini evidently wanted.

Issues of proper articulation also figure prominently in Bartolo’s first act aria “A un dottor della mia sorte,” the piece formerly so often replaced by Romani’s “Manca un foglio.” In this case, a systematic glance backwards in time offers a fascinating opportunity to consider both changing performance practice as well as the way that Rossini’s later interpreters corrupted his scores. The Dover (Ricordi) Edition has the following:

The image shows a musical score for Bartolo's first act aria "A un dottor della mia sorte". It includes a vocal line with lyrics: "altra, ci vuol al - tro, figlia mia, per potermi corbellar altro, altro, altro, altro. Perchè manca là quel". Below the vocal line are staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Voice, and Cello/Double Bass. The violin parts are marked with a staccato texture, while the viola, voice, and cello/double bass parts are marked with a smoother, portato texture. Dynamics include *mf*.

Note the string parts in the third bar, all marked with staccato dots. A great deal of ambiguity surrounds those dots—they only acquired their exclusive staccato meaning much later in the 19th century. Prior to then, they had a contextual significance depending on the emotional tenor of the music, the different kinds of accents used in the same work, and any other expressive indications the composer cared to supply. Rossini, for example, often indicates staccato with sharp triangular wedges, as for example at the fortissimo outbursts in the second act storm. Here and elsewhere Zedda retains the dots, a curious decision given his willingness to adopt other, more distinctively Rossinian notational signs (such as the closed crescendo, which indicates a dynamic increase or decrease, starting or ending with a sforzando accent).

Zedda in 1969, supposedly returning to the composer's autograph manuscript, took a look at this passage and came up with:

The image shows a page of a musical score. At the top, it is labeled 'BART.' and contains the lyrics: 'altro, ci vuol al . tro, figlia mia, per potermi corbellar altro, altro, altro, altro. Perchè manca là quel'. Below the vocal line are five staves for string instruments: Violin I (Vni I), Violin II (Vni II), Viola (Vle), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabasso (Cb.). Each string staff has a dynamic marking of '[mf] marc.' and contains musical notation with staccato dots (small vertical lines) above the notes, indicating a marcato or staccato articulation.

Marcato, and not staccato: in fact, quite a different type of accent than the later 19th century score suggests. But this is still not what Rossini wrote, and I am grateful to *Works of Rossini* General Editor, Professor Philip Gossett, for taking the time to double-check and confirm the new edition against the composer's manuscript. What Rossini notated, and what Brauner reproduces, is this:

mi - a, per po - ter - mi cor - bel - lar, al - tro, al - tro, al - tro, al - tro. Per - ché man - ca là quel

marcato
mf

staccato
mf

marcato
mf

staccato
mf

staccato
mf

In other words, Rossini imagined two distinct types of articulation, staccato and marcato, played *simultaneously*, and both are indicated by a combination of verbal description and notational signs (dots). Also, consider the grouping of the notes in the first violins and violas, which naturally suggests a slightly different pattern of accentuation than does the usual “rule of four” as homogenized by later 19th century editors, and accepted by Zedda. So both of these previous editions misrepresent Rossini’s intentions.

Why does this matter, and what does it tell us? Quite a bit, actually. First, the above passage features the orchestra playing alone, between vocal entries, and even in this brief half-bar of music Rossini evidently wanted the instrumental parts to sustain a degree of color and interest. His desired articulation gives this motive, which appears three more times, always in dialogue with the vocal line, an independent life and a rhythmic counterpoint which would be rendered far less audible if everyone played their music with the same kind of accent, whether staccato or marcato.

Second, details such as this are not gratuitously fussy. They explain how a composer working at high speed, writing for players for whom rehearsal was a sometime thing, could create textural interest using simple notational conventions that any musician of the day could be expected to understand. Remember, Rossini was working before the rise of the modern conductor. The leader of the performance, seated at the piano, often had little more to guide him than a more elaborate first violin part with some cues written in. It was up to the players, whether solo or in sections, to play whatever was put in front of them in conditions (no orchestra pit, no darkened auditorium) that allowed for a degree of direct interaction with the singers on stage that is unthinkable today.

In short, Rossini’s original intentions aren’t just practical, they ought to be foolproof, *provided* of course that the parts accurately reflect them. Later editions of

the score, including Zedda's, betray an overriding concern for the conductor's ability to ensure ensemble discipline within a large, modern orchestra, and the notation is homogenized accordingly. Rossini's conception demonstrates his desire to characterize instrumental lines even as he does the parts for his vocal soloists. The very simplicity of his accompaniments often means that he places a premium on instrumental color and a vivid use of accent and articulation to bring the orchestra's contribution to life. And all of this happens absent the presence of a single, guiding interpretive vision emanating from the conductor's podium.

Rossini's orchestral writing is colorful, flexible, and above all full of personality. Restoring the individuality that he built into his instrumental lines ultimately makes them more interesting to play, and more captivating to hear. It affirms the fundamentally vocal basis of his whole technique, and gives the singers an additional source of musically fruitful interaction and collaboration. These observations remain equally valid whether future performers of *Il barbiere* approach the work through the medium of traditional instruments and vocalism in major opera houses, or adopt a more scholarly approach to historical performance practice.

By reproducing Rossini's text with such fidelity to the details of his notation, we can see not just *what* Rossini wrote, but also come to understand *why*. And here's a news flash: It turns out that he knew what he was doing, and was in fact a lot smarter than subsequent generations of publishers and performers felt inclined to concede. Appreciating this fact will encourage musicians to create interpretations truer to both the letter and the spirit--not just of this perennially refreshing masterpiece--but also of lesser-known works by Rossini and his contemporaries, on which this score shines a bright new light. The importance of Brauner's achievement in this last respect, especially, cannot be overestimated.

David Hurwitz