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RICHARD OSBORNE

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ROSSINI

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THE MASTER MUSICIANS

ROSSINI

His Life and Works

SECOND EDITION

RICHARD OSBORNE

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Osborne, Richard, 1943–
Rossini : his life and works / Richard Osborne.—2nd ed.
p. cm.— (The master musicians)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-518129-6
1. Rossini, Gioachino, 1792-1868.
2. Composers—Biography.
I. Title.
ML410.R8O9 2007
782.1092—dc22
[B] 2006030179

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

FOR
HAILZ-EMILY
AND
HARRY

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I love Italian opera—it's so reckless. Damn Wagner, and his bellowings at Fate and death. Damn Debussy, and his averted face. I like the Italians who run all on impulse, and don't care a damn about their immortal souls, and don't worry about the ultimate.

D. H. Lawrence,
letter to Louie Burrows,
1 April 1911

Tous les genres sont bons
Hors le genre ennuyeux.

Gioachino Rossini,
letter to Filippo Filippi,
26 August 1868

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Preface to First Edition (1985)

DESPITE THE WIDESPREAD POPULARITY OF A HANDFUL OF HIS works, Rossini has some claim to being the most neglected and generally misunderstood of all the great nineteenth-century composers. Indeed, it is a measure of this neglect that no full-length study of his life and works has appeared in English for over fifty years.

The reasons for the decline in Rossini's reputation in the years following his death will be touched on later; but it can be said at the outset that his art and personality have always been something of an enigma, naturally resistant to the quick and easy solutions readily on offer. The grounds for the popularity of his better-known works are not difficult to find. Rossini's most characteristic music is rhythmically vital, sensuous, and brilliant; 'full of the finest animal spirits', wrote Leigh Hunt in his *Autobiography* of 1850, 'yet capable of the noblest gravity'. It might also be agreed that Rossini's natural stance is a detached one, detached enough for his admirers to think him a fine ironist and for his detractors to dub him cynical. But the image which devolves from this—Rossini as a gifted but feckless amateur, who at an early age abandoned his career to the otiose pleasures of the table—bears no relation to the facts of the career as we have them. The man, who in his lifetime was happy to cultivate a mask of casual unconcern, was in reality an odd mixture of affability and reserve, industry and indolence, wit and melancholy. And there were other paradoxes, too. A classicist by training and a conservative by inclination, Rossini nonetheless broke the mould of the old Italian operatic order and laid the foundations for a new generation of romantically inspired music-dramatists. The persona foisted on the young Rossini by an adoring public was, in fact, little more than an agreeable fiction. Yet it was a fiction which provided Rossini with the protection he needed: both as a creative artist anxious to make his mark in a rumbustious and changing world, and as a man increasingly prey in his later years to debilitating bouts of physical and mental illness. The truth is, Rossini was not only one of the most influential, he was also one of the

most industrious and at the same time one of the most emotionally complex of nineteenth-century composers.

To understand this, it is necessary to look afresh at Rossini's life and at the conditions which existed in Italy and France during his long career; for without an informed knowledge of the context in which Rossini wrote, it is impossible to arrive at a secure idea of how the works themselves might best be assessed and revived. And unfashionable as it now is to separate out life and works, the works themselves merit separate, and chronological, treatment: for ease of reference and in order to avoid the kind of damaging generalisations which have bedevilled some earlier Rossini criticism. Only by considering each of Rossini's thirty-nine operas, his principal choral works, and the substantial body of late piano and vocal music can we properly prepare the ground for more informed, general discussion of his art and influence.

In adopting this approach, I have not, I hope, neglected some larger issues. The principal facets of Rossini's art—his mastery of the comic medium, the nature of his treatment of the seria and semiseria genres, and, above all, his evolution of those new and far-reaching forms which were to dominate Italian operatic procedures for the next fifty years—are dealt with in the context of the work-by-work guide to his output. Thus the chapters on such pivotal works as *Tancredi, L'italiana in Algeri, Il barbiere di Siviglia, La Cenerentola, La gazza ladra, Armida, Mosè in Egitto, Ermione, Maometto II,* and *Guillaume Tell* serve a double purpose: surveying the work in question, whilst at the same time examining issues central to any proper assessment of Rossini's style and method. I have included a separate chapter on Rossini's use of the overture, and another (chapter 18) setting out some of the problems we need to bear in mind as we approach the works.

Assessment of the operas continues to be hampered by the fact that none of us has seen the entire opus in the theatre, let alone the entire opus sympathetically produced and sung, with the right kind of orchestra in the right size auditorium. As Rossini himself affirmed in conversation with Wagner in 1860: 'It is only in the theatre that it is possible to bring equitable judgment to bear on music meant for the stage'. Nor do we have the benefit of a complete set of scholarly texts. Reading nineteenth-century vocal scores is no substitute for the detailed examination of the mass of materials—including the important variants sanctioned by Rossini himself—which goes to make up a critical edition. Happily, an edition is underway. And

though it will be many decades before its seventy or so volumes are complete, the initiative, begun at the Fondazione Rossini, Pesaro, in the early 1970s, has already yielded a mass of materials germane to a fresh understanding of Rossini and his music. This Rossini Edition, under the joint editorship of Bruno Cagli, Philip Gossett, and Alberto Zedda, is one of the great musicological enterprises of our time; without its example and without the detailed findings it has thrown up in the last ten years, this book could not have been written.

As to performances of Rossini's works, the situation is improving by the year and there is the added promise of significant bicentenary celebrations in 1992. In the 1950s and 1960s a number of Rossini's finest comic operas, including such rarities at the time as *Le Comte Ory* and *Il turco in Italia,* underwent stylish revival at Glyndebourne, an ideal Rossini theatre, and elsewhere. Nowadays we can, if we are so minded, travel to Pesaro itself, Rossini's birthplace, where each year the beautifully restored small Teatro Rossini becomes the focal point for a summer festival in which distinguished singers, players, and conductors, backed by the formidable scholarly resources of the Fondazione Rossini, come together to revive works which fifty years ago were written off as failures on no stronger ground than that of contemporary neglect. Meanwhile, the gramophone continues to provide inestimable help in bringing these productions to a wider audience.

The prospects, then, are bright for a just and sustained reappraisal of Rossini's music. In such circumstances enthusiasm for the Rossini cause should no doubt be tempered by a measure of Rossinian scepticism; but if the book which follows veers towards the former, I make no apology. The detractors have had their way with Rossini for far too long.

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Preface to Second Edition (2007)

NOT THE LEAST OF THE GLORIES OF THE *MASTER MUSICIANS* SERIES has been the willingness of its publishers and editors-in-chief to commission what at the time were ground-breaking works, and then to keep faith with them, allowing new editions as fresh scholarship and developing insights manifested themselves. One thinks of Edward Lockspeiser's *Debussy,* first published in 1936, eighteen years after the composer's death. A masterly study, it underwent three revisions by Lockspeiser himself, and a fourth, posthumously in 1979, by a close colleague. Winton Dean's *Bizet,* a not dissimilar project to *Rossini,* went through three significantly different editions. In the preface to the third, Dean noted: 'When the first edition of this book appeared in 1948, no adequate biography of Bizet and no thorough study of his music existed. He was not considered a worthy subject for research or a composer of much consequence'.

As late as 1979, the year I somewhat hesitantly accepted Stanley Sadie's invitation to begin work on *Rossini,* there were those who thought the composer an odd choice for so eminent a series. ('Rather scraping the barrel, don't you think?') Where Rossini studies were concerned, the centenary of his death in 1968 had been something of a turning point. Herbert Weinstock had published a compendious biography (essentially a life, no works), and a new generation of scholars was forging initiatives which would bear fruit in 1979–1980 in the form of the first publications in the Fondazione Rossini's *Edizione critica delle opere Gioachino Rossini* and the founding of the annual Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro. Without authoritative texts, and staged performances based on those texts, no body of operatic work can hope to survive, let alone thrive.

Though Stanley Sadie's timing was as impeccable as his judgment, the first edition of this book was, in the very nature of things, a somewhat speculative affair, not least where many of Rossini's works were concerned. Declaring *Ermione,* not seen on stage since 1819, to be a masterpiece on the basis of a reading of the libretto and an examination of a mid-nineteenth-

century vocal score in the confines of the British Library was, at best, a risky procedure. That work, happily, was 'read' right. The status of other works, not least those whose qualities require a measure of special pleading, was sometimes more difficult to determine in the absence of reliable editions, stage productions, recordings, and the larger perspectives such benefits bring. It is all rather easier now. By 2005, 29 volumes of the *Edizione* had been published by the Fondazione Rossini under the editorial direction of Philip Gossett. (From 2007, further volumes will be published, under Professor Gossett's direction, by Bährenreiter-Verlag, Kassel.) These volumes have proved invaluable in the preparation of this revised edition of *Rossini*. Even where expertly edited texts have not yet been published, the editorial work has, in many instances, been completed, performances staged, and recordings made. Twenty years on, none of Rossini's 39 operas is an unknown quantity.

In 1992 the Fondazione Rossini began publication of *Gioachino Rossini: Lettere e Documenti* under the editorship of Bruno Cagli and Sergio Ragni. At the time of this writing, four volumes have appeared, taking us to December 1830, the year after Rossini's retirement from operatic composition. Though it would be wrong to suggest that the volumes radically alter one's perception of Rossini's personality or achievement, the cumulative effect of (to date) 2,760 pages of absorbing text and meticulously researched background information is both daunting and exhilarating. Most remarkable of all is *Lettere ai genitori,* a supplementary volume of 246 previously unknown and unpublished letters written mainly by Rossini himself to his parents between 1812 and 1830. Published in 2004, three years after the letters' appearance in a London saleroom, the collection must rank as one of the most remarkable musicological finds in recent memory.

The first edition of *Rossini* was generously and enthusiastically received when it appeared in 1985, not least by the late John Rosselli, who suggested in the *Times Literary Supplement* that 'it deserves to become the standard account in English'. That may have been the impression it gave at the time, though I was acutely aware that if such an accolade were even to be partly merited, it could only be so at a later date, after judgment had been passed on a substantially revised volume. I am indebted to Bruce Phillips for first proposing that such a revision be undertaken, to Stanley Sadie for his support for the project, to Kim Robinson of Oxford University Press

in New York for turning the proposal into a reality, and to Suzanne Ryan for her overseeing of the publication of the finished revision.

This is to all intents and purposes a new book. One or two chapters on the better known operas—*Il barbiere di Siviglia, La Cenerentola*—have been only lightly revised, though the majority of the chapters in the 'works' section (formerly 19 chapters, now 22) have been reordered, recast, and substantially rewritten. The 'life' retains its original narrative trajectory, but it too has been substantially rewritten and, in many places, expanded to take account of new information and documentation. (The chapter on Rossini's Paris years 1824–1829 is now twice as long.) Revising an existing work is, of course, a very Rossinian activity. As he himself never tired of demonstrating, it is something of a privilege to be able to revisit old material. New contexts offer new opportunities, and the passage of time brings fresh perspectives. As Rossini knew only too well, what looks like a chore rapidly turns into an absorbing game, and ultimately into a labour of love.

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Key to Sigla

AGR	A. Azevedo. *G. Rossini: sa vie et ses oeuvres.* Paris, 1864.
BCRS	*Bollettino del centro rossiniano di studi.* Pesaro, 1955–.
BLJ	*Lord Byron. Letters and Journals,* vi, ed. L. Marchand. London, 1976.
CBI	Castil-Blaze. *L'Opéra Italien de 1548 à 1856.* Paris, 1856.
CCR	*The Cambridge Companion to Rossini,* ed. E. Senici. Cambridge, 2004.
CGV	*I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi,* ed. G. Cesari and A. Luzio. Milan, 1913.
CLR	G. Carpani. *Le rossiniane, ossia lettere musico-teatrali.* Padua, 1824.
EM	E. Michotte. *Richard Wagner's Visit to Rossini* and *An Evening at Rossini's in Beau-Sejour,* translated and annotated with an introduction and appendix by H. Weinstock. Chicago, 1968.
FBN	Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence.
FPO	Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Paris.
GDA	*Giornale dell'Adriatico,* Venice.
GRDS	*Giornale del Regno delle Due Sicilie,* Naples.
GREC	*Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini.* Pesaro, 1979–2005.
GRLD	*Gioachino Rossini: Lettere e documenti.* Pesaro, 1992–.
GRR	G. Radiciotti. *Gioacchino Rossini. Vita documentata, opere et influenza su l'arte.* 3 vols, Tivoli, 1927–1929.

HCR	H. Chorley. *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections.* London, 1862, 2/New York, 1926.
HFM	F. Hiller. *Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy: Briefe und Erinnerungen.* Cologne, 1874; translated M. E. von Glahn. London, 1874.
HPR	F. Hiller. 'Plaudereien mit Rossini (1856)', *Aus dem Tonleben unserer Zeit,* ii. Leipzig, 1868, 2/1871; BCRS 32 (1992), 63.
LRM	*Lettere di G. Rossini,* ed. G. Mazzatinti with F. and G. Manis. Florence, 1902, 2/Bologna, 1975.
MBT	*Giacomo Meyerbeer: Briefwechsel und Tagebücher,* ed. H. Becker. Berlin, 1960.
MLER	M. and L. Escudier. *Rossini: sa vie et ses oeuvres.* Paris, 1854.
QMMR	*Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review,* vi. London, 1824.
QR	*Quaderni rossiniani.* Pesaro, 1954–1976.
RGR	L. Rognoni. *Gioacchino Rossini.* Turin, 1968, 3/1977.
RRO	G. Roncaglia. *Rossini l'olimpico.* Milan, 1946.
SVR	Stendhal. *Vie de Rossini,* Paris, 1824, translated and annotated by R. N. Coe. London, 1970.
WER	R. Wagner. 'Eine Erinnerung an Rossini, 1868', *Richard Wagner's Prose Works,* ed. and trans. W.A. Ellis. London, 1895.
WRB	H. Weinstock. *Rossini: A biography.* New York, 1968.
WRLT	A. Wendt. *Rossinis Leben und Treiben.* Leipzig, 1824.
WRP	F. Walker. 'Rossiniana in the Piancastelli Collection'. *Monthly Musical Record,* xc, 1960.
ZBG	A. Zanolini. *Biografia di Gioachino Rossini.* Paris, 1836.

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ROSSINI

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CHAPTER ONE

The Formative Years (1792–1810)

LIKE MOST POPULAR RESORTS, PESARO HAS SUCCUMBED IN RECENT decades to a certain amount of commercialisation and concrete; yet the delectable small township which Stendhal evokes in the first chapter of his *Vie de Rossini* is still recognisably there, a modest port on the shores of the Adriatic, with a pleasing hinterland of woods and hills, Urbino not far distant. In Roman and Byzantine times, Pesaro was home to a prosperous colony of farming and fishing folk. Its more recent history dates from the restoration of papal power in Rome in the 1420s. Ruled for the best part of three hundred years by the Sforza and Della Rovere families from their castle fastness in Gradara, the community found itself transformed into a small but handsome Renaissance city.

In the eighteenth century it changed yet again. With the grand families gone, Pesaro was administered by bureaucrats from the Papal States, financially exacting but politically inert. By the end of the century there was an air of independence and self-sufficiency about the place. Business thrived, the classes mingled. The family into which Gioachino Antonio Rossini was born on 29 February 1792 lacked both status and money; yet at his baptism in the city's ancient cathedral later that same day two local grandees stood as godparents: the noble signor Conte Paolo Macchirelli Giordani, civic magistrate and city standard-bearer, and the noble signora Catterina Semproni-Giovannelli, a woman of 'culture and spirit', much given to making inflammatory speeches in the Jacobin cause.

Rossini's mother was a native of Pesaro but his father, the 27-year-old Giuseppe Rossini, came from Lugo, a small town to the north, 28 kilometres from Ravenna. He was an itinerant horn and trumpet player, who had arrived in Pesaro in 1788–1789 to play at the Teatro del Sole during the winter opera season. He must have liked what he saw, since he immediately sought an option on the position of *trombetta comunale* or 'town crier'. After backstairs dealing with the incumbent, Luigi Ricci, the post was vacated early in 1790 on terms favourable to Ricci. Giuseppe applied for release from his temporary position with the garrison band in Ferrara but was refused. Infuriated, and perhaps already a little drunk with revolutionary fervour, he remonstrated with the authorities and was imprisoned for insubordination. The subsequent imbroglio was a subject fit for one of his son's operas: Ricci's dismissal for attempting to barter a public office, Giuseppe's eventual release from prison, his apology to the Pesaro authorities, and his subsequent appointment to the post. The picture that emerges from this incident is of a splendidly robust character: earthy and energetic, querulous, a shade naif perhaps, but a natural improviser, an honest schemer.

'Vivazza', as Giuseppe was known to his friends, lodged with the Guidarini family. Domenico Guidarini, a baker by trade, had married Lucia Romagnoli, whose family came from Urbino. There were four children: a son and three daughters, of whom Anna was the eldest. The family supplemented their income by running a modest pensione in the house they shared in the Via del Fallo. Bed and breakfast was provided, and occasionally other services too. (By the late 1790s, Anna's younger sister, Annunziata, had a police record as a prostitute.) Anna herself became pregnant in the summer of 1791 shortly before her twentieth birthday. She and Giuseppe married in Pesaro Cathedral on 24 September 1791. Five months later she gave birth to her only child.

In his youth, Rossini had something of his mother's charm, grace, and feminine good looks. In later years he came more and more to resemble his father: the photographs of the 1850s show us a heavier, sturdier, more resilient figure, thinner-lipped but still with a lively, enquiring, ironic gaze.[1] (Rumours persisted that the real father was an aristocrat, a member of the Perticari family, perhaps. This is improbable. Rossini's remark 'Sono

[1] See plates 2, 3, and 18.

figlio di un corna', 'I'm the son of a horn', was a pun, not a complaint.) Rossini's relationship with his parents was a close one, rather closer than theirs to one another. The grief he exhibited at the time of his mother's death in 1827, and his father's in 1839, is sufficient testimony to the depth of that relationship. When Wagner praised William Tell's aria 'Sois immobile' during the conversation he had with Rossini in Paris in 1860, Rossini commented: 'I'll tell you that the feeling which moved me most in my life was the love I had for my mother and my father, and they repaid it at a usurer's rate of interest, I'm happy to tell you. It was there, I think, that I found the note that I needed for this scene of the apple in *Guillaume Tell*.'[2]

Giuseppe's enthusiasm for the republican cause sweeping Europe in the wake of the French Revolution was shared by many of Pesaro's citizens, who were similarly disenchanted with the dead hand of papal rule. It was, nonetheless, a dangerous game for Giuseppe to be playing. French forces had first entered Italy in 1792; four years later, they took Bologna and Ferrara. When troops of the pro-French Legione Lombardi marched into Pesaro in February 1797, Giuseppe was given advance intelligence of their arrival by their commander, Giuseppe Lechi. They met minimal resistance.

Napoleon's establishment of a Cisalpine republic of annexed northern states raised hopes that an independent Italian republic built on French lines might one day become a reality. Then in 1799 the Austro-Russian armies mounted a successful counteroffensive. Prominent republicans—among them Pesaro's high-profile city trumpeter, 'the excellent patriot Rossini'—were rounded up, interrogated, and imprisoned. Giuseppe remained in prison until Austria's defeat by the French at the battle of Marengo the following June. It was a sobering experience for a man with a wife and child to support; the following year he applied for a teaching position at Bologna's Accademia Filarmonica.

For the child Rossini, it was the best of times, the worst of times, exciting and disorientating. In his middle years he became ultraconservative. The revolutions of 1830 and 1848 coming in the wake of the long-drawn-out Napoleonic wars, his own exacerbated nerves, and the drift towards the right which tends to come naturally with age gave him a not unreasonable loathing of those who would seek endlessly to disorder the world. Yet, looking back on the 1790s, he concluded that the events of that turbulent

[2] EM, 69–70.

decade had changed his life for the better. 'Without the French invasion of Italy,' he told his biographer Alexis Azevedo, 'I would probably have been an apothecary or olive-oil merchant.'[3]

Italian society certainly began to change in the late 1790s, not least in the arts, where a process of democratisation set in. Admission to academic institutions became easier for ordinary folk; new music was encouraged from a wider variety of sources; ticket prices fell; women found it easier to take paid employment on the stage. This last development had enormous repercussions for the Rossini family, since it allowed Anna Rossini to earn useful money as a singer. She began her theatrical career at Ancona's Teatro della Fenice, appearing as second soprano in comic operas by Paisiello, Cimarosa, and Martini during the 1797–1798 carnival season; she ended it in the autumn of 1808 at the Teatro Comunale, Bagnacavallo, as the house's *prima donna assoluta* in performances of Mayr's *Che originali*. She had some fifteen roles in her repertory, all of them in comic operas. Rossini recalled that she had a naturally expressive voice, 'sweet like her appearance'. She could not read music, but she had a good ear and, like her son, a remarkable memory. Rossini told his friend the composer Ferdinand Hiller that she sang 'out of necessity' at a time when the family was forced to leave Pesaro.[4] This statement was not strictly true. Anna began her professional career eighteen months before the financial crisis precipitated by Giuseppe's imprisonment and a whole four years before the family's move to Lugo.

After their marriage, the Rossinis had moved to rooms in a house on Via del Duomo. When both parents were away, Gioachino was looked after by one of his grandmothers or by his aunt. If the reminiscences of his school friend Francesco Genari are to be believed, the young Rossini was a high-spirited scamp, much given to stone-throwing and the raiding of cruets in the cathedral sanctuary. He was nonetheless made to attend the local community school, where he was given a basic grounding in reading and writing, as well as instruction in mathematics, Latin, and decorative handwriting. It was, at best, half an education. (In his early years his written Italian was poor, yet in later life he wrote and spoke excellent French.) By the time of his tenth birthday, it was not unusual for his mother to take

[3] AGR, 21.

[4] HPR/BCRS, 78.

him on tour with her. This was an education in itself. By the age of 14, he already had the theatre in his blood.

Rossini's first music teacher was his father. Later, during a time when he was briefly boarded out in Bologna, he took instruction from maestro al cembalo, Giuseppe Prinetti. According to Rossini, Prinetti slept upright among the colonnades of the city and made ends meet by distilling brandy and giving keyboard lessons. In Lugo, Rossini was taught by two priests, Father Giovanni Sassoli and the talented and musically gifted Canon Giuseppe Malerbi, who taught composition and singing. The Palazzo Malerbi became a second home to the young Rossini. For the best part of three years he sang, played, and read his way through the Malerbi library: a collection of music, much of it by Haydn and Mozart, which was to leave a permanent mark on his compositional style. Another inhabitant of the palazzo was Giuseppe's brother, Luigi, a lively, caustic man whose music is said to have reflected his dispassionate view of the world. The Rossini family often dined at the Malerbi house. For young Gioachino, it was an early introduction to high living and the pleasures of the table.

In Imola in 1804 a notice was posted announcing a concert at the Teatro Comunale on the evening of 22 April. It promised arias to be sung by 'Cittad. Anna Rossini', a duetto in full costume in which she would be joined by her son, and a 'Cavatina cantata dal Citt. Gioachino Rossini', also costumed, and in the buffo style. Rossini's career as a composer was beginning. That same summer he wrote a set of six *sonate a quattro* for two violins, cello, and double bass for Agostino Triossi, a wealthy young merchant and follower of the Napoleonic cause, who had acquired land and a country home in the village of Conventello near Ravenna. Rossini in his later years would sometimes add ironically affectionate attestations to his autograph manuscripts. On a manuscript copy of the *sonate a quattro* he wrote:

> First violin, second violin, violoncello, and contrabass parts for six horrendous sonatas composed by me at the country house (near Ravenna) of my friend and patron Agostino Triossi, at the most youthful age, having not even had a lesson in thorough-bass. They were all composed and copied in three days and performed in a doggish way by Triossi, contrabass; Morini (his cousin), first violin; the latter's brother, violoncello; and the second violin by myself, who was, to tell the truth, the least doggish.[5]

[5] A. Casella, *Rossiniana* (Bologna, 1942), 37–39.

The sonatas are economically written and shrewdly paced. A mordant wit goes hand in hand with a certain sensuous lyricism, short-breathed but sweet. There is an easy mastery of simple forms, including the implied structuring of tonal contrasts, and an acute ear for the interplay of instruments of disparate tonal volumes. Very few composers speak with a voice that is recognisably their own in the prepubescent stage of their career; yet in these six string sonatas, 'innocent even when roguish and knowing',[6] Rossini does just that.

In 1804 the Rossinis decided to settle in Bologna ('the headquarters of music in Italy', as Stendhal dubbed it[7]), the better to ensure the next stage of Gioachino's education. The city's prestigious Accademia Filarmonica, founded in 1666, had won international fame in the middle years of the eighteenth century during the reign of the celebrated teacher and scholar Padre Giovanni Battista Martini. In 1749 Pope Benedict XIV granted it parity with Rome's Accademia di S. Cecilia; in 1770 the 14-year-old Mozart became an academician after a brief period of study with Martini. That fact alone would have been sufficient to commend the place to Rossini. As he later observed, Mozart was 'the inspiration of my youth, the desperation of my mature years, and the consolation of my old age'.

The home Rossini shared with his mother was a cramped, second-floor room in Strada Maggiore close to the Bologna ghetto. It was inadequate, but it was a base. In the autumn of 1805 he appeared on stage at Bologna's Teatro del Corso. The work was Paër's popular opera semiseria, *Camilla*. Rossini, who sang the role of the heroine's son, Adolfo, is said to have shown great ardour in rushing into the arms of the ampler of the two prima donnas engaged for the production's extended run. In April 1806, a month after his fourteenth birthday, he sang the alto role of Mary Magdalene in a Good Friday performance of *La passione di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo* by Martini's pupil and confidant Padre Stanislao Mattei, professor of counterpoint and composition at the Accademia's newly founded Liceo Musicale. This was one of Rossini's last outings as an alto; at a concert given at the Accademia on 8 August 1806 he is billed as a tenor.

[6] R. Holloway, *The Spectator*, 31 March 2001.

[7] SVR, 110.

Rossini's formal admission to the Accademia took place on 24 June 1806. The minutes of the assembly read as follows:

> The petition of Sig.r Gioachino Rossini, Bolognese, approved for his practice of the Musical Art of Singing, in view of which he requests admission to our Academy, was read. The same is admitted by acclamation, being held excused from the burden of any Contribution; and this in view of the regard merited in his Progress in the Profession which he practises to such praise.[8]

Rossini was too young to have voting rights. Initially he was admitted only to the singing class, though his progress to other disciplines was rapid. During his four years at the academy, his teachers included Mattei's deputy Angelo Tesei, whose subjects were 'singing, solfeggio, figured bass and cembalo accompaniment [figured harmony]', the tenor Matteo Babini, and Mattei himself.

It is sometimes said that Rossini's real teachers continued to be Haydn and Mozart. There is an element of truth in this claim. Their forms provided him with lively and lucid models, while the music itself was rich in felicitous melody and orchestration. Haydn in particular seems to have been a kindred spirit. Echoes of his string quartets, oratorios, and cantatas abound in Rossini's compositions. Here was a man of energy and wit, a 'natural' composer (more 'naif' than 'sentimental', to use Schiller's useful distinction) with whom Rossini could readily identify. As a student, Rossini even directed a certain amount of Haydn's music. In November 1809 the Accademia Concordi'—in effect, the 'Bologna Haydn Society', which Mattei's assistant, Tommaso Marchesi, had founded the previous year—invited him to conduct some of their concerts.

The teachers at the Liceo Musicale did much to direct Rossini's enthusiasms. He learned from them what he needed to learn: simple though not necessarily conservative harmonic procedures, clear part-writing, and how to develop still further his already acute ear for instrumental sonorities. More esoteric disciplines such as canon and fugue he found less meaningful. He was not, however, a poor student. Even when he was spending a good deal of time in local opera houses working as a répétiteur and maestro al cembalo, he had a tolerably good attendance record. Padre Mattei

[8] GRLD, I, 8–9.

may well have 'hurled anathema' at him, calling him 'the dishonour of the school', but he eventually passed out of the academy in August 1810 with an 'honourable mention in the school of counterpoint'.[9]

Schoolboy exercises rarely deliver work of permanent worth. This is certainly true of the majority of the music Rossini wrote during his years at the Liceo, though one piece does perhaps merit an occasional outing: the charming short cantata *Il pianto di Armonia sulla morte di Orfeo,* which the 16-year-old Rossini wrote for the Liceo's end-of-year *accademia* on 11 August 1808. The text by Girolamo Ruggia presents Harmony (a tenor) and a group of nymphs (Rossini uses a male chorus) lamenting the death of Orpheus, the god of harmony. There are four movements, all neatly crafted. What stands out is the quality of the instrumental writing: a bustling brief overture, a beguilingly lovely obbligato cello in the recitative 'Ma tu che desti già sì dolce suono', and a virtuoso horn contribution ('Go on, Dad, play that', you can hear Rossini telling his father) in the concluding aria con coro.

This combination of rhythmic energy and lyric beauty is what distinguishes the best of the sacred music Rossini wrote during his time at the Liceo. A number of compositions have been excavated and revived in various guises (*Messa di Bologna, Messa di Ravenna, Messa di Rimini*), though establishing precisely what Rossini wrote, when, or for whom is far from easy. Much of this music was written 'in house' by groups of students for performance in local churches, generally in two sections, occasionally in three, if the 'Credo' was being set in addition to the 'Kyrie' and 'Gloria'. Even where a complete autograph manuscript exists, as is the case with the *Messa di Milano* (so-called because that is where the manuscript is lodged), it is impossible to prove that it is a single work, as opposed to a collection of individual movements brought together for the purpose of providing one.

Assembled and reordered, the Milan mass requires three soloists (mezzo soprano, tenor, bass), a three-part male chorus, and various permutations of winds and strings. The C minor 'Kyrie' broods after the manner of late Mozart, then blazes at its subsequent return. The 'Christe eleison' is a tenor aria in C. The 'Gloria' is jolly and brilliant yet not vapid, thanks to the

[9] N. Gallino, 'Lo "Scuolaro" Rossini e la musica strumentale al liceo di Bologna', BCRS 33 (1993), 35–36.

robustness of the writing for the two male soloists and the close-gearing of the interventions of the male chorus. In the 'Credo' and 'Resurrexit' the chorus ends up sounding like a band of operatic brigands. With no real contrapuntal skills to fall back on, Rossini simply fails to develop the text. The 'Et vitam venturi saeculi' does strike a properly ecclesiastical note, but this, it turns out, is largely the work of Rossini's copyist. What is striking about the *Messa di Milano* is the eloquence of the writing for the mezzo-soprano. There are three arias: 'Laudamus', 'Qui tollis' (with violin obbligato), and 'Crucifixus'. We know that Rossini loved the mezzo or contralto voice above others—rich, sensual, and, in this context, naturally self-abasing—and here is early proof of the fact.

The overtures Rossini wrote during his time at the Liceo have their own intrinsic interest, if only because this was the form destined to make its author world famous. The *Redattore del Reno* recognised as much after the work we now know as the *Bologna* overture was played at a gathering of Signora Giorgi's Accademia Polinniaca on the evening of 23 December 1808. Referring to Rossini as 'a young man of whom much is hoped', the newspaper reported: 'The sinfonia was found harmonious beyond all belief. Its type is altogether new, and the composer garnered unanimous applause'. This was not Rossini's first such overture: the spirited and charming *Sinfonia al Conventello* (another Triossi commission) dates from 1806–1807. In neither piece is everything quite as it should be from the formal point of view (in the *Sinfonia al Conventello* the second subject turns up on a solo cello in the wrong key), but the music's novelty and charm are the thing. The melodic invention was also of a high order, so much so that Rossini reused two of the ideas: the first theme of the *Overture al Conventello* in the overture to *Il Signor Bruschino,* and the second theme of the *Bologna* overture in the overture to *L'inganno felice.* The Overture in E flat (1809) was reused in 1810, with only minor alterations, in Rossini's first professional opera, *La cambiale di matrimonio.* Some other purely instrumental pieces have less bearing on Rossini's future career and are more difficult to date. These include the *Variazioni a più istrumenti obbligati,* and the *Variazioni a clarinetto,* a work generally attributed to 1809–1810, two years before clarinet classes were formally instituted at the Liceo.

What Rossini really wanted to do by 1810 was write operas, rather better operas, perhaps, than the majority of those his mother had performed

or he himself had accompanied. Where opera buffa was concerned, he already knew a substantial cross-section of the repertory. His mother had sung in opere buffe by Cimarosa, Fioravanti, Gazzaniga, Gardi, Martini, Mayr, Mosca, Paisiello, and Weigl; he himself had been maestro al cembalo for performance of works by Guglielmi, Orlandi, Paër, and Sarti, as well as Cimarosa and Weigl. He had also started composing for the stage. Two pieces which appeared on Liceo programmes in the summer of 1810 had already been put to other uses. One was a cavatina for tenor, 'Dolci aurette che spirate', which appears to have been inserted into the 1809–1810 Ferrara revival of Ferdinando Orlandi's *Podestà di Chioggia,* for which Rossini was the maestro al cembalo. The other was a much admired vocal quartet, in all probability 'Donami omai Siveno' from the opera *Demetrio e Polibio,* which Rossini wrote for the Mombelli family at around this time. It was this of which Stendhal said, 'If Rossini had composed nothing save this one quartet, Mozart and Cimarosa would still have recognised in him a man who was their equal as an artist'.[10] Rossini told Hiller that his singing teacher, Matteo Babini, had persuaded him to avoid certain melodic clichés in writing the piece.[11]

The father of the Mombelli troupe, Domenico, was an admired opera seria tenor, who was still going strong in his 50s. A widower (his first wife, Luisa Laschi, had created the role of the Countess in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*), he had married Vincenzina Viganò, a niece of Boccherini and sister of the celebrated choreographer Salvatore Viganò. Rossini claimed that he first encountered the troupe when a rich patroness asked him to acquire a copy of an aria from an opera by Portogallo which the Mombellis were performing.[12] The copyist declined to provide him with the material, as did Mombelli. Undaunted, Rossini returned to the opera house and wrote out the piece from memory. Mombelli was duly impressed, though, as Rossini later remarked, 'It wasn't exactly *Le nozze di Figaro!*'[13] Mombelli's wife provided the libretto for *Demetrio e Polibio,* which the troupe eventually staged in Rome in 1812.

[10] SVR, 142.

[11] HPR/BCRS, 82.

[12] They performed Portogallo's *Omar, re di Termagene* in Bologna in 1810; Rossini's account implies a rather earlier date.

[13] HPR/BCRS, 82.

Among the many fine singers Rossini heard or played for in and around Bologna during his time at the Liceo, two were especially important: the celebrated castrato Giovan Battista Velluti, and a rising star of the operatic scene, the prodigiously gifted 22-year-old Spanish-born soprano Isabella Colbran, whom Rossini would later write for and eventually marry. Colbran first sang in Bologna in April 1807, having been admitted to the Accademia Filarmonica in her absence the previous November. On that first visit, she sang only recitals. In the summer of 1809 she appeared on stage (with Velluti) at the Teatro Comunale in performances of Nicolini's *Trajano in Dacia* and Cimarosa's *Artemisia*. Hearing Colbran and Velluti working together would have been an astonishing experience for Rossini: the old order of castrati, now doomed to extinction but leaving behind a sense of the brilliance, tonal homogeneity, and stylistic address of the old bel canto style, side by side with the new order of singing actresses whose brilliantly developed coloratura techniques were in some sense a bequest from the castrati. (Colbran herself had studied in Paris with Girolamo Crescentini.) Years later Rossini recalled the impression the castrati made on him:

> I have never forgotten them. The purity, the miraculous flexibility of those voices and, above all, their profoundly penetrating accent—all that moved and fascinated me more than I can tell. I should add that I myself wrote a role for one of them, one of the last but not of the least—Velluti. That was in my opera *Aureliano in Palmira*.[14]

For Rossini, bel canto skills rested on three elements: the instrument itself (what he called 'the Stradivarius'), technical skill, and style ('taste' and 'feeling'). For the finest singers, the acquisition of the first element, the effortless emission of finely equalised tone, required years of work. Rossini told Wagner in Paris in 1860:

> [The castrati] were incomparable teachers. . . . The teaching of singing in the master schools attached to the churches, and supported at the churches' expense generally, was entrusted to them. Some of these schools were famous. They were real singing academies. The pupils flocked to them, and some of them abandoned the choir loft to devote themselves to theatrical careers. But

[14] EM, 109.

> after a new political regime was installed throughout Italy by my restless contemporaries, the master schools were suppressed and replaced by conservatoires in which, though good traditions existed, absolutely nothing of bel canto was conserved.[15]

Rossini used to claim that he himself had come 'within a hair's breadth of belonging to that famous corporation, or, let us say, decorporation'. His maternal uncle, Francesco Maria Guidarini, had suggested that the boy be castrated on the ground that the majority of operatic castrati lived in great opulence. It was an argument which might have carried weight within a less well-to-do family fifty years earlier. According to Rossini, 'my brave mother would not consent at any price'.[16] By the 1790s, that was the view of most Italian families and, indeed, of their political masters in the Cisalpine Republic, who formally outlawed the practice.

Rossini's decision not to return to the Liceo after the summer of 1810 was soundly based. It is difficult to see what practical benefit he would have reaped from a two-year postgraduate course in canon and plainsong. What he required was gainful employment. This came in the form of a recommendation from friends of his parents, the soprano Rosa Morandi and her husband, Giovanni, to Venetian impresario Antonio Cera. Rosa Morandi was appearing with Cera's company at the Teatro San Moisè. When it became clear that the season was in difficulty after a string of failures, Rossini's name was mentioned as someone who might write for them. Cera knew who he was. During his fledgling career as a maestro al cembalo, Rossini had been rebuked for laughing out loud when the soprano Adelaide Carpano, more famous for her beauty than her technique, had attempted a harmonically implausible cadenza during a performance at Senigallia's Teatro La Fenice. Carpano's 'protector' was the Marchese Francesco Cavalli, Cera's predecessor at the San Moisè, a man of power and influence, who had not been amused. Cera took the Morandis' advice and made the young scamp an offer.

It was an ideal beginning for Rossini. A small theatre, run on a shoestring, with a tolerably good company (six singers, a small orchestra, no chorus) was the perfect place for an unostentatious debut. The text he was

[15] EM, 74–75.

[16] EM, 109–10.

given—a one-act comedy featuring a Canadian businessman, an English merchant, and a pair of frustrated lovers—was no better and no worse than dozens of such scenarios extant at the time. What was different was Rossini's music, which astounded the theatre's unsuspecting clientele with its rhythmic pizzazz, sensuous lyricism, and dispassionate wit. With characteristic aplomb, he scored a bull's-eye at his first attempt.

CHAPTER TWO

Venice and Milan (1811–1814)

ROSSINI RETURNED HOME FROM VENICE WITH MONEY IN HIS pocket and the hope of a new commission. Unfortunately, Bologna was no longer the best place to be. By 1811 Milan had taken over as continental Europe's principal meeting place for impresarios and agents. Bologna was becoming a bit of a backwater. While he waited, Rossini rehearsed and directed an Italian-language performance of Haydn's *The Seasons* sponsored by the Accademia dei Concordi. He may also have written the six-movement showpiece cantata for soprano, chorus, and orchestra, *La morte di Didone* ('The Death of Dido'), which he presented to Domenico Mombelli's daughter, Ester. If he did write it in 1811, it offers a remarkable glimpse of things to come.[1]

A commission did eventually arrive. In October the local press reported 'a great flood of curiosity' sweeping Bologna after the announcement that the city's newest venue, the Teatro del Corso, was about to stage a two-act opera by Rossini. It was entitled *L'equivoco stravagante* ('The Strange Misunderstanding'), though the first-night audience may well have been wondering what this eponymous misunderstanding was, the librettist having omitted to include any misunderstandings, strange or otherwise, in the opera's opening act. It is not until act 2 that the trap is sprung by a sharp-

[1] Ester Mombelli performed the cantata at a benefit concert in Venice in 1818 when she was 24. Manuscript and printed sources suggest an earlier date of composition and rather more performances than this only known instance would suggest.

witted servant who decides to cool the ardour of the rich but dim suitor of his master's daughter by suggesting that she is a man in drag: a castrato (or 'musico', as they were euphemistically known) and an army deserter to boot.

Since the Napoleonic regime had outlawed castration, alarm bells should have rung in the local prefecture the moment the libretto was submitted. As things turned out, the censor issued a licence, only to regret it the moment the opera was staged. On 29 October, the politically compliant *Redattore del Reno* reported:

> That the libretto is, if you'll permit me, *wicked* is demonstrated by the decision taken by the ever watchful authorities, who have prohibited any further performances. Out of respect for the composer, three performances had been allowed after certain expressions, which may have seemed tolerable on the page but which were intolerable when sung, had been corrected and re-corrected. However, since the plot centres on a supposed mutilation which gives rise to a good deal of dubious language, mutilating parts of the libretto is no answer. To root out the scandal, it is necessary to suppress the libretto entirely.

The phrase 'expressions which may have seemed tolerable on the page but which were intolerable when sung' is odd. A line of recitative such as 'La credono gallina, ed è un cappone' ('I thought she was a hen and it turns out she's a capon') is either offensive or it isn't. One can only assume that the actor's gestures or Rossini's keyboard improvisations were a good deal more graphic than the line itself. Either that or the authorities were merely making the best of a bad job—finding an excuse to close down an already popular show they should not have licensed in the first place.

For the 19-year-old composer, it was no more than a strategic setback. The opera had been staged. What's more, he had made the acquaintance of a remarkable singing actress, Maria Marcolini. A gifted contralto and a fearless virtuoso, Marcolini relished the kind of showpiece finales Rossini was capable of writing for her, not least when the situation required her to don male attire and stride the stage as a lusty young blade. They may well have been lovers. (Rossini is said to have lost his virginity early.) 'It was at *her* side, upon *her* piano, and within the walls of *her* country-house at Bologna', fantasised Stendhal, 'that he wrote some of his finest pages.'[2]

[2] SVR, 97.

Sceptical as one may be about the Freudian idea that artists are stimulated only by a desire for power, wealth, fame, and the love of women, it would be idle to pretend that Rossini's liaison with Marcolini was not a stimulus. Over the next three years he would create a succession of important roles for her.

Though *L'equivoco stravagante* was taken off after three performances, Rossini stayed in Bologna to direct a number of other operas at the Teatro del Corso. During the dress rehearsal of *Trionfo di Quinto Fabio* by Domenico Puccini (grandfather of the more famous Puccini), a dispute broke out with the chorus over an aria Rossini had added for another Marcolini speciality, her entry on horseback in the final scene. Voices were raised, fists flew, and Rossini brandished a cudgel. He was arrested and ordered to keep the peace, the authorities being understandably reluctant to bring the season to a premature close by putting him behind bars. The following month he had the opportunity to escape Bologna altogether. Venice's Teatro San Moisè decided to invite him back.

Venice had also become something of a backwater. Years of unabashed hedonism had sapped the political will of this once indomitable republic. In May 1797 its demoralised citizens had allowed 3,000 French troops to sail through the Porto di Lido and occupy the Piazza San Marco. Thereafter the French and Austrians played Box and Cox with the city until it secured its freedom as part of the newly formed kingdom of Italy in 1866. Not that occupation did anything to dim Venice's long-standing love affair with music. 'Of all the lands of Italy,' wrote Stendhal 'Venetia stands supreme in the sureness of its taste and the keenness of its appreciation of music written for the human voice.'[3] Rossini's ebullient outpourings were just what the city needed to divert its attention from the somewhat grim and ignominious position in which it now found itself. As for Rossini, he would receive no fewer than six commissions in fifteen months, culminating in the twin triumphs of *Tancredi* and *L'italiana in Algeri* in the spring of 1813. He would leave the city a made man.

The first of the San Moisè operas, the superbly crafted one-act comic melodrama *L'inganno felice,* set him on the right track. The audience loved it ('doves, canaries and pheasants' were loosed into the auditorium after

[3] SVR, 50.