

Overture to *The Barber of Seville*—Gioachino Rossini

There are any numbers of great composers who have been able to produce overtures that entertain, lift the spirits, and bring musical “sizzle” to a symphony concert. But almost none excel those of Gioachino Rossini in sparkle, wit, and vivacity. Their droll wit, sly contrasts of mood, and careening drive to the end are simply inimitable. From their conception for Italian opera audiences primarily in the first decade of the nineteenth century, to their familiar use as springboards for movie and television high jinks today, they simply endure.

Rossini was the most important composer of nineteenth-century Italian opera before Giuseppe Verdi. And while he is historically significant for his innovations in serious Italian opera, clearly his *opere buffe*, or comic operas, are his lasting contributions for opera fans everywhere. These are works of his early maturity, roughly before 1820, before he began to focus upon a more serious style. American audiences are most familiar with *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (1813) and *The Barber of Seville* (1816), but there are other masterpieces, as well. After wide European success in the 1820s, Rossini wangled a lifetime annuity from the French government about the time of the composition of his crowning achievement, *William Tell* (1829)—a French grand opera—and promptly retired at the age of thirty-seven. For the next forty-odd years he enjoyed the largess of the French government, and composed very little, certainly no major operas. It’s not that he was lazy, although a famous anecdote relates that while composing in bed (which he usually did) he dropped an unfinished aria on the floor, and rather than go to the trouble of getting up to retrieve it, he simply composed another one! In his defense, we should recognize how much work that he had accomplished early: 34 operas by the time that he was 31.

Rossini’s first opera was composed in 1810, and by the time of the composition of *The Barber of Seville*, his fame and recognition was formidable. *The Barber of Seville* is perhaps the greatest comic opera ever written, and the overture is a perfect reflection of all that made it a masterpiece of élan, sparkle, and wit. To be sure, his early operas gradually developed in quality, but he was a master of the composition of their overtures from the beginning. It must be observed that the overture to *The Barber of Seville* was not composed for the opera with which it is associated, but was used earlier in two other of his operas. It contains no themes from the eponymous opera.

Most of his overtures generally follow a pattern, beginning with a slow introduction, usually featuring a cantabile melody in a woodwind instrument. The main, fast section soon follows, in which the first tune is usually taken by the strings (but not always, as in this particular overture), and the second one by the winds. There is no development in this truncated sonata form, with the work ending with a recapitulation. The most striking and beloved characteristic is the famous “Rossini *crescendo*” —most often featuring the winds—that keeps repeating a main motive, gradually getting louder and louder, as the harmony swings like a pendulum between the tonic and dominant. Arias in his operas often use the technique to stunning dramatic effect, and its appearance in the overtures is no less smashing. It’s easy to see why Rossini is perhaps the *non plus ultra* of composers who makes the most of simple ideas.

Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 35—Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Most probably, no composer other than Beethoven has enjoyed the popularity in this country of that of Pyotr Tchaikovsky. His reputation has been secure since his early maturity, and yet, it is equally true that no other major modern composer has endured the distortions and indignities as that imposed upon his personality and personal life after his death. A welter of factors has been trotted out to “explain” his art and its personal genesis: his sexuality, politics, religious beliefs, and social class. Every generation of musicologists--radical and otherwise--social commentators, and political ideologues has taken its shots at the man. And it must be said, chief among the negative attitudes simply has been the implication that his music is vulgar, overly emotional, and void of intellectual attainment--all clearly a reflection of the composer, himself!

That said, it is refreshing to see that much of the critical persiflage of the last century is now being replaced by a clearer, less ideologically freighted appreciation. He is historically important for his integration of the symphonic tradition of Beethoven and Schumann into the colorful, nationalistic atmosphere of Russia. But, ultimately it is the eloquence and technical mastery of his compositions that founded his lasting popularity. He was blessed with an extraordinary gift for melodic imagination, and learned to use it in contexts of structural integrity--not a given among the world's great melodists.

The violin concerto was written in 1878 during a time of growing success as a composer, after having lived in Moscow for slightly over a decade. During that time he had composed four of his six symphonies, his first piano concerto, and other important works. However, composition of the violin concerto is associated with one of the most controversial and unfortunate episodes in Tchaikovsky's life--his ill-fated marriage with Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova. It was a hurried affair, with neither party's motives exactly clear even today, after endless sifting of the evidence. It lasted only two months, but they never divorced. Thereafter, Tchaikovsky underwent a long-term re-orientation in his artistic output.

After returning from recuperation in Switzerland from the marriage, Tchaikovsky set to work on the concerto, collaborating with a young violinist, Iosif Kotek, who had been a student of his at the Moscow Conservatory. It was completed swiftly, but the première was delayed, owing to the difficulty of finding a violinist who was either willing--or able-- to perform it. It finally received its first public performance in Vienna in 1881. The ensuing review by the famous Viennese critic, Eduard Hanslick (you may remember his difficulties with Richard Wagner) has gone down in journalistic history. Among his comments were that in the work “the violin . . . is beaten black and blue;” that the finale has the “brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian holiday” with “savagely vulgar faces . . . curses . . . and vodka.” “Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks in the ear.”

Well, today of course, we all know better. It is one of the most difficult of violin concertos, and Tchaikovsky's inimitable melodic gift is omnipresent. It is a masterpiece, even though it never achieves the traditional balanced give and take expected between orchestra and soloist. Its effervescence, bravura, and appealing melodies have earned it a lasting place in the repertoire.

The first movement begins softly in the orchestra, with a clear theme—although it’s not the main one—followed shortly by intimations of the real main theme. All of this doesn’t last long, for Tchaikovsky, unlike many of his peers, doesn’t believe in a long introduction before the soloist enters. In this case, after a few meditative bars, the solo violin plunges right in to what is clearly the main theme. Tchaikovsky’s themes are always clear, aren’t they? There is, of course, a second theme, too, but the main point here is that the orchestra’s rôle is definitely subordinate to the soloist, who carries the tunes throughout. Clearly apparent, as well, is the virtuosity necessary to bring off the violin part, which is a combination of the famed Tchaikovsky lyricism and a fiery intensity of challenging melodic figurations. The cadenza before the recapitulation is Tchaikovsky’s and a more formidable one would be hard to find. For those who revel in violin pyrotechnics, this is your *métier*! The driving gallop to the end of the movement is the pure Tchaikovsky familiar to all who know his other orchestra works.

The woodwind section intones a little organ-like chorale to introduce the entry of the soloist in the slow movement. The mood here is not one of tragedy or deep reflection, but seemingly one of a kind of pastoral rhapsody, and that would be altogether appropriate, considering the beauty of the Swiss countryside in which it was conceived. An aura of improvisation pervades this relatively brief interlude, with ample opportunities for some exchanges between the soloist and the woodwinds. The woodwinds end the movement, as they began it, and without a break, we’re plunged immediately into the last movement. After a few cadenza-like moments wherein the soloist toys with the main theme, it’s off to the races. But it’s not an unalloyed dash to the end, for the composer wisely intersperses quiet moments that only enhance the return of the dizzying pyrotechnics. So back and forth we go, always driven by the *élan* and panache of Tchaikovsky’s inimitable skill at stirring up a climatic finish.

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, op. 92—Ludwig van Beethoven

This work is simply a gem, and while certainly well known, deserves to be even better appreciated by concert audiences. Beethoven, himself, famously said that it was one of his best works. And, unlike so many works of genius that initially were pearls cast before swine, everybody knew on the spot that this work was great. It is commonplace, of course, for scholars to think of Beethoven’s musical life in three great periods—the last being the time of compositions that “challenge” comprehension and appreciation. The fecund middle period, roughly the first decade of the nineteenth century is the time of dozens of the magnificent works that came to define the composer and establish his eternal reputation, and his seventh symphony stands pretty much near the end of that time.

Written mostly during 1811 and finished by early 1812, it is a without doubt a complete reflection of the happy times and optimistic personal attitude of the composer at that time in his life—both professionally and personally. We are all familiar with the struggles and depressive moments in his emotionally up and down life, but times were good about then. The beloved “Pastoral” symphony was finished in 1808, and he then busied himself with important works, among them, the “Emperor” piano concerto and the music for *Egmont*. Sketches for both the seventh and the eighth symphonies were all part of his activity during this time.

He had already suffered health problems by early 1811, and traveled to the spa in the Bohemian town of Teplice, where work on the symphonies went on during that summer. Both symphonies were finished the next year, and together they more or less demark the end of an era. From that time on, until the end of his life in 1827, Beethoven the man, and his musical works underwent significant changes. His health underwent further deterioration, with debilitating family squabbles and failures in personal relationships all contributing to the change. While there were great works still to be written, the flow of inspiration was lessened, his social isolation increased, and the style of his composition took on a new, abstract quality.

So, the uplifting joy and vigor of Symphony No. 7 is a turning point. Beethoven, himself, conducted the première—contemporary accounts entertainingly describe his energetic and exaggerated gesticulations on the podium. And in the orchestra were some of the luminaries of the musical scene. It must have been an inspiring concert, indeed. The audience is on record for its enthusiastic response to this vivacious composition. No wonder, for there are few works by Beethoven so spurred by rhythmic inspiration and drive. Wagner has been endlessly excoriated for the banal comment that the work is “an apotheosis of the dance.” While it may have been a ham-fisted comment—neither Beethoven, nor few others have alluded to any dances in the work--but there is a grain of truth in the comment.

After a few dynamic chords, the first movement opens with a long, slow introduction that is a perfect example of Beethoven’s skill at artfully creating an atmosphere of expectation out of nothing much more than a few scales, sustained chords, and some melodic fragments. As it ends it seems to fragment into just a few repeated notes peeking out from octave to octave. And then there coyly appears a murmur of the simple rhythmic figure around which the first movement, proper, is built. A multiplicity of themes inhabits this driving, happy affair—all built in typical Beethoven fashion out of that little dotted rhythm.

The second movement is a special one—even for Beethoven. The first audience immediately recognized its inherent appeal, and forced its encore, right then. It consists of a “theme” that undergoes a series of variations—are rather more strictly, it is repeated with new and attractive elements added with each repetition, while retaining all that which was added. And it’s not really a theme in the melodic sense at all, rather just a basic chord progression in a constantly repeated simple rhythm. Here again, is ample evidence of Beethoven’s consummate skill at conjuring up magic out of the simplest of elements. There is a new tune in the middle, in the major mode—still with the simple rhythm of the beginning. The material of the opening returns, with some development added, and it all ends as it began.

A driving and dynamic scherzo can be expected next, and the composer certainly delivers one, quite a long one, at that, in an extended form that Beethoven liked. This movement possesses all of the impetus and rhythmic verve of the first movement, and again reaffirms the composer’s optimism. The last movement, if it is possible, trumps everything so far. It jumps right in with an intensity and jubilant ferocity rare even in Beethoven. Thumping, swinging, hammering—it relentlessly drives ahead, spurred by the timpani and the horns. If ever there was one movement from Beethoven’s nine symphonies that reminds us of his epochal innovation of rhythm as a fundamental

element in musical composition, this is it. It doesn't take long, dashing to a headlong conclusion that is nothing less than breathtaking.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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