

Overture to *William Tell*—Gioachino Rossini

There are many 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 thereafter 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 he had accomplished early on: thirty-four operas by the time that he was thirty-one.

William Tell is, of course, the story of the legendary archer who shot the apple from off his son’s head. But, that is incidental. Rather, his legend is all about honest Swiss yeomanry throwing off the yoke of tyranny, striking a blow for freedom, and ending oppressive foreign domination—arrogant Austrians, in this case. It’s a perfect yarn for the demands of French grand opera, and the impressive staging resources of the Paris Opera. There are virtuoso horn fanfares for the gathering of the Cantons; a precarious lake crossing during a storm; choruses of defiant soldiers; and, of course, the dramatic apple shot. Rossini’s score for all of this is a masterpiece. Berlioz—no mean conjurer of ripping musical theatrics—lavished praise on Rossini’s masterpiece. Rossini’s orchestration is ground breaking, his sense of drama, sure, and his skill at building to a tremendous climax, peerless. The overture is simply a reflection of a fantastic opera; if you like the former, try the latter, too.

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