



The Barber of Seville

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EDUCATION PACK

▲ THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

● By Gioachino Rossini

What is Opera?

Opera is a type of theatre which combines drama, music, elements of dance or movement with exciting costumes and innovative set design.

However, in opera, the actors are trained singers who sing their lines instead of speaking them.

A librettist writes the libretto - the words that are to be sung, like a script. Often, the plot of the opera is taken from stories in books or plays, or real world events. A composer writes the music for the singers and orchestra.

An orchestra accompanies the singers. A conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians.

An easy way to think of opera is that it is a story told with music. In a lot of operas, the people on stage sing all the way through. Imagine having all your conversations by singing them!



Opera Singers

It takes a lot of training to become an opera singer. A lot of aspiring opera singers will take this route: Sing in choirs, volunteer for solos, take singing lessons, study singing and music at university, then audition for the chorus or roles in operas.

Opera singers hardly ever use a microphone, which means that they train their voices to be heard by audiences, even over the top of orchestras. Singing opera can be very physical and tiring because of the effort that goes into making this large sound.

RESOURCES

- Video: An introduction to opera's voice types (The Royal Opera)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLfvkwTnJVM>
- Information and sound clips: Opera 101
<http://www.theopera101.com/operaabc/voices/>
- Video: Sir Mark Elder's Introduction to Rossini
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6LhsGphiwY>
- Video: Bugs Bunny - The Rabbit of Seville
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2o5y7d>



THE CREATORS

THE COMPOSER



Gioachino Rossini

Born 29 February 1792 in Pesaro, Italy.

The composer is the person who makes up and notates the melodies, makes the librettist's words fit to the music, and creates and writes down what the orchestra needs to play.

Rossini's parents were both accomplished orchestral musicians; however his father was arrested for political crimes when Rossini was very young.

While Rossini wrote 39 operas in his lifetime, *The Barber of Seville* was Rossini's greatest hit.

Rossini moved to Paris in 1855 where he became an instant celebrity and was royally commissioned by French King Charles X to write five operas every year.

Rossini was a life-long foodie and was well known across Paris for his love of fine dining. He once said: "I know of no more admirable occupation than eating.... The stomach is the conductor, who rules the grand orchestra of our passions, and rouses it to action."

THE LIBRETTIST



Cesare Sterbini

Born in 1784 in Rome.

Librettist – the person who writes the words and lyrics which go with the melodies and therefore tell the story of the opera.

The Barber of Seville was one of just two libretti Sterbini wrote for Rossini.

He was a gifted linguist, fluent in French, Italian, German, Latin, and Greek.

He based the libretto of *The Barber of Seville* on a French play by Pierre Beaumarchais, *Le Barbier de Séville*, one of three plays about the character Figaro and his adventures.

Beaumarchais had originally intended *Le Barbier de Séville* as an opera, but it was rejected by French opera companies so he made it a play.





THE CHARACTERS

Count Almaviva	Tenor
Figaro	Baritone
Rosina	Mezzo-Soprano
Bartolo	Bass
Basilio	Bass
Berta	Soprano
Fiorello/Officer	Bass



SYNOPSIS

Warning: contains spoilers!

ACT I

Seville. Count Almaviva comes in disguise to the house of Doctor Bartolo and serenades Rosina, whom Bartolo keeps confined to the house. Figaro the barber, who knows all the town's secrets and scandals, explains to Almaviva that Rosina is Bartolo's ward, not his daughter, and that the doctor intends to marry her. Figaro devises a plan: the count will disguise himself as a drunken soldier with orders to be quartered at Bartolo's house so that he may gain access to the girl. Almaviva is excited and Figaro looks forward to a nice cash pay-off.

Rosina reflects on the voice that has enchanted her and resolves to use her considerable wiles to meet the man it belongs to—as Almaviva has led her to believe, a poor student named Lindoro. Bartolo appears with Rosina's music master, Don Basilio. Basilio warns Bartolo that Count Almaviva, who has made known his admiration for Rosina, has been seen in Seville. Bartolo decides to marry Rosina immediately. Figaro, who has overheard the plot, warns Rosina and promises to deliver a note from her to Lindoro. Bartolo suspects that Rosina has indeed written a letter, but she outwits him at every turn. Bartolo warns her not to trifle with him.

Almaviva arrives, creating a ruckus in his disguise as a drunken soldier, and secretly passes Rosina his own note. Bartolo is infuriated by the stranger's behaviour and claims that he has an official exemption from billeting soldiers. Figaro announces that a crowd has gathered in the street, curious about the noise. The civil guard bursts in to arrest Almaviva, but when he secretly reveals his true identity to the captain he is instantly released. Everyone except Figaro is amazed by this turn of events.





ACT II

Bartolo suspects that the “soldier” was a spy planted by Almaviva. The count returns, this time disguised as Don Alonso, a music teacher and student of Don Basilio, to give Rosina her singing lesson in place of Basilio, who, he says, is ill at home. “Don Alonso” then tells Bartolo that he is staying at the same inn as Almaviva and has found a letter from Rosina. He offers to tell her that it was given to him by another woman, seemingly to prove that Lindoro is toying with Rosina on Almaviva’s behalf. This convinces Bartolo that “Don Alonso” is indeed a student of the scheming Basilio, and he allows him to give Rosina her lesson. With Bartolo dozing off, Almaviva and Rosina declare their love.

Figaro arrives to give Bartolo his shave and manages to snatch the key that opens the doors to Rosina’s balcony. Suddenly Basilio shows up looking perfectly healthy. Almaviva, Rosina, and Figaro convince him with a quick bribe that he is sick with scarlet fever and must go home at once. While Bartolo gets his shave, Almaviva plots with Rosina to elope that night. But the doctor overhears them and furiously realizes he has been tricked again. Everyone disperses.

Bartolo summons Basilio, telling him to bring a notary so Bartolo can marry Rosina that very night. Bartolo then shows Rosina her letter to Lindoro, which seems to prove that he is in league with Almaviva. Heartbroken and convinced that she has been deceived, Rosina agrees to marry Bartolo. A thunderstorm passes. Figaro and the count climb a ladder to Rosina’s balcony and let themselves in with the key. Rosina appears and confronts Lindoro, who finally reveals his true identity as Almaviva. Basilio shows up with the notary. Bribed and threatened, he agrees to be a witness to the marriage of Rosina and Almaviva. Bartolo arrives with soldiers, but it is too late. He accepts that he has been beaten, and Figaro, Rosina, and the count celebrate their good fortune.



INTERESTING FACTS

- *The Barber of Seville* was not only a hit in Rossini’s time, it remains incredibly popular today: it was the 8th most performed opera in the world in 2018, receiving a total of 2398 performances!
- Rossini wrote the music for *The Barber of Seville* remarkably quickly. He claimed to have written the entire opera in just 10 days!
- Rossini was notorious for self-plagiarizing: he saved time while writing Barber by incorporating excerpts from his other operas. The whole overture, for example, is adapted from two of Rossini’s earlier, lesser-known operas.
- When Rossini was writing his version of *The Barber of Seville*, there was already another hugely popular operatic adaptation of Beaumarchais’s play by Giovanni Paisiello. Paisiello was furious when he found out that Rossini had written his own version of *The Barber of Seville*, and organized a mob of supporters to cause a riot at the premiere. Despite this early disruption, Rossini’s version became a resounding success, and Paisiello’s has fallen into obscurity.
- The characters in *The Barber of Seville* are based on stock characters from commedia dell’arte, an Italian form of clown theatre. Commedia dell’arte had a cast of recurring characters and standard plots that would have been well known to Italian audiences.



What is Opera Buffa?

The Barber of Seville is a good example of an Opera Buffa. Opera Buffa was a form of comic opera that developed in the middle of the eighteenth century and became one of the most popular opera genres across Italy.

Before the birth of opera buffa, the prevailing opera genre across Europe was opera seria, a rather earnest genre of opera portraying gods, heroes and kings in mythic settings. Opera seria, with its grandiloquent language and extravagant depictions of nobility, was mostly associated with the aristocracy and tended to be funded through the royal courts. However, a large social, intellectual and artistic movement in the mid eighteenth century called the Enlightenment, began to reject the power of absolute monarchy in favour of individual liberty, tolerance, democracy, justice and reason. These Enlightenment ideals reached fever pitch with the French revolution, where the French royal family were dethroned and decapitated by republican forces dissatisfied with their rule. The Enlightenment led to the privatisation of many opera houses and, thus, the need for a genre of opera with mass appeal beyond the courts. Opera buffa, with its everyday characters, vernacular language and contemporary setting became the perfect antidote to opera seria's Enlightenment decline.

Rossini was devoted to the opera buffa genre, and it was the genre for which he became most well-known: in 1822, Rossini met fellow composer Ludwig Van Beethoven, who remarked that Rossini should never write anything other than opera buffa because *The Barber of Seville* was so good! *The Barber of Seville* has all the typical tropes of an opera buffa. Its plot gives the same prominence to lower class figures such as servants and barbers as it does to its dons and counts, even depicting Figaro and Count Almaviva as equally cunning conspirators. It was set in Rossini's time and its language is conversational and accessible. It also features a basso buffo in the role of Bartolo, a low male singer capable of patter singing (singing a lot of very fast, very funny text), a staple of the opera buffo genre. The comic plot of *The Barber of Seville* proved to have very wide appeal, the tale of Figaro and Almaviva flying in the face of authority in the name of love resonating with the rebellious social atmosphere of the time.



A STORY IN PICTURES



Count Almaviva, in disguise as a student called Lindoro, serenades Rosina at her window. He has fallen in love with her.



Figaro arrives and they overhear Rosina's guardian, Dr Bartolo, saying that he intends to choose Rosina's husband.



Rosina wants to choose who she marries, but Bartolo has planned for her to get married that evening.



Figaro says that he will help the count get into Bartolo's house so that he can speak to Rosina. The count will pay Figaro for his help.



Rosina has also fallen in love with Lindoro (The Count). She writes him a letter. Figaro distracts Bartolo while Lindoro (The Count) talks with Rosina inside.



Bartolo tells Rosina that Lindoro is tricking her and that he is actually planning on setting her up with the count.



Rosina is very angry but Lindoro reveals his true identity as The Count and convinces her of his affections.



Rosina and The Count get married and Figaro gets his money!



▲ ATTENDING AN OPERA

● Before you go:

It is a good idea to do at least a little research about the opera that you are to attend. Taking 10 minutes to review the plot or listening to excerpts from the piece, for example on Youtube, will make sure you are familiar with what you are about to see and help you to better enjoy all that is happening on-stage. Find out where the theatre is, where you collect your tickets from, and aim to be there at least twenty minutes before the opera starts. Acts in an opera can be quite long and it's a good idea to use the bathroom before it starts.

What do I do during the performance?

Enjoy the show and take it all in. Respond as you would in a movie theatre. The story might make you laugh, it may make you cry. Please turn off all phones. Be aware that any filming, recording and photography is strictly prohibited. Be considerate of all other opera-goers, so keeping quiet and not tapping or humming along is appreciated!



How do I understand what is going on?

The Barber of Seville was written, and is performed, in Italian. However it is always advisable to familiarize yourself with the production before the performance, for example by reading the synopsis, so that you're sure not to miss anything that comes up. There will be surtitle screens hung above the stage in the theatre which provide an English translation, so you won't miss any of the action!

What next?

- Attend a live opera when you can
- Find a Metropolitan Opera Live screening at a movie theatre
- Watch an opera on YouTube, either a whole one or just the highlights
- Read books about composers, conductors, opera singers or other topics we have mentioned.
- Ask your parents or teachers for advice on where they think you could find more information





OPERA GLOSSARY



The below terms may be helpful in understanding opera better:

ACT — a major section (like a chapter of a novel) of a dramatic production. Each act may consist of a number of scenes. An opera has one or more acts.

ACCOMPANIMENT — the music that supports or plays a secondary role to the melody. The accompaniment can be sung or played.

ARIA — a solo song.

COMPOSER — the musician who writes the music of the operatic piece.

CHORD — more than one note sounded at the same time (simultaneously).

ENSEMBLE — a group of musicians. In opera an ensemble can refer to any music written for two or more voices.

HARMONY — any combination of notes that are sung or played simultaneously. Usually the word harmony refers to a pleasing combination of those sounds (but not always).

KEY — the presence of tonality.

LIBRETTO — the text of the opera.

LYRICIST (LIBRETTIST) — a writer who transforms prose into something suitable for a song setting. This writer has the skills of a poet to structure the text into verses.

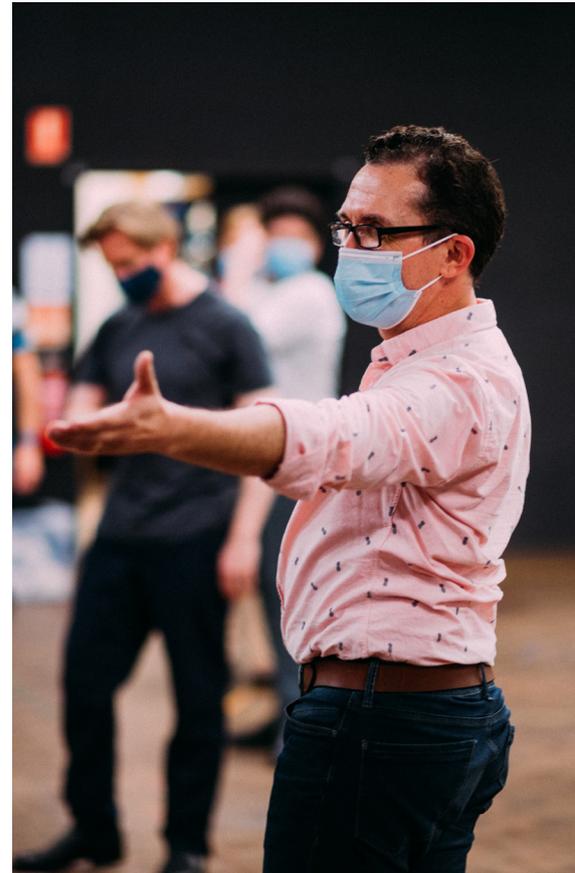
MAJOR/MINOR — the modality in harmony. These can be demonstrated by simple triads or coloured by extra notes.

OPERA — A work for the stage that combines music with dramatic and theatrical elements. An opera can be of any length, combined with instrumental forces of any size, and can be based on stories of any type. An opera in the 16th century can be very different from those created in the 20th century.

TEXTURE — the layers of sound. Different combination of pitches and of instruments can create interesting sound that can be described as heavy or light, thick or thin.

THEME — a melody belonging to a passage of music or assigned to a dramatic character.

TIMBRE — the character or quality of a musical sound or voice.



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