
ROSSINI'S *IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA*:
STUDY GUIDE
FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Introduction

"I cannot help but think that *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, by its abundance of true musical ideas, comic verve and truth of declamation, is the finest *opera buffa* that exists."¹ So wrote Giuseppe Verdi. And it was only at the very end of his career (ignoring his youthful experiment *Un giorno di regno*) that Verdi ventured to try his hand at the comic genre with *Falstaff*. Similar judgments had already been expressed by various notable figures, like Beethoven and Stendhal. The musicians of the last century could hardly fail to be captivated by the magic of this work. Ildebrando Pizzetti observed: "*Il barbiere di Siviglia* is the most divinely light-hearted and completely perfect *opera buffa* that has ever been written in the world."² And an influential American connoisseur of Italian opera, Philip Gossett: "*The Barber of Seville* is perhaps the greatest of all comic operas."³ In a school curriculum of music education, discovering Rossini is a must, and especially his *Barbiere di Siviglia*, an outstanding opera in the comic repertoire worldwide. It has an amusing storyline and delightful characters, enchanting, unforgettable melodies, a plot full of hilarious twists and turns, all served up with dazzling orchestration and exuberant melodic invention.

The way the opera is presented to students nowadays is to recount the plot and listen to the scenes in order, perhaps making a selection of the most significant scenes.

This audio teaching aid, as well as the book that comes with it, provides essential information about the work, and the complete libretto. A large number of historical and critical essays by eminent scholars will extend the teaching.

The pages that follow, conceived for both middle and upper secondary schools, offer teachers suggestions about specific aspects of the *Barber*, from which they can choose those closest to their own annual program, students' interests and preferences, and the teaching method adopted.

Plot

Act I

Night. Count d'Almaviva is in love with the beautiful Rosina, an orphan who he ward of her elderly guardian Don Bartolo. He keeps her locked up in the house and is plotting to marry her. Beneath her balcony the youthful Count sings a serenade, concealing his true identity, because he wants her to love him for what he is, not his wealth. He has adopted the name Lindoro. But how to approach her? Luckily, he bumps into the barber Figaro, an old acquaintance of the Count's, who calls himself the factotum (or jack of all trades) of the town, and he has plenty of ideas. He suggests the Count should show up at Don Bartolo's house dressed as a soldier, complete with a document that authorises him to be billeted on the family. But the music-teacher Don Basilio, turns up at Don Bartolo's house and he warns him against the Count Almaviva, who has just arrived in town to woo Rosina. Don Basilio says the way to deal with the Count is to spread slanders about him. Figaro has overheard everything, and is planning to help Almaviva and Rosina/Lindoro meet. The Count now arrives, pretending to be a drunken soldier. Bartolo produces a document showing he is exempt from having soldiers quartered in his house. The Count drops a note for Rosina, but Don Bartolo notices the move. This gives rise to such a hubbub

that the police are called in to quell the riot. As soon as the Count takes them aside and reveals his identity, the police leave, treating him with great deference. The whole company is amazed by this turn of events.

Act II

Count Almaviva now returns to Don Bartolo's house in a new disguise, calling himself Don Alonso. He says he is a replacement music teacher for Don Basilio, whom he describes as bedridden with a fever. In league with the Count, Figaro shaves Don Bartolo to keep him from listening to the conversation between the two lovers. When Don Basilio turns up unexpectedly, the Count bribes him to play along and say he's going home to get medical treatment. There follows a brief intermezzo in which we listen to the old housekeeper Berta singing of her memories of love. Meanwhile the slanders are spreading. Basilio and Bartolo make Rosina believe that her young lover Lindoro is nothing more than a go-between who wants to push her into the arms of Count Almaviva. The young woman's indignation is soon dispelled when Lindoro reveals himself to her as Almaviva. Knowing her lover's true identity, she is ready to elope with him through the bedroom window, where Figaro has placed a ladder. But someone has got wind of the barber's plan and taken the ladder away. The lovers and Figaro are discovered by Don Basilio and the public notary summoned Bartolo to celebrate his wedding with Rosina. But once again Figaro shows himself equal to the situation: he orders the notary to marry Rosina not to Don Bartolo but Almaviva. Don Basilio is persuaded by another large bribe from the Count to act as the witness together with Figaro. On his arrival, Bartolo has to ad-

mit he has been outwitted, and confess the failure of his ambitious marriage plans.

Cesare Sterbini's libretto is fairly faithful to the comedy *Le barbier de Séville* by the French playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Performed in Paris in 1775, the play was received into the permanent French classical repertoire. It was so successful that it was set to music before Rossini by notable composers such as Ludwig Benda, Nicolas Isouard, and above all, in 1782, Giovanni Paisiello. If it were not for Rossini's opera, not only Paisiello's version, but much of his overflowing operatic repertoire would be much commoner today in our opera houses, just as it was before Rossini's star rose.

Rossini's opera had its first performance in Rome on 20 February 1816. Just three months later, the Perugian composer Francesco Morlacchi also composed an opera based on Beaumarchais's play. On 5 June of that same year Paisiello died, after witnessing the triumph of Rossini's opera, and the unmerited eclipse of his own.

Reading the libretto

An effective way to read the libretto in class is to share out the parts between students so that everyone is involved in the reading. For example, the meeting between Figaro and the Count could be entrusted to a first pair: "È desso, oppur m'inganno?" // "Chi sarà mai costui?" // "Oh, è lui senz'altro. Figaro!" // "Mio padrone." Then move on to another pair, and so on.

Teachers who aim to focus on expression know about the problems faced by the students in reading. They also know how to deal with them, while allowing for the classroom time they feel able to spend on it.

The principle we recommend is to systematically practise each of the 'musical' elements of speech. The previous dialogue compels us to do just this. When they meet each other, the Count and Figaro are thinking aloud, so they speak quite softly (*pianissimo*). Then, when Count recognises his old acquaintance he calls to him in a loud voice (*forte*): "Figaro!". *Piano* (softly), *forte* (loudly), *sottovoce* (in a hushed voice), *fortissimo* (very loudly), *crescendo* (increasing in loudness), *diminuendo* (decreasing in loudness): these are all ways to indicate the first element: *intensity*. And when, shortly afterwards, the Count explains to Figaro the reason why he has come to Seville ("Al Prado vidi un fior di bellezza...") how loudly should he speak? *Forte*, to emphasise the Count's passionate love, or *piano*, to imply that it must remain secret? There are no right answers. In a play it is the director who decides this, together with the actor. Our libretto is full of situations which call for the students to decide for themselves to just how to speak.

But this working method can also be used with different elements. Just as essential as intensity is *speed*. Take the scene where the Count has just finished serenading Rosina. He and Figaro hear the girl's window banged shut. "Oh cielo!" exclaims the Count, and there follows a dialogue with Figaro. Here it is easier to imagine their exchange is rapid, expressing anxiety. But we should remember that only the Count is anxious, while Figaro is just as calm as before. So the Count's utterance will be *veloce* and Figaro's *moderato*. *Veloce* (fast), *moderato* (moderate speed), *vivace* (lively), *mosso* (with animation), *lento* or *adagio* (slowly), and many others. These are all indications of the *tempo* or speed of

utterance. Just as intensity applies not only to speech, so these terms also apply to music. At least a third parameter deserves to be practised, if you want to ensure the reading expresses a text. And this is *pitch*, or rather the movement of words up and down within the whole range from the *deepest, lowest, bass* notes of the voice to the *shrill or high* notes, which is the meaning these terms have in music. Take the scene where Figaro meets Rosina. The girl is bored stiff, "shut up between these four walls, which feels just like being buried alive". And boredom is usually expressed in a falling tone of voice. "A beautiful, witty girl," Figaro encourages her, probably raising his voice into the high, clear ... witty zone. And what if it was the other way round? Rosina's voice acute, and Figaro's deep? There are no *mistakes* in the deliberate choices of ways to read a text; there are only different interpretations. A Rosina who spoke in the higher part of her vocal range would just sound weepy; while Figaro speaking in a deep voice would sound soothing.

These are only brief examples of how to educate young people, not only to use their own voices expressively and consciously (*prosodic education*), but also to grasp and understand the meaning of what they are reading.⁴ So far we have only examined Sterbini's dialogues, which he based intelligently on the original by Beaumarchais.

But Sterbini's dialogues do not have a life of their own. They are like the framework, the scaffolding, on which Rossini built the house. Now it is up to us to discover the framework and explore the building, in order to understand Rossini's characters, musical qualities and meanings, and admire, if we are able to, his genius.

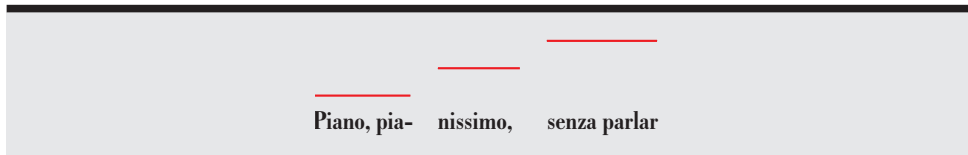
From libretto to music

A good way to begin is to become aware that what is true of speech holds good for music. It also applies to the kind of music that penetrates into the bodies of texts and shapes them to its own principles, meaning music that is sung.

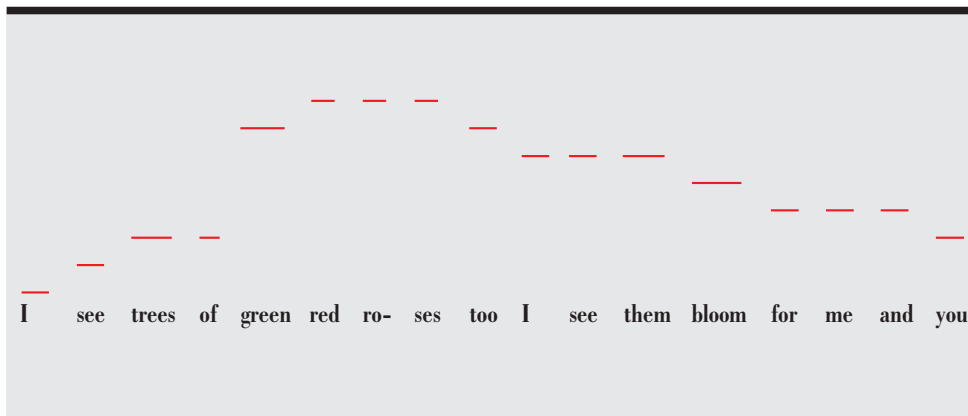
It is the tone that is particularly important in the comparison/transition between the speaking voice and the singing voice. Listening that leads to a better understanding of sung music starts from here, from an analysis of the progression of the pitch (the melodic profile), along a range from the deepest to the highest sounds (possible to the different

vocal registers: starting from the bass and passing through baritone, tenor, alto and mezzo-soprano, to finally reach the soprano). Also important are the rhythms and various combinations of sounds in harmony.

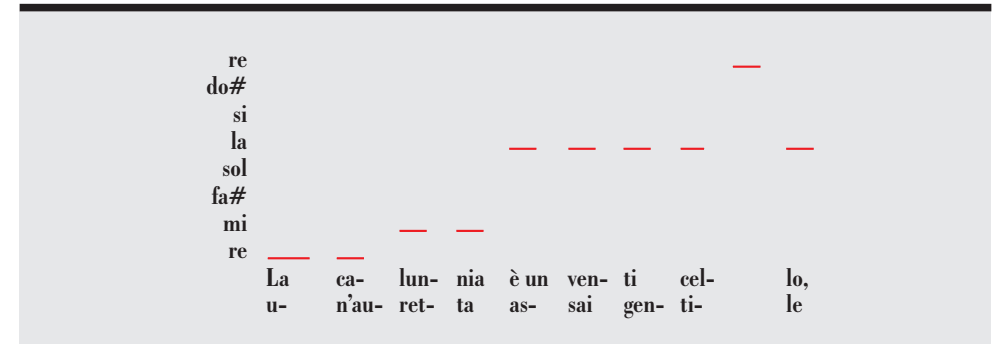
A typical first exercise in any music education programme is to guide students to recognise the direction, ascending, descending, or horizontal, of pairs of sounds. It is the first step that guides them to draw lines to express the up and down movement of the notes, including the notes of a song. It takes just a little practice to get a student to transcribe the course of the first words sung in the opera (“Piano, pianissimo, senza parlar”) like this:



At first, the exercise can be fascinating for the young people if we apply it to the songs they love. For example, the first sentence of *What a Wonderful World* can be transcribed as follows:



We can apply this to Basilio's aria “La calunnia”. The notes are written on the left:



And so forth for the other pages of the opera. This is an effective way to gradually guide students to read the sung stave on their own. In the course of listening to opera, it will be a useful way of grasping one of its characteristics, whether it is *opera seria* or *opera buffa*. The attention, however great or little, which the composer devoted to the natural inflections of the speaking voice, and then the care taken to transfer the tones of voice of the speaker to the stave, depending on his or her thoughts and feelings.

We find this process in all composers of opera, from the very first, Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*, written in 1597, to the most recent. It is explained or recommended by a number of musicians and theoreticians, such as these observations made by the philosopher Denis Diderot in 1760, in his splendid play *Rameau's Nephew*:

A melody is an imitation using the sounds of a scale invented by art or inspired by nature, whichever you like, either with the voice or with an instrument, an imitation of the physical sounds or accents of passion.

[...] What is the model of the musician or a song? It is declamation, if the model is alive and thinking; it is noise, if the model is inanimate. We must consider declamation as like a line, and the song as like another line that winds around the first. The stronger and truer this declamation, the basis of the melody, the more the melody which matches it will intersect it at a greater number of points. And the truer the melody, the more beautiful it will be. When one hears *Je suis un pauvre diable*, one thinks one can recognise the sad cry of a miser. If he wasn't singing, he would speak to the earth in the same tones when he entrusts his gold to it, saying, *O terre, reçois mon trésor*. And that young woman who feels her heart beating, who blushes, who is confused, and who begs the gentleman to let her go—would she express herself any differently? In these works there are all sorts of characters, an infinite variety of declamations. And it is sublime—I can tell you. Listen, listen to the piece where the young man who feels he is dying, cries out, *Mon cœur s'en va*. Listen to the song. Listen to the instrumental accompaniment, and then tell me what is

the difference between the real actions of a man who is dying and the movement of this melody. You'll see whether the line of the melody coincides completely with the line of the declamation or not. [...] There is nothing more obvious than the following passage, which I read somewhere: *Musices seminarium accentus*: accent is the seed-bed of melody.⁵

In this passage from Diderot, we should not overlook something that goes beyond the observation that song mimics the “accents of passion.” The accents of passion are just one of the “imitations” which song is capable of. There is another for the philosopher, “noise, if the model is inanimate.” If he had lived for more than a century, Diderot could have successfully given some examples from the words in which Rossini describes how calumny succeeds in “making a noise” and finally exploding. The song begins like a light breeze, a few syllables punctuated by pauses; with that mischievous light soaring high D. It descends as if to deny its importance, and then starts building up relentlessly, including dotted notes, repeated notes, and silences. And above all, it makes the singing grow gradually from *piano* to the *fortissimo* of the climax, when slander has taken over the whole community. But it is not just the voice of the bass (Don Basilio) that makes us feel the relentless swelling of slander to the point of explosion, the “noise” Diderot speaks of. Rossini unleashes the whole orchestra, with the overwhelming rush of galloping semiquavers and dotted quavers. An immediate and naïve realism, because now remote from the refinements of Mozart or Paisiello, as we will hear in a moment. No less enchanting and surprising is the scene that

opens to our ears, once the echoes of “earthquake, storm and cannon shot” have died away. The calm returns, the voice again rides over the instruments, singing sotto voce, to depict the “meschino calunniato.” Voice and orchestra together offer us a new crescendo, taking us all the way to the precipice where the poor maligned wretch crawls away to die. The *crescendo* is one of the stylistic features that makes Rossini’s work immediately recognisable. He achieves it not only by gradually increasing the volume of sound of the instruments, but by carefully measured and incremental additions of new instruments. Rossini’s crescendo here “is a gradual transition from deep shadow to blazing light, from mystery to reality, from the hidden form to full vitality, from the quietly meditative to operatic exaltation. The effect has something orgiastic, frenetic, overwhelming, and triumphant about it. The *ff* response of the other instruments, especially in the bass, to the *crescendo*, is an outbreak of healthy joy and vigour, the explosion of an overriding certainty, an instinctive enthusiastic affirmation. As a whole, something that borders on a miracle, while at the same time verging on frenzy.”⁶

Between Mozart and Rossini

The slander aria reveals that Rossini’s comic operas are not just the masterpieces that we know. They brought about a genuine revolution compared to the opera buffa of Italian eighteenth-century tradition, in the work of Traetta, Jommelli, Piccinni, all the way up to Cimarosa and Paisiello. Mozart had drawn on this same tradition in the works of his first period, before *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, after which Mozart’s music dramas soared to give us the masterpieces of *Le nozze di*

Figaro, *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Die Zauberflöte*.

To realise how ‘Mozartian’, in Mozart’s first manner, the music of his Italian contemporaries could be (or vice versa, how Italian Mozart’s first manner in opera was), it should be enough to listen to one or two of arias. Movie lovers will remember the scene in *Barry Lyndon* in which the hero gives further evidence of his arrogance by cheating at cards. The director Stanley Kubrick chose to comment on the scene with a sound track taken from Paisiello’s *Barbiere di Siviglia*, in which the Count sings a serenade to Rosina and all that follows from it.

In the film it is performed by both the tenor (“Saper bramate”) and instrumentally, alternating between mandolin and cello. In the opera, it is sung by Count on these five-syllable verses:

CONTE

Saper bramate,
bella, il mio nome:
ecco, ascoltate,
ve lo dirò.
Io son Lindoro,
di basso stato;
né alcun tesoro
darvi potrò.
Ma sempre fido,
ogni mattina
a voi mie pene,
cara Rosina,
col cor su’ labbri
vi canterò.

ROSINA

Dunque Lindoro
ogni mattina
le di lui pene
alla Rosi...
(*s’ode chiudere la finestra con rumore*)

We can listen to the original, as performed in the opera:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSK8PTMiGY>

Kubrick brought out the refined and haughty affectation of the aristocratic world with the lightness of Rococo music. But what kind of music? Unless we happen to know the original, we would be ready to swear that the aria was by Mozart (from *Idomeneo*, for instance, which Mozart wrote only four years after Paisiello’s *Barbiere*.) No less Mozartian appears Rosina’s aria “Giusto ciel”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbIx1OjnZTg>

Giusto ciel, che conoscete
quanto il cor onesto sia,
deh, voi date all’anima mia
quella pace che non ha.

Of course, we could invert the statement, and recognise how ‘Paisellian’ certain arias by Mozart might seem. A show directly as Rossini breaks definitively with that language, it is useful to directly compare the two *Barbieri*, Rossini and Paisiello. We choose the “air of slander”. In the libretto of Paisiello’s opera, it is sung to these verses:

La calunnia, mio signore,
non sapete che cos’è?
Sol con questa a tutte l’ore
si può far gran cose, affé.
Questa qui, radendo il suolo,
incomincia piano piano;
e del volgo il vasto stuolo
la raccoglie, e rinforzando
passa poi di bocca in bocca,
ed il diavolo all’orecchie
ve la porta, e così è.

La calunnia intanto cresce,
s'alza, fischia, gonfia a vista:
vola in aria, e turbigliona,
lampeggiando stride e tuona;
e diviene poi crescendo
un tumulto universale,
come un coro generale,
e rimedio più non v'è.

Now we can listen to Paisiello's arrangement of this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe9eK5UgivA>

An effective way to get your students to reflect on the differences they discover between the two arias is to present the inquiry as group work, provided the teacher adopts this method fairly frequently. Listening twice over will be necessary to fix the different musical passages in the students' memories. While Rossini gives us a sequence of surprisingly different sound images in rapid succession, Paisiello starts with a motif, Mozartian in flavour, which is then replicated exactly ("La calunnia... cos'è"). He also continues with a crescendo, though conducted in a more elementary way than by Rossini, with the melody rising diligently along the scale. It is energised at the image of slander flying through the air ("La calunnia [...] vola in aria"), counterpointed in an almost Rossinian way by the instruments, with the tremolo of the strings coming in to counterfeit the rumbling of thunder. The comparison with Rossini becomes ungenerous to Paisiello when you listen to what happens musically to Rossini's poor slandered wretch ("meschino calunniato"). Paisiello dismisses the whole business with a simple scholastic cadenzina ("e rimedio più non c'è": where it has to be said that the poor librettist, much more modest than

Sterbini, did not offer much to the composer's verve). Having rapidly put an end to the description of calumny, Paisiello is unable to find any other way to proceed than by banally repeating what has already been said. In short, we have here a single unique "passion," as Diderot would have said, but also a single "noise," with moderate variations, from beginning to end of the aria.

It must be said that Paisiello's work contains many brilliant pages, like the whole scene focused on Don Bartolo's dull pedantry, where "the music reaches a climax of expression presenting monotony as a comic element."⁷ But in an educational project like ours, it is not so much the judgment of merit that matters. In their lives, young people find endless incitement to express value judgments, comparing the value of people or things. As usual, it is easy to judge, difficult to understand. Here we are trying first of all to understand *in what ways* the two songs are objectively, meaning stylistically, different. And in this way we are seeking to grasp, through the music, the two different worlds reflected in a late eighteenth-century Neapolitan opera and Rossini's early nineteenth-century one: the Rococo and the early Romantic world, we might say, the first with skilfully stylised features, and the second charged with stylistic exuberance.

A possible cross-disciplinary insight into the comparison between Mozart or Paisiello and Rossini is offered by musicology which focuses on the historical and social aspects of the work of art. In the *Barbieri di Siviglia*

the social content of the opera has changed radically. In Mozart's *Nozze*, the *régie du jeu* was conducted in terms of a rationalistic hedonism punctuated by the closed forms of a self-sufficient social caste that holds the monopoly of art, and is therefore detached from every other form of social life not attributable to those 'models' and those 'canons'. In Mozart's work, it is still the 'ethic' of the aristocratic class that, in its sentimental indifference, guides the characters, who are already bourgeois in Beaumarchais' comedy [...]. Rossini took over these 'models', but applied them to the new social reality of men and women that had emerged from the French Revolution. The self-critical spirit of the rising bourgeoisie, which was replacing the decrepit aristocratic world, is strongly portrayed in Rossini's *Barbieri*. The neo-Baroque experience is transformed into an ironic gesture; Rossini charges the colours, without weighing them down, and Beaumarchais' characters take on a new rhythm, a more earth-bound and realistic psychology: they are mirrors of everyday life, whose attitudes and defects Rossini heightens, unceremoniously compelling audiences, from smiles to broad laughter, to recognise themselves in them.⁸

Time suspended

Concertati (meaning passages in which the various voices superimpose different melodic lines, and often different words) are a specific resource of musical language, one that is absent from speech. In his *opere buffe* Rossini uses them frequently to heighten the comedy of the situation. He only needs to find a character in the libretto who urges silence on the others: "zitti, zitti, piano, piano; senza fare confusione," for his imagination to unleash an orgy of sounds. The orchestra is

joined by the voices, with everyone singing together, each in his or her own way. The result is a kind of sound track of chaos.

Let's put ourselves (or our students) in the place of the audience of a stage comedy, or still better a movie. Even if we take it for granted that they accept the fact that the characters sing instead of speaking, how can they explain the way words are bounced from one to another? And the fact that the characters keep repeating them?

Even a great admirer of Rossini, Stendhal, writes about the *concertato* of the finale I:

In my experience, Bartolo's petrified immobility, which he maintains while all the others gather about him, singing: "Freddo e immobile, come una statua," unfaillingly produces an unsatisfactory impression. Immediately the audience has an instant to realize that the absurdity is overdone, the laughter dries up; and this alone is sufficient to prove that the farce is badly written. The spectator must be stunned into uncritical acceptance, as he is by Molière or by Cimarosa; but this is one of the most difficult things to achieve in all the art of music. For music, by its very nature, cannot hurry its own development; whereas the development of the intrigues and machinations of farce, if they are to succeed at all, must move with the rapidity of lightning. Music must somehow manage to convey directly comic suggestions of the same order as those which, in the straight theatre, might be conveyed by the speed and sheer acting ability of a first-rate comedy.⁹

Nostalgia for Paisiello or Cimarosa seems to linger in the words of this illustrious admirer of Rossini, who fails to realise that the comedy here lies precisely in the paradoxical

freezing of the action. The continued, exasperated repetition of the phrases, which disturbed Stendhal as it does someone who approaches the opera for the first time today, is just one of the essential artifices of suspension. It heightens the humour of the scene, in the contrast between the realistic backdrop and the deliberate exaggerated unnaturalness of the situation.

We will rapidly glance at the cases that are most striking, or let's say less realistic, created by freezing the action. We can start at the beginning. The curtain rises on the entrance of Count Almaviva's servant Fiorello with his troupe of musicians. They prepare to accompany the Count's serenade beneath Rosina's window. Fiorello urges them not to make a noise. The suggestion is hardly necessary, or could be dismissed in a few words. Instead Fiorello, and then the Count, go on a good 78 times repeating the phrase "Piano pianissimo...", so creating the noise they are deprecating so greatly, if not a hubbub.

A similar situation, and equally absurd, appears at the end of the Act I. The din created by the arrival of the Count disguised as a soldier summons first Figaro and then the guard to the house. They are about to arrest the disturbers of the public peace when they discover they are in the presence of the noble, authoritative Count Almaviva in military uniform. They withdraw, leaving the company stupefied. Here, again, each of the six characters blurts out the same few words: "Fredda/o ed immobile come una statua." The audience realises everyone is "storditi e sbalorditi," as we read in the libretto. A few exclamations, or even gestures, would do to express their amazement. Instead Rossini creates a contrapuntal interplay of six voices,

singing first softly and slowly; and then in a wild, *vivace* unison: all to express that they feel their heads transformed "in un'orrida fucina."

If we wanted to enable our students to realise Rossini's spirit more fully, we could find similar situations in a number of other works, illustrating comedy based on the distortion of everyday speech. From the *Italiana in Algeri* (1813), we could cite the ensemble "Nella testa ho un campanel," or from *Cenerentola* (written the year after the *Barbiere*): "Questo è un nodo avviluppato," or "Zitto zitto, piano piano."

The most resounding example comes at the end of the *Barbiere* (though 'resounding' is an oxymoron). Lindoro reveals himself to Rosina for who he is: Count Almaviva. The couple exchange loving words, while Figaro vainly urges them to escape down the ladder he has leaned against the window. They have to be quick about it, because Bartolo, Basilio and the notary are on their way. At last the Count decides to set off. Once again we expect haste. Instead Rossini scores no less than 93 repetitions of the words in which the three merely exhort each other to climb down from the balcony in silence: "Zitti zitti piano piano, senza fare confusione..."

In the *concertati* the characters repeat the same words a number of times. This device also helps freeze the action. Situations that would actually take a few seconds are dilated and taken to an extreme. The humour thus stems from the unreal timing, the suspension of time, and the sudden changes of (musical) scene. As here: the astonishment of "Freddo ed immobile" closes with an exquisitely lyrical cadenza of the strings, which opens up the climate in the transition from A flat major

to C major (a third above)! By contrast with the unexpected lyrical moment, Rossini now introduces the furious spat between poor Don Bartolo and the soldiers.

Time in plays and opera

Since a fan of Rossini's like Stendhal had his qualms about certain of his idol's methods, it is hardly surprising if our students harbour similar misgivings. So it is now time to return to the question by focusing more closely on the issues.

The first is the *specific language* of opera, its being something other than prose drama. When we see a play, comedy or movie, the time taken up by the dialogues flows as it does in real life, though flashbacks and other devices make it possible to switch the time frame to the past. In some films, past and present alternate continuously; but each generally respects real time.

In the opera the matter is organised very differently. "The continuous time of the drama is replaced in opera by discontinuous time." It is normal in opera for "a situation that in a play would last no more than an instant to unfold in opera as a *tableau vivant*, where the action freezes"¹⁰ often due to the frequent repetitions in the lyrics.

This is not to say, of course, that the work lacks rules of its own for the time frame of the performance. The treatment of time actually coincides in drama and opera when it comes to the recitatives, even though they are sung and have an instrumental accompaniment. But, strangely enough, the recitatives are almost always the least interesting moments of opera: sometimes not in the least interesting. This explains the old custom of the audience of music lovers

leaving the stalls until the recitative came to an end and the action at last reached what they cared most about: the open, flowing and melodious singing of the arias, duets, *concertati* and choruses. The alternation of fluid and slow-motion action in opera causes "the dissociation of time in two different frames: one tied to the musical form [think about the classic ABA form, which repeats at the end what has already been said at the beginning] and the other related to the dramatic content."¹¹

Recitative and song

The difference between drama and opera in terms of 'naturalness' suggests that, if we are to appreciate the latter, it is essential to understand its rules, its own special rules, which are not those of plays. These rules start with the one that is the most immediate, the point of contact between them: how far, and in what ways, the melody of the singing in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* draws on the principle that we found in Diderot, the correspondence between prosody ("declamation as line") and melody ("the song as another line that twists around the first")?

The most elementary case has already been anticipated: straight recitative. Why isn't it much loved? Because here the singing does nothing more than cling to inevitable clichés, devoid of any emotional charge. The words may even be spoken rather than sung; if they are sung, it is only so as to not to deviate too dangerously far from the expressive register of opera and the specifics of its language (in other traditions, like the German *Singspiel* or operettas, not to mention musicals, there is no such concern, and speech is used instead of recitative).¹²

Get our students to listen to any of the recitatives in the *Barbiere*. We can expect them to experience the same sort of boredom as music lovers. It is at this point that we will have to confess to them that there is little Rossini in these dialogues, since he merely adopted conventional, existing formulas. It is when the characters sing, really sing, that Rossini's spirit, his world, and the souls of his characters open up before us.

Even if we feel unable to play them the whole work, you will only be spoiled for choice to choose a passage that will enable them to understand Rossini's characters through their feelings. And in this case Rossini's means not the characters that come to life in Sterbini's verses, but those that grow out of the score, the singing and the orchestral integration, quite apart from the words they utter.

From this point of view, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* is a masterpiece of naturalness, of realism. Consider the opening scene of Act II, "Pace e gioia sia con voi." We quickly realise that the false Alonso (Almaviva) is presenting himself to Don Bartolo in the guise of an unctuous hypocrite, if only because of the *acciacatura*, or grace notes at the end of the phrase, first double and then triple. It should not be hard to repeat it in class in spoken form, with the intonation following the up and down movement of the singing (example A).

Don Bartolo's replies echo his tone, as happens in speaking: the guardian is being courteous. And then the Count, in turn, echoes Don Bartolo, when the guardian passes from patience to the sudden realisation he has seen this face somewhere before: "Questo volto non m'è ignoto"; the Count echoes him as he expresses his fear his plan might fail: "Ah se un colpo è andato a vuoto." Now

they are no longer speaking to be heard by each other. Rossini resorts to the traditional theatrical device of speaking in asides: the characters let the audience know what they are thinking. Don Bartolo grows suspicious, the Count exultant. In this short fragment Rossini creates an opposition between explicit dialogue and concealed thoughts. The false music teacher's ingratiating manner drives Don Bartolo first to irritation and then exasperation. At this point, there is another typical operatic device: still in asides, the two sing together perfectly (in parallel thirds) to the same rhythm, which grows hectic; but the Count expresses elation ("Ah mio ben fra pochi istanti"), while Don Bartolo is vexed at the "perfido destino" that has brought this nuisance to his house.

Individuals and types

In the works written after Rossini, composers took care to introduce characters whose states of mind, feelings, and even their personalities changed in the course of the opera. In making a character speak, or in our case sing, a composer can move within a range that goes from fixed, rigid characterisation, to the most unpredictable and changeable emotions. On this scale, Puccini's characters tend towards the second pole. Butterfly appears at first as a girl in love and resolute; in the second act she is unable to conceal her fear of being forsaken, when she reacts angrily to the servant's certainties; by the end we feel she has plummeted into utter despair. Teachers who took part in *Vox Imago's* study of *La traviata* will find it an emblematic example to present to students, with Violetta, Alfredo and Germont's psychological development.

Il Barbiere di Siviglia

Esempio A

Andante moderato

Pa - ce e gio - ia sia con vo - i | Mil - le gra - zie, nons'in -
co - mo - di. Gio - ia e pa - ce per mil - l'an - ni. Ob - bli - ga - to in ve - ri - tà |
Pa - ce e gio - ia sia con vo - i.

Esempio B

CELLULA aa

Esempio C

A un dot - tor del - la mia sor - te que - ste scu - se si - gno - ri - na

Esempio D

vi con - si - glio mia ca - ri - na

Esempio E

A un dot - tor del - la mia sor - te que - ste scu - se si - gno - ri - na

Rossini is closer to the opposite pole. His characters are always psychologically the same from start to finish. The musician is not interested in the psychological development of the characters, their emotional states. They are consciously treated as *types*, figures plastically and permanently carved from their first appearance, and not subject to change. They are rather like the stock figures of the old comedy, or the characters in the puppet theatre.

“Rossini is therefore not much concerned with the psychological processes of his characters. They are not individuals in the strict sense, rather symbolic incarnations of certain conceptions of the world.”¹³ So Rosina “is invariably flirtatious and mischievous, as suggested in the prelude to the cavatina ‘Una voce poco fa,’ alternating energetic and supple rhythms with anxious breaks in the phrasing: ‘Ma se mi toccano...’ Even the trills acquire an impetuous and dangerously artful character.” Almoviva “is clearly characterised as the eternal gallant; this is maintained from beginning to end (except where he is pretending to be a soldier or Jesuit) sentimental and suitor, with motifs filled with coy trills.” We have already considered the character of the two basses, Don Bartolo and Don Basilio: the first, “the elderly, pretentious, suspicious grouch” in the aria “A un dottor della mia sorte”; the second appears in the music of the aria “La calunnia,” “with a pompous, falsely hieratic clamour, heightened by the cavernous timbre of his voice.” The most sharply sculpted figure, the *deus ex machina* of the work, is Figaro. “The few bars of the prelude followed by the full orchestra heralding his arrival already cast a vivid light on the chutzpah, the astute braggadocio, of

this loudmouthed fixer and swashbuckler, so boisterously festive.” “The shimmering violins tell us Figaro’s brain is already simmering [...]. But note that at the first moment the orchestra plays *piano* before growing in intensity: it is a world being born still confusedly, a mystery. Yet it precludes something grand, as indicated by the tempo marking: not just ‘allegro’ but ‘allegro maestoso.’ Whenever Figaro ponders on some subtle and artful plan, this witty motif, when he launches into ‘All’idea di quel metallo,’ fires his mind, is repeated like a *leitmotiv*”¹⁴ (example B).

In this opera, Figaro is presented as “one of the greatest characters in the history of opera; and this in perfect keeping with the character Beaumarchais created by transforming the old role of the servant into the exponent of the spirit of enterprise, fearless through all reverses of fortune, and despite his social inferiority, hence a symbol of the bourgeois spirit in the battle against the privilege of birth. [...] A many-sided character, ready to change direction, and always driven by an irrepressible vitality.” His appearance on the scene is “delayed by suspense: for over forty bars the orchestra announces his arrival, while his voice reaches us in an occasional ‘la ran la ran’ from offstage.”¹⁵

Vocalisations and repetitions

Prosodic realism seems to be contradicted in song (a line that winds around the line with which those given words would be uttered in speech, as Diderot explained) by the systematic and continuous use Rossini makes of two practices: one is *vocalisation* (coloratura, trills, melisma), i.e. the development of a melodic turn on a single vowel; the other is the continuous repetition of the same word,

or phrase. Such practices are occasional in speech, normal in song, and in Rossini particularly so. It is not difficult to make students grasp the reason for them and their meaning. In vocalisation, the word is only the starting point for an exploration of purely musical emotion. Speech ends up being dissolved, the voice becomes a pure musical instrument, tracing a long arabesque on this or that speech text. Get your students listen to the most famous example: Rosina’s aria “Una voce poco fa.” It was a common practice for singers vie with each by offering the public boldly virtuoso singing. This obviously jeopardised the unity or even the expressive meaning of the score. This was not Rossini’s case. To prevent this malpractice, but at the same time retain the value and elegance of coloratura singing, he wrote in his own vocalisations wherever necessary, by their exuberance expressing the exuberant emotions of the character.

As for the repetition of words and phrases, this is another device of the musical code that seems to conflict with the principles of linguistic communication. The breakthrough in the difficult process of understanding operatic language lies in acknowledging that a verbal text itself does not need to be supplemented musically; but that when this exists, then the musical code requires heightened attention from the listener.

The repetition of a text in music has the function of allowing the composer to expand the melody, to develop the musical architecture of the score. A good example is the Don Bartolo’s aria “A un dottor della mia sorte” with what follows up to “meglio meglio meglio meglio.” The tone is peremptory, with that rhythm of a quarter note with two dots,

followed by the quivering of the strings (example C). The repetition of “meglio” is not a problem. Everyone sometimes repeats an exclamation, as when we are impatient and say to someone: “Go, go, go ...” And it is perfectly natural that on getting to end he repeats, “Vi consiglio mia carina un po’ meglio a imposturar.” Better to drive home the lesson, thinks the old man!

When we hear “Vi consiglio mia carina...” repeated for the third time, we discover the essential reason for the repetition: the quality that makes opera different from a play in prose. The third exposition serves Rossini to complete his musical development. As the verbal discourse comes to an end, the music continues, and renews itself in a surprising way: it is motif D: the true principal theme of the aria, which makes C appear as an introduction (example D). The melody that broke out impetuously from Rossini’s imagination could not find any other possibility in the libretto but to soar by repeating the same words. And here the Don Bartolo of the libretto starts all over again with “A un dottor della mia sorte,” while the Don Bartolo of the music literally gives wing to his reproaches on a third motif rich in vocalisation (example E). At this point, librettist and musician both start off together with new thoughts: the first by making Don Bartolo object to Rosina’s tricks: “I confetti alla ragazza...” as far as “ferma là non mi toccate”; the second with the witty business in the violins, soft and staccato, playing on the rhythmic cell aa (example B). Here composer and librettist swap approaches. While Don Bartolo in the libretto protests in new words: “figlia mia non lo sperate,” Don Bartolo in the music gives us in those words something he had already

sung before: motif D. It is not just a way of stimulating the listener's memory by restoring the principal motif to the foreground. It was also a requisite, according to the musical logic of the time (the period of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and the opera composers who were their contemporaries). Without the resumption of the principal motif, a musical discourse would have appeared ungrammatical. Music has its own rules, its structural principles, which are very different from those of prose. This is an essential idea to instil in our pupils, when introducing them to opera (and music in general).

Listening to Don Bartolo's reprimand will tell us much more, of course. We cannot afford to overlook the virtuoso patter in "Signorina un'altra volta...": this, too, with its internal repetitions of lyrics and music, which then glides (partly to allow the singer time to breathe!) into the reprise, in the guise of a coda, of the principal motif (D), sung to "Un dottor della mia sorte."

The above examples serve to illustrate the fact that music is guided by its own specific morphological and semantic rules, quite different from those of speech. Musicology, beginning with the essays in the volume *Vox Imago* and on this same DVD, offers us plenty of ideas for guiding students in their understanding.

A different example, offered by another musicologist, helps us to extend the listening to the *concertati* in the finales to the acts in the *Barbiere*. They follow a typical pattern, which is found fairly regularly in other operas by Rossini. A quadripartite scheme, introduced by a brief preparation, which serves to bring different characters together in single place.

Follow the four situations of finale I:

- "1. The characters meet and their tempers start to rise, triggering the dialectical clash that leads to the bursting of the dramatic-musical bombshell": "Che cosa accadde signori miei?"
- "2. A grand *concertato* of amazement as a reaction to the sudden twist in the action: everyone is astonished; psychological time is frozen; each expresses a sonorous silence—a highly eloquent dismay magically turned into song [...] with the voices entering as in a canon, one after the other": "Fredda ed immobile come una statua."
- "3. The characters regain awareness and return to reality: the action is renewed on the stage, with the dialogue becoming interpersonal [...], and the situation degenerates into a ruinous crisis": "Ma signor... Zitto tu."
- "4. A great inconclusive hubbub [...] with its irrepressible rhythms and stunning crescendo [...] until the final liberation":¹⁶ "Mi par d'esser con la testa."

Having taken note of this structural principle, it will not be difficult for the students to look for concertatos in Rossini's other operas, such as *L'italiana in Algeri* or *Cenerentola*.

The instruments

Rossini, as was customary, introduces the principal scenes with a brief instrumental episode, which serves to set the tone for the scene that follows. When the curtain rises we not the sharp contrast with the resounding tone lingering in our ears from the overture. The mood is mild and gentle. Fiorello and the musicians enter with light and gentle steps, expressed by the *pizzicato sottovoce* of the

strings. A serene melody is played by the violins, cellos and bassoon, with its sequel anticipating the motif with which Fiorello summons the musicians.

Preparing the vocal parts with an instrumental introduction was the norm in opera of the day. We find it in almost all the arias in the *Barbiere*, from the Count's "Ecco ridente in cielo" to "Di si felice innesto," which wraps up the opera.

An independent instrumental episode appears in the last act. In the orchestra Rossini evokes night, and after Berta's aria prepares the climax to the whole complicated plot. This is a topos in opera. It is often found in action films or thrillers, to create tension and fears. Rossini uses it in several of his works, from the *Barbiere* to *Cenerentola* and *Guillaume Tell*, with a clear dramatic function: to prepare for the 'catastrophe', meaning the dramatic climax which unravels the tangled intrigue. In the *Barbiere* we now have a situation that threatens to scupper the scheme concocted by the three plotters, Figaro, Almaviva and Rosina. Instead, it leads to the classic finale: the young couple are married, the two witnesses to the wedding are well paid, and the pompous old guardian is humbled. The tension created by the music fades, like the rainbow after a storm.

In the *Barbiere*, voice and instruments both have an essential function. But in two distinct ways, depending on whether the composer's interest is focused on one or the other. In the first case it is the orchestra that plays the leading part. With "its typically ample and perfectly formed instrumental configurations that absorb the listener's utmost interest: the voice is adapted to it almost like a tonal projection that reproduces the line of

melody or, wholly devoid of melody, scans its rhythmic pattern, wholly or by formants."¹⁷ The vocal line is "closely tied to the principal musical line unfolded by the instruments. The main care of the voice seems to be to conceal itself and camouflage its presence in the symphonic event."

In the second case the situation is reversed. "Here it is the voice that has the dominant part and guides the discourse, unfolding with an abundant and regular profusion of symmetric melismas (or, in the bass arias, with a delirious rush of phonemes through the rapid patter). The vocalistic treatment retains an instrumental character." If in the first case "it was the stripping of the singing to a simple rhythmic pulsation or angular instrumental patterns"; here "the orchestra simply scans a regular rhythm without offering alternatives to the thematic vocal line." But there is also a hybrid situation, in which the two components are balanced, and one might say they collaborate.

Let the students listen to the duet between Figaro and the Count in Act I: "All'idea di quel metallo": here the precipitous inrush of the strings merely expands and strengthens the vocal line. But as soon as the Count wants to know what Figaro has in mind, the phrases of song intervene, only to continue the discourse begun by flute and violins: "Su vediamo, su vediam di quel metallo." The instrumental motif becomes the principal axis of the rest of the duet (the quasi-*leitmotiv* B whose reference we read in Roncaglia's comment).

In this way the dialogue continues. The predominance of the word becomes the festive compliments that the pair heap on each other: "Che invenzione, che invenzione..."

The total predominance of the orchestra appears when Figaro tells the Count his address: "Numero quindici a mano manca." The voice remains stuck for 28 beats on a single note, D, a monotonous chant, which acts as a simple drone, a pedal point, while the orchestra fully anticipates the melody which the Count sings shortly after: "Ah che d'amore la fiamma io sento."

The students themselves should now find a section in some other scene where one of the two elements, voice or orchestra, predominates with the other acting strictly as a support. They could start with the aria where Rosina makes her charming temper known: "Una voce poco fa." Or the entrance of the fake drunken soldier ("Ehi di casa buona gente"), which offers a chance to point out the military march, which Rossini entrusts to the full orchestra as a way of introducing the Count.

Why we laugh

Rossini's masterpiece lends itself to thinking, together with the students, about the conception and properties of the *comic*. This subject was dealt with comprehensively and in depth by the philosopher Henri Bergson, in a text that has become a classic: *Le rire (Laughter)*.

Among the different situations and conditions that stir laughter we can choose those best suited to our students, and found in the *Barbiere*.

The first is experienced every day, in the company of friends, at the theatre or cinema. In Bergson's words: "You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo."¹⁸ It creates "a complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary."

"Laughter must have a social significance. It strengthens social ties between laughers. And at the same time it blocks empathy for those we laugh at."

A second is rigid behaviour that turns people into automations. "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are ridiculous in the exact extent to which this body suggests a simple mechanism." "Our starting-point is again *something mechanical encrusted upon the living*." What gives rise to comic situations? The fact that "the living body became rigid, like a machine." In behaviour as in psychology. "It need only be noted that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic is unconscious."

The comic also arises from neutral situations, repeated in unexpected ways. Bergson provides a striking example: "On the street one day I meet a friend I have not seen for a long time. There is nothing comical about the situation. But if we meet again on the same day, and again a third time and a fourth, we end up laughing again at the 'coincidence'." The reversal of normal roles is also comic: the persecutor who becomes the victim of the persecuted or a thief robbed.

More subtle is another feature of comedy, or rather another condition for it to take place: "Feeling is the greatest enemy of laughter." "To produce the full comic effect calls for something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart." Trash television display situations where people, even children, or animals act clumsily and even get hurt. Broadcast programmers know that viewers laugh because they have no emotional connection with the victims. No one would laugh at an old man tripping up, a child crashing a sled, or a dog

trapped in a wire fence, if they were members of the family circle.

In everyday life, as well as the cinema or theatre, we are familiar with occasions for laughter arising out of the dialogue or just the characters' gestures. There are even quips in Sterbini's libretto. In the opening scene, when the Count meets his old friend Figaro: "Conte: Ti vedo grasso e tondo." Figaro replies: "La miseria, signore!"

Jokes contain a typically inexhaustible repertoire of comic effects achieved by playing on words.

As for gestures, the stock situation is that of the character who imitates another's gestures without his knowledge. In the *Barbiere* (both in the original French and in Sterbini's libretto) an irresistible scene is the ballet Don Bartolo improvises while singing "When you are near me, sweet Rosina." Figaro behind him takes off his ludicrous movements.

If we keep to the point that concerns us here, the music, we laugh at the situations described by Bergson, starting with that rigidity of character, that absence of empathy with each other, which makes each of them a *type*, a puppet, hence something mechanical. The distinctive characters in comic comedies clash: here the wily Figaro before the elderly, stupid and crabby Don Bartolo (already comic in his jealousy for Rosina, whom we imagine to be little more than adolescent). But Figaro also shows he is smarter than his master, Count Almaviva. When they sing "Che invenzione, che invenzione" together in Act I, the audience realise the invention is Figaro's, not the Count's.

Almaviva's repeated disguises are hilarious: the soldier who bursts drunk into sober Don Bartolo's house (with a reversal of roles: the

fake soldier presenting himself as master of Don Bartolo's house); then a repetition of the situation: the fake music teacher who finally manages to speak to Rosina while Figaro covers Don Bartolo with his work as a barber. No less comical is the sudden appearance of Don Basilio, and the reaction of Figaro and company: they make him believe they have scarlet fever, and send him home for treatment. On the smaller scale, there is also humour in the (sung!) repetition of words and phrases by a single character, or between one character and another.

These are all points we could suggest young people might look for in the cinema, with an interdisciplinary approach. Opera and film have much in common, they overlap. The functions that music has in opera (painting characters, heightening mental states, preparing situations, accentuating them, evoking past events, etc.) appear in the music accompanying film sequences.

From the start, comedy played an important part in cinema. School offers an opportunity to recover young people's appreciation of the masterpieces of the past, which the mechanism of consumerism tends to efface from the awareness of contemporary viewers. Who today enjoys the comic masterpieces that are the silent movies of Buster Keaton or Harry Langdon, not to mention the dense comedy of Chaplin's pathos? From here we can go on to the surreal comedy of Mel Brooks or Jacques Tati, or even the coarse humour of Fantozzi, and hopefully no further. On the Web there are endless lists of comic films from past to present. As for prose comedy, there is an inexhaustible series of masterpieces: from Aristophanes to Plautus and Petronius, the inevitable Boccaccio with the

Decameron, and then Rabelais (*Gargantua and Pantagruel*), Cervantes (*Don Quixote*), Molière and Goldoni and all the way to the Jaroslav Hasek's *Good Soldier Schweik* and a series of irrepressible comic masterpieces of our own time.

Later we will see one more reason, perhaps even more important, to get to know the ways and forms of comedy close up, making a valuable contribution to the education, not only in music, of young people. First we have to consider some essential aspects of the *Barbiere*, in particular the one, barely touched on so far, of the *type* of its characters. Then we have to deal with a topic that has been the subject of much controversy in the past among critics: the overture, with its ambiguous history.

The rhythmic charge

We can look more closely at the essence of the *types*, or *puppets*, or even *caricatures*, if you like, mechanically fixed, peculiar to *opera buffa*, and the *Barbiere* to a superlative degree. Rossini makes fun of humanity, which acts in life as if driven by forces they show they are unable to control, being dominated by them. It is a comic version of the words uttered with tragic force by Macbeth in Shakespeare's play: "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Rossini is poles apart from Shakespeare. But essentially there is an affinity between them: our world is like a great lunatic asylum, where individuals are driven by overpowering forces, just as a marionette is moved by mysterious wires. Hence the absurdity to which, from such distant and opposing sides, the staging of life seems to lead. Through their paradoxes, both seem to look at the world, and invite us to look at it, so to speak, from below.

The situations Rossini puts on the stage are ordinary, commonplace, but perhaps because of this they attain the ethical purpose. Which is the object of every work of art: to open our eyes, as the saying goes, but at least in the case of music we might say to *open our ears*, to the dynamics of life, both private and social. In our world events happen in a way that we tend to see/hear as ordered and consequential. Our timepieces guarantee the rationality of our time. Rossini instead, as we have seen, *suspends time*, giving us situations that contradict normal logic.

The instrument in his expressive arsenal that underpins his language is recognised almost unanimously by scholars. It is *rhythm*. Rhythm is the driving force of the stage action.

Rossini's music comedy almost always consists in the rhythmic-melodic deformation of speech, of certain words that characterise a theatrical-musical action. A quick and mischievous wit like Rossini's was led to reveal the absurdity of certain propositions and expressions that in everyday life, in both noble and bourgeois institutions, were meaningless and therefore easily resolved into the ridiculous, just as in the stereotyped schemes of second-rate poets in opera seria.¹⁹

The rhythm "almost always has Rossini's obstinate character; and it is precisely from the mechanical and constant repetition of rhythmic microstructures (reproducing morphemes and phonemes) that the discourse acquires a meaning and makes a psychological impact on the listener." This clockwork rhythm is the way he discovered to present a mechanical humanity. And again:

Rossini never adapts the musical rhythm to the scansion of the word, but rather reduces the syllabic articulation of the word to the logic of the musical rhythm, subjecting it to the inexorable space-time structure of rhythmical symmetry. The word is as if interrupted, automated, often reduced to the scansion of these repeated notes that is one of the most common formulas and characteristics of Rossini's burlesque.

Rossini sets in motion and sustains most of his scenes with pounding pulsations of quavers in binary, ternary or quaternary groups, in simple or compound time, and at different speeds.

The overture

On *Vox Imago's* website teachers will find useful ideas for teaching that can be transferred from the lesson on one opera to that on another. One of these proposals, as suggested in the guide to Mozart's *Magic Flute*, concerns the function of the overture (or symphony, or prelude): instrumental page usually placed beginning of the spectacle. We can examine essentially three functions:

- signal function: it simply announces the start of the show. This was the function of the Baroque overture, starting from Monteverdi's *Orfeo*;
- direct introduction to the opening scene. This is the function favoured by Puccini. For example, in *Gianni Schicchi*, the motif entrusted to the orchestra before the curtain goes up is the same that accompanies the fake lamentations of the characters who appear on stage;
- sum up the inner meaning of the story. Emblematic in this respect are Verdi's over-

tures to *Nabucco*, *La forza del destino*, and *I vespri siciliani*. A similar function is performed, but more succinctly, in the prelude to *La traviata* and *Carmen*.

And in the *Barbiere*? We can say that the overture matches none of the three functions listed. For one simple reason: Rossini did not compose it for this opera, but lifted it from *Aureliano in Palmira*, a drama composed three years earlier. It recounts the deeds of the Roman emperor in Persia, hence a drama *serio*! And he used it again in 1815 for another drama *serio*: *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*. As the titles suggest, these operas were remote from the world of Figaro.

This was commonly done, as was the practice of taking over arias composed for earlier works that had little to do with the new subject. Again in *Cenerentola*, Rossini took the overture from an earlier work, *La gazetta*. If the young people have understood that an overture is a preparation, in one way or another, for the plot of the opera, how can they understand Rossini's apparent indifference to the task of introducing audiences to the story he is about to relate through the overture? The simple answer is that Rossini was not at all interested in relating the overture to specific events in the two acts of his opera. But it would be too easy to think that the overture to *Il barbiere* precedes the work in the same way that we might hear it in a symphony concert followed by a Brahms Concerto.

In thinking about the *opera buffa* that will soon be performed on the stage, one influential musicologist wrote, "the listener is led to hear [in the overture] Rossini's smile that heralds the coming laughter." But didn't Rossini write this overture for an *opera seria*? "This matters so little that even the famous mel-

ody that emerges from the *Allegro vivace*, despite the plaintive minor intonation, now acquires [for the same listener] an ironic flavour. The rhythmic-melodic discourse develops, playing hide and seek, then bursts out joyfully, before subsiding and disappearing in the fragments of the usual 'suspension'.²⁰ A gratuitous, far-fetched interpretation? We cannot honestly preclude the possibility that Rossini thought of all this, when he cobbled together the earlier pages to the score, or even later, when the performance was over. For instance, he may well have found in the *cantabile* theme of the overture some affinity to a serene dialogue between Figaro and Almaviva; or in the concluding crescendo an echo of the words with which Don Basilio seals the agreement with Don Bartolo. In other words, it might have been the composer himself who invested his overture with a new, comprehensive and profound significance as he placed it in a different context. Just as we can take over texts or images just as they are, giving them a title that makes them a different aesthetic object. This lesson that could also be used in school: "Each of us [...] as an artist is free to use existing works of art for new creations." So Benedetto Croce justified the operation, instancing the example of the revolution in meaning that a sonnet by the poet Tansillo acquired by the simple representation in a philosophical perspective by Giordano Bruno of what was originally a hymn to love. A "palimpsest" Croce called this kind of operation.²¹ We can go more deeply into something inherent in Rossini's ideas and personality. Something that Rossini felt inwardly, and to which the overture to *Aureliano* offered attractive materials. Not the evocation of con-

crete situations, like Verdi's overtures, say, but more abstract situations, which go right to the heart of Rossini's inspiration, with its core: the unstoppable dynamism, life imagined as "the tale told by an idiot," evoked by Macbeth: nonsense. Essentially, Rossini's renunciation of opera after 1829 can be traced to this philosophy: life as nonsense, about which one tries to laugh, but which one also tries to distance oneself from.

The significance we could then attribute to the *Barbiere* overture is not directly related to the story line. But it becomes indirectly relevant. The *sinfonia* appears as a coloured glass which, though unrelated to the work to which it is applied, helps reveal it to us in a new and unexpected light. The same applies to practically all Rossini's other overtures (but not the one to *William Tell*, which is closely related to the action of the play). They really could be the prelude to either a tragedy or a farce, because they are actually a prelude to what appears to Rossini as the spectacle of life. We saw above that, in Rossini's operas, he is more interested in the dynamic of the action than the specific psychology of the characters and situations. Both are rather gear wheels, in a certain sense neutral, of the machinations renewed with an inexhaustible imagination. For this reason, in his output as a whole, they can be moved from one work to another without appearing out of place. Because what matters to him is not to characterise *this* particular action, but to immerse these actions (whatever they are) in a frenzied space-time, which eludes the control of reason or the logic of the feelings.

Two musicologists put it differently. Luigi Rognoni observes that Rossini's overture "serves above all to prepare the listeners for

the physical joy of sound, to electrify them. It enables them to immediately and confidently identify Rossini's formula, which in the shrill chatter of the instruments heralds the bickering voices of the characters on the stage."²² Fedele d'Amico notes that the open function of the overture "simply reflects the roots of Rossini's poetic [...] which] lies in the expression of an ideal beauty, driven by impulses that are not psychological but purely vitalistic, until they attain an orgiastic exaltation; a process that may well be guided by an expressive trace of certain situations or a particular dramatic adventure (whether 'serious' or 'comic'), but always in order to transcend them."²³ This is why characters and situations could be moved easily from one opera to other without creating inconsistencies. And it was in fact what Rossini did many times, to the unjustified scandal of some right-thinking people ...

Rossini as philosopher

At its appearance, Rossini's music aroused a bitter dispute across Europe, between a strong majority that was won over and a hostile minority. A great philosopher, Hegel, recognised this and sided with Rossini's admirers. "Finally people have disputed in a similar way for or against Rossini and the newer Italian school. Rossini's opponents decry his music as a mere empty tickling of the ear; but when we become more accustomed to its melodies, we find this music on the contrary full of feeling and genius, piercing the mind and heart, even if it does not have to do with the sort of characterization beloved of our strict German musical intellect." It was his own rigorous "German intellect" that led him to admit that "all too often Rossini is un-

faithful to his text and with his free melodies soars over all the heights, and so the result is that we can only choose whether to stick to the subject-matter and grumble at the music that no longer harmonizes with it, or alternatively to abandon the subject-matter and take unhindered delight in the free inspirations of the composer and enjoy with fullness of soul the soul that they contain."²⁴ Infidelity to the text? Lack of concord between text and music? Or rather an original relationship, in which, whenever the composer wished to, he was capable of penetrating into the emotional state of each character, and most of the time-perhaps this is the cause of Hegel's concern-invests the whole situation, so to speak, from above?

Rossini manages to embody what Hegel regarded as "the most profound need of comedy," which is not satisfied to laugh at people's "foolishness, mindlessness, or stupidity," but enjoys the infinite certainty of being able to rise above its own contradiction and of not being at all sad or unhappy in this. Figaro in the *Barbiere*, for instance, is a character of this kind. Others, the audience, do not laugh at him, at any defects of his; he is not the "object of others' laughter," but he can indulge in free and happy laughter, expressive of his pleasure in intrigue and adventure, but essentially of his *joie de vivre*, his electrifying vitality. Like the other characters in the *Barbiere*, Figaro is characterised psychologically by Rossini's music; and yet even more than Figaro, that Figaro, singing those words, performing those actions, he is the first impulse of gaiety that pervades the whole opera, of a comicality celebrated as a value in itself. Rossini's comic characters are so like many different paths that flow into a

single great high road, the one where happy subjectivity lingers, sometimes happily detached from one's awareness.²⁵

Laughter will bury you

At the end of the *Barbiere* the characters exit, all satisfied in one way or another. Figaro is exalted in his inexhaustible explosive creativity, Don Basilio paid off with hard cash, Rosina and the Count united happily in marriage. No, not all of them, to tell the truth. Even if we leave aside the maid Berta in her humble corner, a figure who comes to life in the opera only to complain of her old age, excluded from the enticements of love, the character who comes out of the story line mocked, humiliated and defeated at the end is the old guardian Don Bartolo. Even more than by his fellow characters, he is defeated by the ridicule heaped up on the list of his failings supplied by Rossini: harshness, arrogance, jealousy, authoritarianism, avarice... The work's humour stems not just from the droll situations created, but above all the tricks the company play on Don Bartolo through his own actions. The imbroglios of Rosina, Figaro and the Count are so many punishments that Rossini inflicts on him. The same happens to Verdi's Falstaff. The play ends, and of course we cannot say whether the lesson has been useful. In real life lessons recur constantly, and we can follow what happens next. In real life we find people who are rigid, authoritarian, jealous etc., and even cruel. In life, the part of the positive heroes of the *Barbiere*, or rather the part of Rossini, can be taken by each of us if we are able to take advantage of laughter to neutralise harmful behaviour. *Castigat ridendo mores*: laughter corrects morals. The celebrated

Latin maxim tells us that by covering morals and customs with ridicule, we can effectively help reform them.

The other subtitle, *Laughter will bury you*, was coined in the past by protesters against political authority, to express essentially the same great truths, whatever one's political colour. Someone wrote that if the crowd that gathered beneath the balcony in Piazza Venezia, observing Mussolini's pompous gestures and phrases, had burst into laughter, perhaps the world would be a different place. Let us take advantage of more modest opportunities at school. After all, the Duce and his great friend Hitler did not change a jot of their plans after seeing themselves covered with ridicule by Chaplin's caricatures in *The Great Dictator*. But at least it stirred the collective conscience of those who were able to see it. Who can rule out the possibility that the sobering of the collective consciousness in the years of nuclear nightmare did not draw at least a hint from seeing Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, which ends with the image of the mad major astride the atomic missile launched to destroy the planet?

The survey we suggested above, concerning the forms and properties of the comic, could Bergson's masterly essay and make it the starting point for the students' creative activity.

Without exploring the tragic themes that are jeopardising our societies today, and which seem to resurrect so many Dr. Strangeloves in every corner of the planet, what cases do they know from everyday situations that could be the subject of their creations? It is easy to put together a list: hooligans in sport, bullying, gender bias, contempt for diversity, environment damage... So many possible

themes for our students to work on (again preferably in groups) devising their own comic opera: a story in which the object of their sanction is turned to caricature, satire, or theatre of the absurd. And so much is gained for musical education, if this or that motif, at least instrumental if not sung, could be used as a soundtrack for the completed work.

First extension: thunderstorms in music

All the practical work we here plan to offer our students can also be taken as a launch pad to glide over the content and objectives of a different kind. We can examine a pair. The first deals with the final scene of the opera, where Rossini inserts the instrumental piece evoking the storm. He is clearly not the only musician, or the first, to attempt to represent the inclemency of mother nature. At least since, Vivaldi, the subject has always been an occasion that stimulated composers' instrumental palette.

Comparing the different scores can have at least a couple of advantages. First it facilitates us in one of the basic experiences of music education: an analysis of the means that composers use to express the situations they are inspired by (instruments, rhythms, melodies...). Then, on the basis of this analysis, we can grasp the expressive content procured by these means.

From Vivaldi on, teachers can find a variety of music inspired by storms or tempests. The example of Rossini's *Barbiere* (doubled with the similar example from *Cenerentola*) can be supplemented with Verdi's *Rigoletto*: we are again at the final turning point in the plot; a tragic event, which ends with Gilda's murder. Verdi intensifies the drama on the page by entrusting the evocation of

the storm wind to a chorus hummed by male voices.

Now look at the orchestral score. In Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, "van coprendo l'aere di nero ammanto e lampi e tuoni" [a cloak of black with thunder and lightning is covering the air], wrote the composer himself at the start of the first movement of *Primavera*; "Tuona e fulmina il ciel" [Thunder and lightning in the sky] in *Estate*. While in the Concerto *Autunno*, Bacchus shelters us from inclement weather, Boreas rages for almost the whole Concerto of *Inverno*. A listener who was unaware of the subject, which the composer himself describes in his sonnets, could hardly imagine the object of the description. For the simple reason that Vivaldi could only make use of the expressive resources of his day, a small orchestra of strings, in the same way, made up of thematic repetitions, harmonic passages, repeats, dynamics, with which he composed his untitled concertos. This does not mean that he had the weather in mind in the concertos of the *Seasons*, but that he could only listen to them through the scheme available to the musical language of his time: the late Baroque language.

Far from the world of Vivaldi is the third movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, which enables us to follow the course of a thunderstorm, from the first drops evoked by the quick staccato notes of the violins to the sudden explosion in which the whole orchestra takes part, suggesting the onrush of the elements. Then follows a burst of timpani with darting violins to suggest the lightning. The climax is reached when Beethoven inserts the piccolo, rarely used in orchestras of the day. Gradually the climate brightens, as often happens in summer. The oboe plays us a placid

motif: the theme of the rain, greatly slowed: the sound symbol for the rainbow, which restores serenity in the sky and hearts. Of the *Pastoral*, Beethoven wrote that it was more painting of feelings than of nature. But this applies to all the nineteenth-century composers who grappled with natural events.

To find a description that abstracts from feeling and seeks to render closely the unfolding sound of a thunderstorm, onomatopoeically, we can play the corresponding episode from the *Grand Canyon Suite* by the American Ferde Grofé. It begins with a motif that recalls a cowboy song, like the calm before the storm. Gradually the atmosphere comes alive. A tremolo of the gong warns us that something disturbing is about to arrive. The tempo becomes Allegro and unleashes the elements, with alternating insertions of the different instruments of the orchestra: glissandos of violins, piano, harp.... Before normality returns, there is one last violent roar of the hurricane, until calm is restored. A twentieth-century composer like Grofé could draw on an orchestral palette and a set of compositional procedures that enabled him to achieve what was impossible to Vivaldi: to ensure, as some wag commented on the musical episode, that listeners felt the need to open their umbrellas, so realistic is the imitation of acoustic reality.

Second extension: the comic in instrumental music

The comic spirit finds expression in a number of operas and operettas, as well as *Lieder* or popular songs. *Lieder* worth getting students to listen to include the *Song of the Flea*, a setting of Goethe's poem by Beethoven and later Mussorgsky. The comparison would bring

out two remarkably different ways of imagining the king who becomes enamoured of a flea to the point of installing a special throne for it beside him. Then, just as often happens among humans, it ends up with the whole family of fleas moving in at court.²⁶ As for popular songs, from Jannacci to Elio e le Storie tese, teachers are spoiled for choice. The comic in these pages stems from the union of words and music. But can comic effects ever be achieved by music without words, by instrumental music alone? Such cases are rare, but they exist.

Pure music may also take on traits of parody. In this case it seeks by excess or defect to counterfeit its formal apparatus, bring out its procedural mannerisms and constructional errors. The construction may be deliberately disordered, formally unhinged, for the listeners' amusement. The flaws in the works' construction or execution are then highlighted, raised to caricature and displayed, produced by extreme skill, not the unskillfulness of a village musician.²⁷

Scholars instance Mozart's *Musical Joke* K. 522, which makes fun of the blundering musicians. It takes the ear of a listener educated to Mozart's musical language to be able to appreciate the players' comic blunders.

A different case is offered by the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály, in the symphonic suite from his *Háry János*, the protagonist of many popular legends of his country. Háry János is a loudmouth with an inexhaustible imagination, a braggart who boasts he is capable of the most incredible feats, as when he sets off, all alone, to wage war on Napoleon's army. The theme that accom-

panies him is boldly assigned to the trombones, then repeated with the addition of trumpets and percussion. The loud clash of cymbals interrupts the theme. People laugh and mock Háry. Kodály mimics laughter with the glissando of the brass and the trilling of piccolos. Poor Háry is upset, but soon snaps out of it, and the story goes on, bolder than before. Again he is interrupted, and this time Háry loses his temper: woe betide those who dare to do so again! Because he is going to tell of his most glorious enterprise: when all alone with his sword he faced the whole French army. A drumbeat: a famous theme gradually emerges: played on the trombones and tuba and distorted. It is the *Marseillaise*, the anthem of the army that Háry defeated. It evokes Napoleon himself kneeling to Háry enthroned: he and his army submit and beg forgiveness. Here Kodály inserts a short funeral march. Even a funeral march can be funny!

It is true that the comic meaning of the situation is reinforced by the story underlying the orchestral score. The fact remains that the humour is created by purely musical means. An even more persuasive example of the possibility of suggesting comedy to the listener is offered by another great Hungarian composer, Béla Bartók. In 1941, when Leningrad was being besieged by the Nazi army, Shostakovich composed his Symphony No. 7, evoking the tragic events of those days. In the first movement he introduces a theme that is then repeated twelve times, in a relentless continuous crescendo entrusted to an ever larger orchestra, over the ostinato rhythm of the percussion: a pattern

borrowed explicitly from Ravel's *Bolero*. With this theme the composer sought to suggest the increasingly stifling pressure of the German army. The microfilm of the symphony luckily managed to escape the siege of Leningrad. It was taken to an allied country, the United States, and there continually performed and broadcast over the radio: it was enthralling music, meant to inflame warlike feelings in its listeners. Not all of them, however, felt this collective exaltation. Béla Bartók lay ill in a New York hospital bed. A musician with a retiring personality, very different from the unabashed Soviet composer. He was so vexed by hearing Shostakovich's music broadcast continuously on the radio that he decided to parody it, and chose the 'Nazi theme'. He was then composing his delightful Concerto for Orchestra. The main theme is playful. But something breaks in to disturb the party... A rather lame *zum pa pa*, and Shostakovich's very motif appears in *accelerando*: it is executed by the clarinet, lengthening it out and adorning it with musical squiggles that turn it to ridicule. But the harshest ridicule, true mockery, are the tremolos and scales of the orchestra and especially the glissandos of the tuba, that crown the closed theme. Bartók seems to be recounting the serenity of a peaceful life now degenerated into a circus atmosphere. And so, over a band (woodwind and brass) unleashed in a fairground roundabout tune, the violins repeat Shostakovich's motif for a second time, leaping comically. It returns one last time, from an instrument that leaves no doubt about the composer's ironic intentions: the tuba! Complete with a final chuckle.

NOTES

1. *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, edited by Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio (Milan: Commissione esecutiva per le onoranze a Giuseppe Verdi, 1913), 415.
2. ILDEBRANDO PIZZETTI, *Intermezzi critici* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1914), 115.
3. PHILIP GOSSETT, *Gioachino Rossini*, in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, xvi, 232.
4. Teachers can find a course of prosodic education, with a series of activities, in the volume: CARLO DELFRATI, *La voce espressiva* (Milan: Principato, 2001).
5. DENIS DIDEROT, *Le neveu de Rameau* (Genève: Caillet, 1950), 78-79.
6. GINO RONCAGLIA, *Rossini l'olimpico* (Milan: Bocca, 1953), 169-171.
7. ANDREA DELLA CORTE, *Paisiello* (Turin: Bocca, 1922), 91.
8. LUIGI ROGNONI, *Gioacchino Rossini* (Rome: ERI, 1968), 62-63.
9. STENDHAL, *Life of Rossini* (New York: Criterion Books, 1957), 221.
10. CARL DAHLHAUS, "Le strutture temporali nel teatro d'opera," in *La drammaturgia musicale*, edited by Lorenzo Bianconi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 183-184.
11. *Ibid.*, 184.
12. It is true that opera developed as accompanied recitative at the dawn of the seventeenth century, but we also know that a musical genius—think of Monteverdi—was capable of filling with pathos the dull lines of early recitative, giving rise to the first great opera masterpieces. This could be studied more fully by a teacher interested in conducting a lesson on the history of opera.
13. ALESSANDRA LAZZERINI BELLI, "Hegel e Rossini: 'Il cantar che nell'anima si sente,'" *Revue belge de musicologie*, II (1995), 211-230. It can be consulted online at <http://users.unimi.it/gpiana/dm1/dm1rosal.htm>.
14. RONCAGLIA, *Rossini l'olimpico*, 284-290.
15. FEDELE D'AMICO, *Il teatro di Rossini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), 89, 91-92.
16. MARCO BEGHELLI, "Morfologia dell'opera italiana da Rossini a Puccini," in *Enciclopedia della musica*, directed by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, IV: *Storia della musica europea* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), 902-903. Consultable online at <http://users.unimi.it/musica/programmi/melo-Beghelli.pdf>.
17. PAOLO GALLARATI, "Dramma e *ludus* dall'*Italiana* al *Barbiere*," in *Il melodramma italiano dell'Ottocento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 239. The following quotes are from p. 242.
18. HENRI BERGSON, "Le rire," in *Oeuvres. Édition du Centenaire* (Paris: PUF), 389. The following quotes are from pp. 401, 410, 430-431, 432, 388, 389.
19. LUIGI ROGNONI, "Realismo comico e soggettivismo romantico in Rossini," in *Il Verri*, 27 (1973), 6; following quotation on pp. 10 and 7.
20. ROGNONI, *Gioacchino Rossini*, 183.
21. BENEDETTO CROCE, *Problemi di estetica* (Bari: Laterza, 1949), 136.
22. ROGNONI, "Realismo comico," 11.
23. D'AMICO, *Il teatro di Rossini*, 61-62.
24. GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL, *Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 1260. In the previous pages Hegel had distanced himself from "today's dramatic music [that] often seeks its effects in violent contrasts by forcing into a single musical movement contrasting passions artistically at odds. Hence, for instance, it expresses cheerfulness, a wedding, festivities, and then shoves in at the same time hate, revenge, and enmity, so that in the midst of pleasure, joy, and dance-music there is a storm of violent quarrels and highly unpleasant discords." He was not referring to Rossini, but the Romantics, starting from Weber and his *Freischütz* (in Chapter 3 of Part I). While what disturbed him in Rossini was immediately neutralised by the irresistible fascination that the music aroused in him, his condemnation of Romantic opera was unreserved. To grasp the heated atmosphere in those years, read this judgement that circulated at the time in the salons of Vienna itself: "Mozart and Beethoven are old pedants, the stupidity of the previous age enjoyed them. Only after Rossini is it known what melody is. *Fidelio* is rubbish: it is hard to understand how people can bear to listen to it, to be bored," quoted by LAZZERINI BELLI, "Hegel e Rossini." Teachers of philosophy who intend to get their students to analyse and understand the ideas of Hegel on music, the philosopher offers the whole of Chapter 2 of Part III of the *Aesthetics*.
25. LAZZERINI BELLI, "Hegel e Rossini."
26. I offered a comparison between the two works in the textbook for schools *All'opera insieme* (Milan: Principato, 2008), 72-73. The subsequent examples regarding Bartók and Kodály are from the same text.
27. FAUSTO PETRELLA, "Spazio artistico e umoristico in musica," in *Cantando e scherzando* (Cremona: Cremonabooks, 2014), 14. It offers a lucid analysis of musical comedy.