

# VOX IMAGO

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GIOACHINO ROSSINI  
THE JOURNEY TO RHEIMS

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TEATRO ALLA SCALA



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## THE JOURNEY TO RHEIMS

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### LISTENING GUIDE

Philip Gossett

We know practically nothing about the events that led to the composition of *Il viaggio a Reims*, the first and only Italian opera Rossini wrote for Paris. It was a celebratory work, first performed on 19 June 1825, honoring the coronation of Charles X, who had been crowned King of France at the Cathedral of Rheims on 29 May 1825. After the King returned to Paris, his coronation was celebrated in many Parisian theaters, among them the Théâtre Italien. The event offered Rossini a splendid occasion to present himself to the Paris that mattered, especially the political establishment. He had served as the director of the Théâtre Italien from November 1824, but thus far he had only reproduced operas originally written for Italian stages, often with new music composed for Paris. For the coronation opera, however, it proved important that the Théâtre Italien had been annexed by the Académie Royale de Musique already in 1818. Rossini therefore had at his disposition the finest instrumentalists in Paris. He took advantage of this opportunity and wrote his opera with those musicians in mind. He also drew on the entire company of the Théâtre Italien, so that he could produce an opera with a large number of remarkable solo parts (ten major roles and another eight minor ones).

Plans for multitudinous celebrations for the coronation of Charles X were established by the municipal council of Paris in a decree of 7 February 1825. Rossini was hard at work on his opera by 24 April, and rehearsals had begun by early June. We have no information about the genesis of the libretto by Luigi Balochi, poet and stage director at the Théâtre Italien. He later worked with Rossini on the French librettos for *Le Siège de Corinthe* (1826), and *Moïse* (1827), and undertook the first Italian translation of *Guillaume Tell* (1830). Balocchi took the occasion of the coronation to insist upon the pan-European nature of the event, to offer unstinting praise of Charles X and the royal line, and to present Rossini with a series of situations that parody texts typical of Italian opera librettos. That the composer responded with music that is itself often parodistic hardly comes as a surprise. Yet it must be understood in order to appreciate fully his achievement in *Il viaggio a Reims*.

The libretto consists of only nine musical units, mostly separated from one another by secco recitative composed by Rossini himself, a small number of units by contemporary standards, but some of them are so extended that the work takes almost three hours to perform. Although the libretto has no internal divisions, *Il viaggio a Reims* was originally presented in three parts, with intermissions after the Sextet (N. 3) and the *Gran Pezzo Concertato* (N. 7). In the staging by Luca Ronconi, used in these 2009 performances from the Teatro alla Scala, there is only one intermission, after the *Gran Pezzo Concertato*.

#### ***N. 1. Introduzione***

In a classic Rossinian *Introduzione*, there is an ensemble opening, followed by a cantabile (a slow, lyrical section) for an important soloist (usually not a role that will later have a formal entrance aria), and a final cabaletta for the same character (a quicker movement, with a ‘theme’ for the soloist—with various pertichini—that is repeated in its entirety after a brief transition). Such pieces are found, for example, in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (given to the Conte d’Almaviva, with the assistance of Fiorello) or *Zelmira* (sung by the baritenor, Antenore, with his bass associate, Leucippo). Sometimes more than one character is featured in the ‘solo’ sections (in *Semiramide*, the soloists include, unusually, the prima donna herself, despite her subsequent *Cavatina*). An *Introduzione* normally is closed tonally (it begins and ends in the same key), but the cantabile is often in a key different from the subsequent cabaletta.

The *Introduzione* in *Il viaggio a Reims* fits this description perfectly, but it is even more elaborate than the normal Rossinian model, particularly in its opening section, where there is first an extended passage for Maddalena (a servant to Madama Cortese, proprietor of the *Albergo del Giglio d’Oro*, a bathing establishment in Plombières, where the action of *Il viaggio a Reims* takes place) and the servants, followed by an equally extended passage for the doctor at the spa, Don Prudenziio. Only after this extended passage (it fills more than 200 measures) does Cortese—the true “soloist” of the *Introduzione*—

enter; true to form she sings a cantabile movement («Da vaghi raggi adorno»), after which a very short tempo di mezzo leads to the cabaletta («Or siete attenti, badate bene»), with extensive parts for three additional soloists and chorus.

Il viaggio a Reims never had an overture: the piece often called its 'overture' is a twentieth-century fraud. As is typical in an elaborate Introduzione,, the initial instrumental passage is extended and offers melodic material exploited throughout the opening section (in the passages for Maddalena and for Prudenzio). The opening ff melody recurs to bring the entire section to a close. Unusually, it also recurs at the end of the cabaletta, but now in the triple time of the latter passage, rather than the original common time (4/4). This gesture provides another way for the composer to emphasize the unity of the entire Introduzione. That Rossini is thinking in the broadest terms is also clear from Cortese's elaborate cantabile, with its beautifully rendered instrumental introduction, deliciously scored for solo winds and strings. Her C major solo could easily have been concluded after the first reprise of the initial melody, but Rossini continues with a contrasting section in A minor, another reprise of the main tune, and an extended series of cadenzas. Cortese's instructions to her staff form the basis for her cabaletta, and it is the first of many Rossinian tongue-twisters in Il viaggio a Reims. She rattles off the attributes of the travelers, as Maddalena, Prudenzio, and Antonio respond «Bene, bene, bene, bene.». There is little possibility for vocal variations in the repetition of the theme, whose text is entirely different from its first presentation, but the accompaniment, in which the melodic line of the soloist is doubled by the orchestra, also inhibits the singer from introducing variations.

### ***N. 2. Recitativo ed Aria Contessa***

This is the only example in the history of music in which a composer writes a parody of his own style, then essentially reuses the piece in a serious way in a subsequent opera (Le Comte Ory). An elaborate accompanied recitative sets up the situation: the French Contessa di Folleville, who «per le mode notte e di delira» (according to Cortese) has learned that the carriage containing her clothes has overturned and she will have nothing stylish to wear to the coronation. In the secco recitative preceding the number she faints to words well known from Don Giovanni, «lo manco... lo moro...». As the doctor of the spa, Prudenzio, and the German music-master, the Barone di Trombonok, argue about her state, she wakes up, turns to her masculine interlocutors and declaims «Il mio male capir voi non potete».

Who can understand? In appropriately sexist language, she sings:«Donne, voi sol comprendere potete il mio dolor». The cantabile of her Aria is elaborate, florid, and very long, and Rossini leaves room at its conclusion for the insertion of a cadenza. (In this performance Anik Massis begins with a standard Rossinian cadenza, then seems to wander into Lucia di Lammermoor before Trombonok reminds her of the opera in which she is performing: all of this is great fun, but it is not in Rossini's score—Lucia was written ten years later!) As is typical of such passages, Folleville begins with more declaimed music (including a syncopated passage, «Come spiegare, oh Dio!» with many 'sigh' figures on «oh Dio!») before attacking her principal melodic theme («Donne voi sol comprendere»), which we hear twice, the second time more elaborate than the first, even without the variations a singer is expected to add. The distance between Folleville's plaintive cantabile and the motivation makes the piece seem a parody. As Trombonok says in the following recitative, «La cagion delle smanie indovinar chi mai potuto avria?»

But Rossini is not finished. One item was preserved in the wreck: a hat. At this news, Folleville breaks into a joyous cabaletta: a declaimed opening, «Grazie vi rendo, oh Dei!» followed by a lyrical theme, «a tal favor quest'anima». Again the musical expression (here, of joy) is out of proportion to the situation. Compare Le Comte Ory, where in the same cabaletta the Comtesse Adèle quite properly thanks the hermit (Comte Ory in disguise) for having told her it was acceptable for her to have fallen in love with Ory's page, Isolier. But a proper Rossinian Aria in two parts must conclude with a more positive and quick concluding section, which is precisely what happens in Il viaggio a Reims. Even the chorus of six pertichini understand that text and music belong to different worlds, as they comment «(È comica la scena, e ridere ci fa)». Scales, runs, many high notes, all give added weight to a situation in which the music seems to ridicule the text.

### ***N. 3. Sestetto***

This is the first major piece in Il viaggio a Reims that Rossini did not reuse in Le Comte Ory. He simply eliminated those compositions that could not easily be adapted to a new situation, and it is difficult to see how he could have employed elsewhere this large ensemble (although the piece is called a Sestetto, seven solo voices are involved), which depends for its meaning on the European context Balochi invokes in his libretto. The basic structure is the typical Rossinian four-part ensemble, an elaborate primo tempo, a cantabile, a tempo di mezzo, and a final cabaletta (or stretta). The problem for Rossini, however, was how to construct the initial section, in which he needed to introduce six solo voices (all six must be on

stage when the cantabile begins). He accomplished this by using the initial period, sung by Trombonk in C major, to accompany the arrival of most of the travelers. Still, it was crucial—after the entrance of Don Profondo (C major), the Italian collector of antiquities, to introduce the idea of the rivalry between Don Alvaro (representing Spain) and the Conte di Libenskof (representing Russia) over the Marchese Melibea (representing Poland): this love triangle duplicates the political rivalry between Russia and Spain, both of which sought influence over Poland. Alvaro and Melibea are presented with the same melodic idea (Alvaro in C major, modulating to G major, Melibea in G major). Libenskof, who enters in a fury at what he imagines to be the betrayal of his love by Melibea, is the only character whose music is in part different, beginning in C minor, but then continuing as in other sections (with a conclusion in Eë major). A brief dialogue leads to the sixth arrival, Cortese, who returns to C major. With all six soloists on stage, a brief transition modulates to Aë major and the rivalry between Alvaro and Libenskof threatens to explode into outright hostilities.

This cantabile is one of the glories of Rossini's score. Three voices (Libenskof, Cortese, and Melibea) sing a canonic phrase («Non pavento alcun periglio» is the text for Libenskof) in triple time, while Profondo and Trombonk provide a welcome contrast in duple time. Now it is Alvaro who sings different music, in Aë minor, emphasizing «il tremendo mio furore». The six soloists then sing an extended (and repeated) cadential phrase. While similar phrases are found in many Rossini ensembles, this is simply the most beautiful phrase of its kind the composer ever wrote. But the cantabile leaves the dramaturgical problem unanswered. How was it to be resolved? Not by the actions of anyone on stage, but by an elaborate solo section from offstage for Corinna, the 'improvisatrice romana' and the 'seventh' voice, who is accompanied by a harp alone. She sings of joy and love, of «fraterno amor», and finally of the triumph of the «Croce,' that symbol of «pace e gloria», against the «falcata luna» of the Turks. This intervention changes the tension of the primo tempo and the cantabile into the cry for peace that marks the cabaletta of the Sestetto. The joy is infectious and Rossini emphasizes it with a concluding cadential passage that features a chromatic octave in contrary motion: by the time he concludes «felice ognun sarà», we cannot help but believe that peace is indeed possible, as long as the master-of-ceremonies is Rossini.

#### ***N. 4. Scena ed Aria Milord***

Two more major characters remain to be introduced. The first is the English Lord Sidney, derived from Lord Neville in the novel *Corinne* of M.me de Staël, one of the sources of Balochi's libretto. Lord Sidney, deeply in love with Corinna, brings her flowers daily, but he is too shy to speak of his love. His entrance is accompanied by an elaborate flute solo, with a full cadenza in the Scena, performed originally by M. Toulon, the principal flautist at the Opéra. The part is so important that Ronconi puts the performer on stage, a living presence in martial garb. Lord Sidney sighs for love day and night, as he informs us in his Scena, then attacks the cantabile of his Aria, with the solo flute still in evidence. Rossini had hoped to reuse the Scena as well as the cantabile in *Le Comte Ory*, but ultimately he recognized that the character of the Gouverneur in the latter opera could not accommodate this music, and so he left these sections alone, reusing in the Aria of the Gouverneur only the tempo di mezzo and cabaletta of Sidney's Aria. As in the case of the Aria for Folleville, the cantabile begins with a more declamatory section («Invan strappar dal core»), before settling into the lyrical phrase at «Dell'anima fedele».

The beautiful tempo di mezzo, in praise of the «grazia e pudor» of Corinna, with an instrumental part provided mostly by strings, is assigned to a woman's chorus, after which Sidney begins his cabaletta («Dell'alma diva»). This piece is known from *Le Comte Ory*, where Rossini modified the repetition of the theme, introducing a flute echo after each phrase. This effect was not present in *Il viaggio a Rems*, but because it is certainly the composer's later idea, Claudio Abbado in 1984 decided to perform the revised version. The rhythm of the melodic line must be modified slightly in order for this to work, but it is a delicious effect and I am sure Rossini would not have disapproved of anticipating it to the original context. Notice in the final cadences the return of the solo flute in a passage that figures first in the transition between the two statements of the cabaletta theme, but more importantly picks up from the flute cadenza in the Scena. Once again, Rossini expands a simple Aria form, but insists simultaneously on the connectedness of its parts.

#### ***N. 5. Recitativo e Duetto Corinna e Cavaliere***

The last character to be introduced is the Cavalier Belfiore, the Frenchman who thinks all women should fall at his feet. As he relates in his introductory Recitativo, he has had his eye on the poetess, and expects her to give way. She, however, does not understand him when he asks her for lessons in poetry. And so their Duetto begins, mocking the conventions of a love Duet: Belfiore expects an easy victory, while Corinna praises the virtue of true love, not the kind of flirtation Belfiore offers («un tal eccesso è indegno d'un cavalier d'onore»). Although the primo tempo begins, as is normal, with parallel statements for the

two characters, despite the difference in their dramatic positions, it is the continuation a 2 that is the heart of the piece, in which her objection is met by his «Un tal eccesso è pegno del più vivace amor». In a brief tempo di mezzo she tells him to leave her alone, while he insists that he loves her. This leads directly to the cabaletta, with the same music being sung for opposite sentiments (Corinna: «Oh quanto ingannasi chi così crede»; Belfiore: «(Finto è il rigore, lo so per prova»)). Here, too, Abbado adopted changes in the instrumental parts when the period is repeated (and we hear the period four times in *Il viaggio a Reims*), introducing a solo line for the cellos instead of simple repeated chords. It is a lovely effect (and Maestro Dantone uses it in these performances): too bad that it isn't by Rossini! The theme is remarkable, as Rossini explores a series of keys related to the initial A major, moving to the dominant, then to the relative minor, and finally back to the tonic. When he repeats the opening at the end, he changes the continuation in a striking way, with the voices leaping to the high tonic (they don't do this when we first hear the phrase) and then introducing a lively final cadential phrase. Corinna sings the entire melody, then Belfiore; after a brief transition, Corinna sings the tune again, followed finally by Belfiore with Corinna in counterpoint. (When Rossini reused the cabaletta in *Le Comte Ory* he removed the solo statement in the repetition, so instead of AB transition AB, we have only AB transition B). This is another case where the music of *Il viaggio a Reims* uses in full a Rossinian conventional structure despite the text of the passage, in which the cabaletta would normally have resolved the problems from earlier in the piece.

### ***N. 6. Aria Profondo***

Although this Aria was indeed reused in *Le Comte Ory*, its entire sense was badly falsified. It is one of several cases in which the original version is unquestionably superior to the revision. Whereas most numbers in *Il viaggio a Reims* expand on typical Rossinian designs, the Aria for Profondo is the shortest piece in the opera, if anything a contraction of a design. Still, it does have a first section (it would be wrong to call it a cantabile), a brief tempo di mezzo, and a full cabaletta («Il gran momento è omai vicino»). But the first section is particularly characteristic. The melody is in the orchestra, in E $\flat$  major, and Profondo declaims over it. He describes each traveler in a short stanza (there are two stanzas for his description of himself). The melody repeats for each statement, always in a different key. So, for «lo Spagnolo» the music is in C minor; for «la Polacca» in A $\flat$  major; for «la Francese» in F minor, and so it continues, each time descending a third, through «il Tedesco, l'Inglese, il Francese, il Russo», where the music heads for E $\flat$  minor and then to the dominant to prepare the tempo di mezzo and the cabaletta. This structure is a perfect expression of Profondo's text, with each repetition of the tune and each new key representing a different person. (The use of a series of characteristic accents by the singer is a brilliant invention of the 1984 *Don Profondo*, Ruggero Raimondi, and no one since has failed to imitate his procedure.) In *Le Comte Ory*, however, the story Raimbaud tells of discovering the wine cellar of the castle, is a continuous narrative, and the structure of the original aria (which is largely preserved) does not serve the dramaturgical construction well.

### ***N. 7. Gran Pezzo Concertato a 14 voci***

A similar problem occurs in the *Gran Pezzo Concertato*, where the *Comte Ory* version commonly known (the new critical edition of the opera will provide some surprises here)—which becomes the Act I finale of that opera—is an unfortunate reduction of Rossini's original. This is probably the only piece in the history of the lyric theater to be written for as many as fourteen soloists, without chorus. The opening cantabile, after the travelers learn that there are no horses to bring them to Rheims, is for thirteen voices; Cortese enters during the tempo di mezzo, from which point through the cabaletta all fourteen voices are present. The text of the cantabile is a pastiche of catch phrases from Italian opera librettos: «Cruda sorte!», «penar mi fa», «oh Dio», «palpitando va il mio core». But what splendid music Rossini wrote for this pastiche, and what a brilliant use of unaccompanied music, after the initial «Ah!».. Even when music is repeated, it is varied: the bass triplets are sung first by Sidney and Alvaro, but in the repetition they are given to Trombonok and Profondo, just as the florid phrase at «penar mi fa» is sung first by Folleville, then by Corinna.

After the unaccompanied section, the orchestral chords beginning the tempo di mezzo spark the rest of the ensemble, and Cortese rushes in with a letter from Paris. If the travelers can't get to the coronation in Rheims, there will be celebrations in Paris («chi a Reims non potè andare qui si consolerà»). Cortese is singing this precisely at one of the Parisian celebrations, in the presence of the King (whether he was bored or not is quite irrelevant). The cabaletta («fra dolci e cari palpiti») is an expression of purr joy, with the melody sung first by Libenskof and Melibea, then by Cortese and Corinna. When the basses attack «Andiam a giubilar» and «Destino maledetto» in a Rossini crescendo, the sound of the fourteen solo voices is overwhelming: no chorus, the compromise in *Le Comte Ory*, can duplicate it. There is little wonder that

the Parisian press in 1825 considered the *Gran Pezzo Concertato* the masterpiece of *Il viaggio a Reims*. For Rossini it was the triumph of pure music. The decision is soon made to have a celebration in the Inn, and then to continue on to Paris.

### ***N. 8. Scena e Duetto Melibea—Conte***

But first the fate of Poland and Russia had to be decided. In a wonderful Duetto that he never reused, one that maintains the standard form (*primo tempo*, *cantabile*, *tempo di mezzo*, and *cabaletta*), the composer reconciles Melibea with Libenskof. It is hard to understand why, from a musical viewpoint, he did not adopt this piece within *Le Comte Ory*, although looking at its sections more closely he may simply have felt there was no appropriate spot for it. The text is exactly patterned on a famous duet from *Armida* («*Amor! possente nome*»), but the music is entirely different. Since this is a duet for tenor and mezzo-soprano, who sing in different registers, the tenor part in the *primo tempo* is in the tonic (C major), while the mezzo-soprano repetition is transposed to the dominant. (G major): reproducing the tenor's phrase in the same key (an octave higher) would have produced a passage that was in the wrong register for a mezzosoprano). In the first section they continue to battle over Melibea's flirtation with the Spaniard, but a short transition leads to a new key (E♭ major) and the lovely *cantabile*, where both protagonists begin to recognize the advantages of their alliance. During the *tempo di mezzo* they decide to reconcile, which leads to the most remarkable part of the Duetto, its *cabaletta*.

Here they share the same, simple text: «*Ah no, giammai quest'anima / Più cari, dolci palpiti / Non ha provato ancor.*», a text that does not begin to suggest the musical riches of this passage. What is remarkable is the free-floating nature of the theme, with no regular internal repetitions. Instead, Rossini explores a constantly changing series of musical ideas and keys. The main melody features a syncopated cadence, that leads first to the tonic (C major), then to E minor. When both characters begin to sing together their voices overlap, and their music seems to head toward F major, but it is unexpectedly interrupted to A major, from whence Rossini follows the circle of fifths around to A minor as the voices respond to one another. Only then do they begin to sing together. It still takes them a while before they return to the tonic, where a series of cadential phrases brings the *cabaletta* theme to a conclusion. Neither in Rossini nor in any other composer of the time have I ever found a theme constructed in this way: it is almost as if the characters have to go through this process before finally agreeing to an alliance. Reconciling Poland and Russia has never been an easy task!

### ***N. 9. Finale***

The celebration at the Inn was legendary already in 1825, but no part of it had been thought to survive. There was no reason for it to be used in the 1848 *Andremo a Parigi*, and hence it is not in surviving manuscript parts from the *Théâtre Italien*. Only Rossini's autograph in Rome included this piece. The structure is singular. It begins with celebratory dances (newly composed) and a chorus (borrowed, with modifications, from *Maometto II*). When *Il viaggio a Reims* was first reconstructed in 1984, the identity of the chorus was unknown, so it did not figure in the opera. Although we now have the piece, since it was absent in the legendary Ronconi production of 1984, it continues to be absent in this La Scala revival. With all the travelers assembled, each now provides a song in honor of the new monarch, using music characteristic of his or her country. Some songs are easily identifiable (Trombonok sings Haydn's *Kaiserhymne*, Sidney the only melody an Englishman would know, «*God Save the King*», while Folleville and Belfiore join in a famous French folksong, «*Charmante Gabrielle*»), others are simply 'characteristic' (a Spanish dance in 3/8, a piece with a Polonaise rhythm, a yodeling song).

This part of the celebration is capped by an improvisation reserved for Corinna, and all the paraphernalia of a contemporary improvisation is employed: each character writes down a subject, and the winning one is drawn at random. (Rossini's instrumental music to accompany this action is splendid.) Well, not quite at random: we are not surprised to learn that the 'topic' of her improvisation is «*Carlo Decimo, Re di Francia*». To the accompaniment of a solo harp, Corinna sings a beautiful, florid piece in multiple strophes, in honor of the new monarch. The opera concludes with praise for Charles X by the entire company, first to the strains of a classical French song in D minor, «*Vive Henri IV*», on which Rossini introduces a masterful series of variations, then with a final hymn in D major, «*Viva la Francia, il prode regnatore*». With these triumphal notes, the failed voyage to Rheims concludes.