

# Class 3: Opera Buffa

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## A. Who's Who

### 1. Class title 1 (Ory as Sister Colette)

The title slide says **Opera Buffa**—what on earth is that? Well, as we know from the first class, it simply means “comic opera.” Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* (1816) that we sampled two weeks ago is virtually the defining example; we’ll be watching another Rossini opera today. But the term is generally used with a more precise meaning, that certainly includes Rossini and his immediate contemporaries, but would not extend back to Mozart or forward to the later 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

### 2. Masters of Bel Canto

In this more limited sense, *opera buffa* is a subcategory of Italian **bel canto** opera. The phrase simply means “beautiful singing,” but it takes on a special meaning with the work of these three composers: **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792–1868), **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797–1848), and **Vincenzo Bellini** (1801–35). They were born within a decade of each other, in that order, but died in the opposite order: Bellini lived only to 34, whereas Rossini spent literally half his life in retirement, getting fat on *tournedos Rossini*.

### 3. Qualities of Bel Canto

I mention this because some idea of what to listen for in *bel canto* opera will help you enormously in what you are about to hear. Of all the components that go into opera, the most important for these composers was the **solo vocal line**, often highly ornamented to increase its expressive power. This in turn required performers able to execute these demands; this was opera written for stars. All three employed extended musical numbers that follow a standard pattern, beginning slow and ending fast; these fast endings are especially important to a comedy, as we shall hear. Bellini, however, composed only tragedies; the others alternated tragedies with comic operas such as *The Barber of Seville* and *The Italian Girl in Algiers* for Rossini, or *Don Pasquale* and *The Elixir of Love* for Donizetti. All three began their careers in Italy, but all crowned them in **Paris**, the operatic capital of the world at that time.

### 4. Closing scene from the original production

### 5. *Le Comte Ory* at the Met, 2011

Rossini came to Paris in 1824 and wrote three operas there, ending with the comedy *Le Comte Ory* (1828) and the epic *Guillaume Tell* (1829). *Ory* was based on a French play, but then so was his *Barber of Seville*. Here is a print of the first performance, and I must say it doesn’t look especially attractive. The nominal setting is the middle ages, during the Crusades, but the costumes here run the gamut between seventeenth-century cavaliers and nineteenth-century girls out of Jane Austen. One of the things I like

about the 2011 Metropolitan Opera production that I am going to show is that the director, **Bartlett Sher**, puts the whole thing into a theater of around 1800, with and all its mechanics visible and an onstage stage manager, and keeps the costumes in a similar period, though with small references to the time of the crusades, as in the headgear of the nurse Ragonde, in the right background here. This photo also sums up the really very simple kernel of the plot. **Count Ory (Juan Diego Flórez)**, the oversexed bachelor son of some Duke, goes around the country sowing his wild oats. Right now, the woman he has in his sights is the **Countess Adèle (Diana Damrau)**, whose brother has gone to the Crusades leaving her unprotected, taking on various disguises in order to win her trust. What Ory does not know is that his own page, **Isolier (Joyce DiDonato)** is also in love with Adèle. All three of these singers are stars of the first magnitude.

## 6. The role of Isolier

The last point I need to make before we start is about **Isolier**, who is what is called a “trouser role,” “pants role,” or “travesty role”—that is, a young male character sung by a mezzo-soprano in male costume. In over a decade of Osher teaching, I find that some audiences find this difficult to accept, yet it is a tradition stretching all the way back to **Monteverdi** around 1650, coming to the fore in the role of Cherubino in **Mozart’s** *Marriage of Figaro* in 1786, and blossoming in the title role of **Richard Strauss’** *Rosenkavalier* (1911). Personally, I find the gender ambiguity highly erotic, but if it bothers you I’m afraid you will miss the whole point the Rossini’s delicious penultimate scene, in which the three all find themselves in bed together!

# B. Act One

## 7. Section title B (DVD cover)

I am not going to say much more from here on out, though I will pause for occasional comment and to hear from you. I propose to play the last half-hour of each of the two acts as a complete sequence, preceded by a shorter clip from earlier in the act. In Act One, knowing of Countess Adèle’s piety, Ory has come to the village in the guise of a holy Hermit with the power to grant prayers—in exchange for generous contributions. Here is his first entrance, apparently from out of his simple hermit’s hut. Tell me what you think of his first singing.

## 8. Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*, Act I, Ory’s entrance

## 9. Cavatina/cabaletta

[A little footnote here. I’m sure that Ory’s late arrival was built into the production from the start; it helps fill in that long introduction. But in fact the tenor did arrive at the theater that day only just before curtain time. His wife in their New York hotel had given birth to their first child only an hour before!]

What did you think of Ory's singing? It is very ingratiating, isn't it? Yet lascivious at the same time. I don't know if you could hear how difficult it is. Is the first part of the slow section, or *cavatina*, of his aria. If we had time to get on to the fast section, or *cabaletta*, you would certainly hear the virtuosity. But I need to cut ahead to the last half-hour, you will certainly hear the slow/fast alternation there.

#### 10. Summary of the rest of Act I

I'll pick it up with the duet between **Ory** and his page **Isolier**. Apparently, the Count has gone off without leave, and his father has sent his **Tutor** to find him. He arrives with Isolier, and sings an aria which makes all this clear, but we haven't time for it. But Isolier is here for reasons of his own: to pursue his wooing of **Adèle**, who it appears is some distant cousin. So he asks the Hermit's help to speak to her on his behalf. Brace yourself for some suspension of disbelief: Isolier does not recognize Ory in his disguise, though the Count recognizes him; it is the main source of comedy in the scene. When Adèle arrives, we get the *bel canto* aria in full flood: *cavatina*, action music, and fast *cabaletta*. She confesses to an uneasiness of soul; the Hermit advises her that the best cure is to fall in love. Unfortunately for him, she takes this as her cue to declare her love for *Isolier*! We then get some action music in which both Ory and Isolier attempt to do the dirty on each other. Forced into a corner, Ory reveals himself, which is the cue for a slow ensemble of stupefaction such as we already heard in the *Barber*. But then comes news that the Crusades are over, we get fast music again, and the curtain falls.

[Incidentally, almost all late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century operas follow the classical convention of a **24-hour span**. Ory arrives in the morning; Act II takes place that night; and he leaves the next morning. But against this, we get the time-span of months or even years as the men go off on the Crusades, presumably fight, and come back home again. Go figure!]

#### 11. Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*, Act I, last half-hour

#### 12. Class title 2 (...and now what?)

## C. Act Two

#### 13. Section title C (DVD cover)

Same approach with **Act Two**: a scene from relatively early in the act, followed by the last half-hour.

#### 14. Plan B

Ory needs a Plan B. You may have noticed that it was Isolier who gave him the idea in Act One: dress up as a woman. So he dresses himself and his men as **female pilgrims**—nuns—and when there is a convenient thunderstorm outside, they knock at the castle door begging for shelter. The pious Adèle of course grants it. We will see the full nun's chorus in a moment, but first **Ragonde** reports to Adèle that their leader, **Sister Colette**, wishes to speak to her alone. So we get to another of those substantial Rossini duets, this time between Adèle and Ory. If you count the opening action when Ory comes in, the

slow section beginning with *cavatine* for each soloist, and the concluding fast *cabaletta*, it comes to about 13 minutes, which is too long for me to play. So I will stop early, and if necessary I will cut the two long solos for each artist.

#### 15. Juan Diego Flórez (Ory) and Diana Damrau (Adèle)

I am showing the scene for two reasons. **One**, that Rossini is adding to the gender ambiguity of Isolier (a man played by a woman) by now having a woman played by a man—although way over the top—by Ory as Sister Colette. **Two**, something added by this director, Bartlett Sher: you will notice that during their duet, Adele will suddenly realize that “Colette” is in fact another of Ory’s disguises. There is no mention of this in the score, so why do you think Sher does it?

#### 16. Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*, Act II, Ory/Adèle duet, first two sections

#### 17. Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*, Act II, Ory/Adèle duet, emergency cut to after the solos

#### 18. Ory and Adèle (repeat: Does she know?)

So why does Sher have Adèle realize who Colette really is? This is one of the tricks that we stage directors can play, and I would have been very proud to have thought of it myself. **(1)**, it lets us off the hook with at least one aspect of the suspension-of-disbelief thing, which is getting a bit much by this point. **(2)**, it allows Flórez to play as broadly as he likes, milking the role for as much fun as possible. And **(3)**, it casts new light on Adèle’s motivation. It appears that her chastity is mainly for show. Give her plausible denial, and she is prepared to let this new scenario play out for a while longer; at least, she now controls the game, and it is *she* who will make the final decision.

#### 19. Nun’s chorus

Ory’s men now come in, all dressed as nuns. They are shown to a room and given bread and milk. But they want something stronger, so their leader, **Raimbaut**, raids the cellar and comes back with some wine, which they share in a rousing drinking song. This is the beginning of the final half-hour stretch.

#### 20. Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*, Act II ending, part 1

#### 21. Two takes on a trio

I said I would play the last half-hour complete, and I’m not cutting here. But I do want to pause to point out how extraordinary this next scene is. In Act One, the **Isolier-Adèle-Ory triangle** played out as part of the general comic texture and ultimately didn’t lead anywhere. Now Rossini focuses this into an actual **trio**, by bringing them together in a darkened bedroom, aided by Bartlett Sher’s brilliant use of a bed that can be cranked up into a vertical position! Musically, it takes the usual form: slow music beginning with solos, gradually getting more complex, and ending fast. It needn’t be explicit; Rossini’s intertwining music is all the foreplay we need. And those gender ambiguities come out full force. Note that though Ory is now dressed as a man, the role he plays remains that of a woman. And note that although we will see him get pretty close with Isolier, he is not actually asked to make love to a man.

#### 22. Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*, Act II ending, part 1

#### 23. Class title 3 (So what was *that* all about?)