

Comedy in Song



3. Opera Buffa

October 1, 2025

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THE ACKNOWLEDGED MASTER OF ITALIAN OPERATIC FARCE, or *opera buffa*, was **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792–1868), but his final comedy, *Le Comte Ory* (Count Ory, 1828) was unusual in his oeuvre. It was written in French, in Paris, where Rossini was to spend the rest of his life. It is based upon a play by the master craftsman of the French theatre, **Eugène Scribe** (1791–1861). But unlike native French *opéra comique*, it was a fully-developed score, containing no spoken dialogue.

Le Comte Ory is a farcical story of failed seduction; it has no deeper qualities whatever. The plot tells how **Ory**, the bachelor son of some medieval Duke, tries to seduce the Countess **Adèle**, whose brother and protector is off fighting the Crusades. To do this, Ory disguises himself first as a holy Hermit, then as the leader of a group of nuns on pilgrimage. His rival for Adèle's affections is none other than his own page, **Isolier**—a young man's role performed by a mezzo-soprano like Cherubino from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. But unlike *Figaro*, *Ory* ends with a scene in a darkened bedroom, where the double dose of gender confusion—a male character disguised as a woman, and a female singer portraying a male one—adds a titillation to the otherwise conventional form that is unique and very, very funny. *rb.*

A. Who's Who

Classic *opera buffa* is a genre of Italian *bel canto* opera, whose masters were Rossini and his slightly younger but shorter-lived contemporaries **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797-1848) and **Vincenzo Bellini** (1801-35). We start with a brief overview of *bel canto* (literally “beautiful singing”),

including its emphasis on the decorated and expressive vocal line and its use of large musical units that generally break down into a slow section (called a *cavatina* if this is a solo), followed by a fast one (*cabaletta*), each generally introduced by some kind of action music. We shall see these structures again and again in what follows.

B. Act One

We shall watch the last half-hour of each of the two acts of *Le Comte Ory* in the 2011 Metropolitan Opera production below, preceded in each case by a shorter excerpt from earlier in the act. The synopsis below gives an outline of the entire opera; the clips to be played are clearly indicated.

Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*, excerpts (Met 2011; Diana Damrau, *Adèle*; Joyce DiDonato, *Isolier*; Juan Diego Flórez, *Ory*; Bartlett Sher, *director*; Maurizio Benini, *conductor*)

CLIP 1. Ory arrives at the village of Formoutiers, disguised as a Hermit. As all the men are away at the Crusades, he is a great hit with the women, [giving him great opportunities to collect offerings and, he hopes, complete seductions.]

[Later in the act, his Tutor will arrive, sent by his father to find out where he has got to. He is accompanied by his page, Isolier, who has his own reasons for coming to Formoutiers.]

CLIP 2. Isolier does not recognize Ory in his disguise, although the Count obviously recognizes him. He tells the supposed Hermit that he is in love with the local Countess Adèle, and hopes the holy man might put in a good word for him. Adèle does indeed arrive, and consults the Hermit about the heaviness in her heart. He replies that the cure is to fall in love—thinking of course that he will be the obvious candidate himself. But Adèle takes this as permission to declare her love for *Isolier*. Ory warns her that the page might be simply a procurer for the notorious Count Ory. Isolier counters by revealing the Hermit's identity. Ory unmasks, to the astonishment of all. Then news arrives that the Crusade is over and the men are returning. All leave to make ready.

C. Act Two

[The curtain rises on the women gathered in Adèle's castle, rejoicing in their lucky escape. There is a thunderstorm outside, with the pathetic voices of female pilgrims seeking shelter for the night. Adèle gives orders that they be admitted.]

CLIP 3. Sister Colette, the leader of the group, requests an audience with Adèle to thank her for saving her band from the ravishment of Count Ory. Colette, of course, is Ory himself, who tries to use this occasion to get closer to the Countess. But Adèle has other ideas.

[The men arrive, all dressed as nuns. They are shown into a large hall and offered bread and milk. Raimbaud, their leader, raids the cellars, and returns with a plentiful supply of wine.]

CLIP 4. Provided now with alcohol, the men burst into a raucous drinking song, quieting down when Adèle's companion Ragonde comes in. Their show of piety fools her and—apparently—the Countess too. Isolier comes in with the news that the men are only hours away.

CLIP 5 (actually continuous with the above). Adèle admits Isolier to her bedroom at night; Ory has found his own way there, unseen. We are to assume that it is pitch black and that while the three can hear each other, and certainly touch, they cannot see. So we get one of the most extraordinary love scenes in the repertoire, in which the confusion inherent in the situation is compounded with the gender ambiguity of the two male characters. But eventually Adèle's brother returns, Ory beats a retreat, and Isolier remains as (presumably) Adèle's fiancé.

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