

# OpPop



## 2. The Barber of Seville

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# The Barber of Seville

## Background to the Opera

**GIOACCHINO ROSSINI (1792–1868)** was not the first to set the first of the trilogy of plays by **Pierre Beaumarchais (1732–99)** based around the character of Figaro. Three other composers had done so before him, and the 1872 setting by **Giovanni Paisiello (1740–1816)** had become a staple of the repertoire. Partly because of this, Rossini's version was not a success at its premiere at the Teatro Argentina in Rome in 1816, but it soon went on to eclipse all its rivals.

The libretto by **Cesare Sterbini (1784–1831)** removes all the political and satirical content of Beaumarchais' original, and brings the play closer to its origins in the traditional *commedia dell'arte*, with clearly-defined characters executing well-tried comic machinery involving plots, counterplots, and outrageous disguises.

We will dissect some scenes from a somewhat traditional production in the first hour, then sample four other productions in the second act, to discover whether this particular opera needs updating, or whether it can even take it.

## The Story of the Opera

**ACT I.** [In Seville, **Count Almaviva** wants to marry **Rosina**. He has disguised himself as a poor student in the hope that she will fall in love with him unconditionally rather than for his title or money. **Rosina** lives with the much older **Doctor Bartolo**, her guardian, who wants to marry her himself as soon as possible to receive her dowry. The Count serenades **Rosina** outside her window, but she fails to appear on her balcony.] **Figaro**, the local barber, recognizes him and offers to help. He tells the Count to pretend to be a drunken soldier and demand to stay at Bartolo's house. That way he will be able to get close to **Rosina**.

Inside the house, **Rosina** writes a letter to the student she heard outside her window. [**Don Basilio**, her music teacher, tells **Bartolo** that

## *Productions Sampled*

*he should be suspicious of Rosina and the Count.]* When the latter arrives in his disguise, he passes a love letter to Rosina and whispers that he is in fact the student who serenaded her. Bartolo suspiciously demands to know what is in the piece of paper, but Rosina fools him by handing over her laundry list instead. Bartolo and the Count argue loudly, the noise attracting the attention of the **Police Sergeant** and his officers, who crowd into the room. Bartolo demands that they arrest the drunken soldier, but Almaviva quietly reveals his true identity to the Sergeant, who then stands down, causing complete chaos and utter confusion.

**ACT II.** Count Almaviva appears at Bartolo's door, this time disguised as a priest. He tells the doctor that he is also a singing tutor and has come to replace the suddenly ill Don Basilio in teaching Rosina. Bartolo is suspicious but allows the lesson to take place under his supervision. Figaro arrives to shave Bartolo's beard, distracting him enough for the Count and Rosina to declare their mutual love and plan their escape. When Basilio turns up, the Count tries to bribe him into leaving and comments on how sickly he looks. But Bartolo smells a rat and asks Basilio to summon the notary so that he can marry Rosina immediately.

*[During a storm, the Count and Figaro climb a ladder to Rosina's bedroom to take her away. But as they are about to escape, they find that the ladder has disappeared. Hearing footsteps approaching, Figaro gives Basilio an offer he can't refuse, forcing him to witness the marriage between Rosina and Almaviva. Bartolo barges in but it is too late, the marriage contract has been signed. Receiving Rosina's dowry in compensation, he reluctantly accepts the situation and joins in as everyone sings an anthem to love.]*

**METROPOLITAN OPERA**, 2007. Juan Diego Flórez (Count), Joyce DiDonato (Rosina), Peter Mattei (Figaro), John del Carlo (Bartolo), John Relyea (Basilio); c. James Levine; d. Bartlett Sher

**SEVILLE**, 2016. Michele Angelini (Count), Renato Girolami (Bartolo); c. Giuseppe Finzi; d. José Luis Castro

**GLYNDEBOURNE**, 2016. Taylor Staten (Count), Danielle de Niese (Rosina), Björn Bürger (Figaro), Alessandro Corbelli (Bartolo); c. Enrique Mazzola; d. Annabel Arden

**IRISH NATIONAL OPERA**, 2015. Tyler Nelson (Almaviva), Tara Erraught (Rosina), Gavan Ring (Figaro), Graeme Danby (Bartolo). c. Fergus Shiel; d. Michael Barker-Caven

**MADRID**, 2005. Juan Diego Flórez (Count), Maria Bayo (Rosina), Pietro Spagnoli (Figaro), Bruno Praticò (Bartolo), Ruggero Raimondi (Basilio); c. Gianluigi Gelmetti ; d. Emilio Sagi

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