Class 2: The Barber of Seville

A. The Commedia Tradition

1. Section title A (Act II still from the Met)

We'll find, I think, that the reasons for the popularity of *The Barber of Seville,* written in 1816 by **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792–1868), overlap but differ from those we found in the case of *The Magic Flute.* We shall also find that the need of and possibilities for bringing new life to the old piece differ quite greatly, given its different genre. But I'll play a scene from the middle of the opera, and you can see for yourselves. First, though, let me give you a quick run-down of the characters.

2. Character breakdown video

This video should make it clear. The young **Count Almaviva** sees and falls in love with the beautiful **Rosina**, but she is watched closely by her guardian and would-be suitor **Dr Bartolo**. So the Count enlists the help of an old acquaintance, the wily barber **Figaro**, who has access to the household. Most of the action of the opera concerns the various disguises adopted by the Count to get in. But Bartolo has the equally devious help of Rosina's music teacher, **Don Basilio**, who is an unscrupulous opponent.

3. Still from the Act II Quintet

I am going to play the second half of the Quintet in Act II. Having failed in his attempt to gain entrance to the house in Act I as a drunken soldier, the Count tries again, this time as "Don Alonso," (traditionally played as a blatantly gay priest), claiming to be substituting for Don Basilio, whom he says is sick. But then Don Basilio really appears, not sick at all. The Count and Dr. Bartolo need to get rid of him, since "Don Alonso" has proposed a devious plan to discredit Count Almaviva (himself, of course), but Basilio must not know of it. It's complicated and doesn't quite hold water, but don't ask too many questions. Anyway the disguised Count now tries to persuade Basilio that he really *is* sick, and offers him a hefty bribe to buy some medicine. I'll play it, then ask the same questions as before: <u>what features in either the music or the drama could have contributed in making the opera so popular</u>?

4. Met production: Act II Quintet, second half
5. Some questions
6. Some answers: the drama

<u>Just thinking about the drama for a moment, what reasons for its popularity did you come up with</u>? If I were to put it in a single phrase, **it runs like a well-oiled machine**. That machine is far older than Rossini's opera or the **Beaumarchais** play on which it is based. It comes from the old Italian form of street theater known as ***commedia dell'arte***, which relied on a group of caricatured but well-defined types—the young lovers, the persnickety old man, the wily servant—executing a large repertoire of

comic gags that everybody knew. If they failed, the players would have been booed off the stage, so they were honed over the centuries to the point where they *didn't* fail. And one of the stock devices, which goes back to Shakespeare and probably before him, is the fun with cross-dressing and disguises.

7. Some answers: the music

And what about the music? The tunes are seldom as long as Mozart's or as popular in style as those he gave to Papageno, but Rossini sure knew how to write a **catchy phrase**; that "Buona sera, mio signore," for example, is something that you can grasp at about the second hearing, and it crops up again and again. Rossini also had the knack of getting into a **propulsive repeating rhythm** that carries you along with it, clickety-click. He does keep interrupting it to highlight a particular line or comic moment, but that infectious rhythm keeps coming back. And although you probably did not hear much of it in this number, Rossini wrote music that requires **real virtuosity**, not just from a special role like the Queen of Night, but from all the major characters. You would go to the opera much the same as you would watch gymnastics at the Olympics, to watch how the star performers handled their somersaults.

8. Peter Mattei as Figaro

And one of these star performers, of course, is the Barber of Seville himself, **Figaro**. Rossini gives him a magnificent introduction, starting with a burst of sheer energy in the orchestra. Figaro is heard offstage well before he comes on, and when he does it is like a ball shot from a cannon. Listen as he runs through his functions as the "factotum of the city," and tell me what makes it a virtuoso *tour-de- force*.

9. Met production: Figaro's aria
10. — still from the above

What did you think? He has no sustained tunes, does he, but some wonderfully catchy phrases. His particular skill—which is typical of Rossini's baritones, is **patter**, getting a lot of words out very fast—then slipping into overdrive and singing even faster! And he must be an actor, as witness the moment when he enacts people bombarding him from all sides.

11. Joyce DiDonato as Rosina

Rosina has appeared in the first scene, but mainly in recitative, as the recipient of the Count's serenades. The famous aria with which she opens the second scene, "Una voce poco fa," is in effect *her* entrance aria, quickly establishing her character and credo. As Mozart did with his bigger arias, Rossini writes in in two parts: a slow section in which she sums up her situation, followed by a faster one in which she proclaims what she is going to do about it. It is not as fast as Figaro's, but she has other claims to virtuosity; see if you can work out what they are.

12. Met production: Rosina's aria
13. — still from the above

What did you think? Rosina's musical calling cards are first of all her range, from very low to quite high, and secondly her ability to decorate her lines, with ornaments and runs, not all of which are written into the score, but would traditionally have been added by the performer.

14. Scene from the Act I finale

To my mind, Rossini's greatest skill is his ability to build large ensembles. We have already sampled one, the Quintet in Act I, but his big showstoppers are always the **big finales** that come just before intermission. I said *build* large ensembles, for that is precisely what he does here. He starts with one character, the Count in his disguise as a drunken soldier, billeted in Doctor Bartolo's house. Then we add Bartolo; the **solo** scene becomes a **duet**. Then we add Rosina, making it a **trio**. Then Basilio and the housekeeper Berta: **quintet**. Then finally Figaro: **sextet**. One other thing I would have you notice: how each advance of the action is followed by a short section in which the characters sing about their feelings in asides, generally very fast.

15. Met production: Finale I, first part

Let's pause here for station identification. That knock on the door signifies the arrival of the police, adding a sergeant and men's chorus to the mix. One thing I would have you listen for here: how Rossini keeps switching tempo between musical sections. Note the **very fast section** in which they all try to address the Sergeant at once. Then the **very slow section** (another Rossini specialty) which follows the Sergeant's total change of manner after the Count has secretly revealed who he is. And finally the **controlled mayhem** at the end, yet another Rossini specialty as he abandons all sense of logic and builds the sense of a really bad headache by an **orchestral crescendo** that goes all the way from persistent tapping to giant hammer blows.

16. Met production: Finale I, second part
17. Intermission title (still from the above)

B. Matters of Style

18. Section title B (still from a production in Los Angeles)

As Act II opens, the house has been cleared, and Dr Bartolo is enjoying a moment of peace. But now there is a new visitor: it is the Count again, in his second disguise as Don Basilio's supposed assistant. I'll play just the opening of this, in a different video, made at the opera house in Seville itself in 2016, the 200th anniversary of the original production. It is not a high-definition video as the Met one, and the singers are not so good, but I am showing it for the **setting**. What do you think of it?

19. Sevilla: Act II opening
20. — still from the above

What did you think of that? It is a pretty good performance, actually, with singers who clearly know what they are doing. But the setting surprises me in its naturalism, detail, and moody lighting; it seems to belong more to Masterpiece Theatre than to what we normally see for *The Barber*. Did that make any difference for you?

21. Met production: Figaro's aria (repeat of slide #10)

I don't know if you consciously noticed, but the Met production did not have a single solid building or closed room. The set was entirely made of almost-two-dimensional mobile flats such as I used to design for Peabody when the budget was tight (almost always!). Yet it worked. Let me show you a longer version of that same opening scene, going back to the Met production. I will start it at the end of the Met-Live-on-HD intermission feature when Bartolo and his zonked-out servant (**John del Carlo** and **Rob Besserer**) come onstage. Look what happens before the music even begins—and then of course at the magnificent performance of **Juan Diego Flórez** in the short duet that follows.

22. Met production: Act II opening
23. — still from the above

Did you see? The whole idea of a character coming onstage and then suddenly realizing that there is a audience out there plays tricks with conventions of the theater. Throughout the production, in fact, **Bartlett Sher** acknowledges those conventions then deliberately works against them. I presented this in the first hour as just about the most straight production you could get, but in fact it is stylized through and through.

24. Danielle de Niese and Alessandro Corbelli, Glyndebourne 2016

The point of my title, **Five Operas: Why Are They So Popular, And What Do We Do About It?**, is that the most often-performed operas tend to get stale, so we need to keep them fresh. So here is another scene from Act II, in a 2016 production from **Glyndebourne** in England. Basilio has been shown the door, and Figaro starts shaving Dr Bartolo to distract him while the Count makes plans with Rosina for their elopement that night. But Bartolo is more aware than they think. I have two questions as you watch this: do you agree that it is indeed fresh? And what ingredients go into making it so?

25. Glyndebourne: stretto of Act II quartet
26. — still from the above (more or less)

Do you agree that it seems fresh? And why? I am sure that someone will mention the **décor**: the rich colors, the clever mixture of period and modern. But the main things for me are **talent** and **rehearsal, rehearsal, rehearsal**. Glyndebourne, where I worked for four years at the beginning of my career, is noted for its exceptionally long periods of rehearsal. This is a closely honed group who have rehearsed long to be crystal sharp in the fast music, and to execute the complex stage business with hair-trigger timing. *The Barber of Seville,* as I said, is a well-oiled machine; all the machine needs is to be kept running in the traditional way. Unlike *The Magic Flute,* the *Barber* is not easily subject to many interpretations—but it does occasionally get them. I show you one such example.

27. Tyler Nelson and Graeme Danby in *The Barber of Seville* (Irish National Opera, 2015)

This is the "Don Alonso" scene from a 2015 production by the **Irish National Opera**, directed by **Michael Barker-Caven**. It is not quite contemporary; in the seventies, I think. Bartolo has become a music producer, and he is grooming Rosina as his top earner. He keeps her, along with several other young

singers, in a house that also holds the recording studio. I will show you three clips. First, the song the Count sings under her window in Act I, telling her that he is a poor student, Lindoro. Then the second part of her aria, which you have heard before. And finally, the pretend voice lesson in Act II, where the recording studio idea really comes into its own. The singers are **Tara Erraught** (Rosina), **Tyler Nelson** (Almaviva), **Gavan Ring** (Figaro), and **Graeme Danby** (Bartolo). We'll discuss them after you have watched all three.

28. Irish National Opera: the Count's song
29. Irish National Opera: allegro of Rosina's aria
30. Irish National Opera: the voice lesson
31. — still from the above (final scene)

What do you think? Did the updating help you relate, or did it get in the way? The opera has a very artificial plot, so it makes little sense to go all out for realism. But sometimes a new approach can at least give you the fun of seeing how the director will (or will not) make everything fit.

32. The ending of *The Barber of Seville* in Madrid (2005)

Here is a production that bursts into splendid color for its final scene. But director **Emilio Sagi** earns that privilege by studiously avoiding color for the preceding two hours. The result is a sparkling production that is as elegant as could be. Here is Figaro's aria, sung by **Pietro Spagnoli**.

33. Madrid: Figaro's aria
34. — still from the above

I'll play one more scene, the Madrid version of the Quintet with which I opened the class. You will see that Emilo Sagi has indeed polished the outside of the machine to a brilliant shine. But he has also kept the mechanism perfectly oiled, and even devised new tricks for it to perform. I have often taught my students to get as much use for any given prop as you possibly can. Sagi's black-and-white palette makes it natural to introduce those white linen towels—but just look at what he does with them. The singers are **Juan Diego Flórez** again as the Count, **Maria Bayo** as Rosina, **Bruno Praticò** as Bartolo, **Ruggero Raimondi** as Don Basilio, and Pietro Spagnoli whom we have seen before.

35. Madrid: stretto of the Act II quintet
36. Closing title (Ruggero Raimondi)