



ROSSINI

Complete Overtures • 1
The Thieving Magpie • Semiramide • Otello



Prague Philharmonic Choir
Prague Sinfonia Orchestra
Christian Benda

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868): Complete Overtures • 1

Gioachino Antonio Rossini, one of the most successful and popular operatic composers of his time, was born in Pesaro in 1792, five months after the marriage of his parents. His father, a brass-player, had a modest career, disturbed by the political changes of the period as the French replaced the Austrians in Northern Italy. Rossini's mother was a singer and as a boy Rossini appeared with his father in the pit orchestra and from time to time as a singer with his mother on stage, going on to work as a keyboard-player in the opera orchestra.

Rossini's early studies in music were with his father and mother, and with other teachers through the generosity of rich patrons. In childhood he had already started to show ability as a composer and his experience in the opera-house bore natural fruit in a remarkable and meteoric career that began in 1810 with the production of *La cambiale di matrimonio* in Venice.

There followed a series of operas, comic and tragic, ending with *Semiramide* in Venice in 1823, the last of his operas for Italy. There had been attractive offers from abroad, and successful visits to Vienna and to London, but he now turned his attention to Paris. Under the Bourbon King Charles X Rossini staged French versions of earlier works and in 1829 *Guillaume Tell*. A contract for further operas came to nothing when the King was replaced in the revolution of 1830 by Louis-Philippe, although eventually, after some six years, Rossini was able to have his agreed annuity restored. With matters settled in France, in 1836 he returned to Italy and in spite of ill health concerned himself with the affairs of the Liceo Musicale in Bologna. The revolutionary disturbances there in 1848, activities with which he had little sympathy, seemed to threaten him and his second wife, Olympe Pélissier, whom he had married in 1846, after the death of his first wife, the singer Isabella Colbran, from whom he had been legally separated since 1837. For his own safety he moved first to Florence, but in 1855, partly in a search for better health, returned to Paris. In that city and a few years later at his new villa at Passy he passed the rest of his life.

Rossini wrote *La gazza ladra* (The Thieving Magpie) for

performance in Milan in 1817. Ninetta, a servant in the house of a rich farmer, hopes to marry the farmer's son, Giannetto, returning from the war. She tries to shelter her father, who has deserted from the army, and is troubled by the attentions of the mayor. A missing spoon and the evidence of a pedlar, who has bought a piece of silver from Ninetta, sold to raise money for her father, lead to accusations of theft and imprisonment. She is tried and found guilty, to be saved from death at the last minute by the discovery of the culprit, the thieving magpie of the title. The brilliant overture, a well-known concert opener, starts with the sound of the side-drum in an introduction marked *Maestoso marziale*. An *Allegro* follows, with an E minor first subject introduced by the oboe and a second subject entrusted to a clarinet, the themes finally recapitulated, following Rossini's usual practice.

The last of Rossini's operas written for Italy, *Semiramide*, the title rôle written for Isabella Colbran, now Rossini's wife, was first staged at La Fenice in Venice in 1823 and was soon taken up by other Italian theatres. The libretto was based on Voltaire's *Sémiramis*. Queen Semiramis of Babylon has, with Assur, a prince, secured the murder of her husband, King Ninus. Her son, however, has escaped death and is now, as Arsace, a successful commander of the Assyrian army, his identity unknown to his mother. He is called back to Babylon, is in love with Princess Azema and unwilling to support Assur in the latter's bid for the throne. Semiramis falls in love with him and declares him king and her consort, while Azema will marry Idreno, an Indian king. King Ninus's ghost warns of crimes to be expiated and the high priest Oroe tells Arsace of the crime committed by his mother and Assur. Arsace, in the tomb of his father, meets King Ninus's murderers, and seeking to strike Assur, kills Semiramis. He is finally declared King. Rossini's overture makes use of elements that will appear in the opera. There is a drum roll and a sense of urgency as tension mounts, to be interrupted by the tranquillity of a hymn-like *Andantino* for four horns, later to be heard in the third scene choral oath of loyalty to Semiramis. The following *Allegro* makes further use of material from the opera, with a first subject that is to be

heard again as priests tentatively enter the gloomy temple.

Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra (Elizabeth, Queen of England) was first staged at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples in 1815. Queen Elizabeth's favourite, the Earl of Leicester, has contracted a secret marriage with the Scottish Matilde, who turns out to be the daughter of Elizabeth's rival, Mary, Queen of Scots. She and her brother Henry come to the English court, disguised as Scottish hostages. Leicester confides in the Duke of Norfolk, who uses the information to discredit him. Leicester and Matilde are imprisoned, but eventually released and pardoned by the Queen, who resolves to devote herself to affairs of state rather than of the heart. This was Rossini's first opera for the San Carlo. The familiar overture was used again by Rossini for *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and follows Rossini's usual pattern, starting with a slower introduction, marked *Andante maestoso*, followed by a shift to the minor key for the *Allegro vivo* first theme and its answering major-key second theme, both recapitulated.

Otello (Othello) was first performed in Naples at the Teatro del Fondo in 1816, with a libretto by the dilettante Marchese Francesco Berio di Salsa that makes a number of unfortunate changes in Shakespeare's original play, if that was in fact its source. Othello, given Venetian citizenship by the Doge in recognition of his services against the Turks, has married Desdemona secretly, forced to secrecy by the hostility of her father to the match. Rodrigo is in love with Desdemona and Iago is jealous of Othello's success. A politically advantageous marriage is arranged between Desdemona and Rodrigo, and she is now forced to admit her union with Othello. Her father curses her. Rodrigo is jealous, as is Othello, each suspecting the other and finally joining in a duel. Othello's jealousy is fed by Iago, in particular with a letter from Desdemona that he has intercepted. In her bed-room Desdemona confides in Emilia. Othello becomes angrier at her protestations of innocence and kills her, while the death of Rodrigo that he has ordered Iago to effect has ended with the dying confession and death of Iago. Othello stabs himself. The overture has a slower introduction, marked *Andante*, and an *Allegro* that introduces two contrasting themes, the second entrusted first to the clarinet.

Le siège de Corinthe (The Siege of Corinth) is a reworking of the earlier *Maometto II* for Paris, where it was first performed in 1826. The opera is moved from the Venetian colony of Negroponte to Corinth, suiting contemporary circumstances of the Greek War of Independence. It remains a story of love and duty, with Pamyre, daughter of the Greek governor of Corinth, in love with Mahomet, commander of the opposing Turkish forces, but promised by her father to a young Greek officer. Mahomet is victorious, but Pamyre, reconciled with her father, has killed herself. The overture, which, unusually for Rossini, borrows from Simon Mayr's *Atalia*, is introduced by a brief *Allegro vivace* followed by a *Marche lugubre grecque*, leading to an *Allegro assai*, with two contrasting themes, the second more dramatic in contour.

In 1804 Rossini wrote a set of six *String Sonatas*, for two violins, cello and double bass, commissioned by Agostino Triossi, a well-to-do landowner, living at Conventello, near Ravenna. These were to be played by Triossi on the double bass, with his cousins playing first violin and cello and Rossini himself taking the rather more demanding second violin part. A further commission from Triossi brought a D major *Overture*, known to many as *Sintonia al Conventello*. The work is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes and clarinets, one bassoon, two horns, one trombone and strings, presumably representing the forces immediately available at Conventello. The slow introduction is followed by a faster section, with a first theme that was later used in the opera *Il Signor Bruschino*.

Ermione (Hermione), based on Racine's *Andromaque* and on Euripides, was first mounted at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples in 1819. Andromache, widow of the Trojan Hector, is a prisoner of Pyrrhus, who is in love with her, and intends to reject his betrothed Hermione. To save her son Astyanax, Andromache is induced to marry Pyrrhus, whereupon Hermione takes her revenge by ordering Orestes to murder him, which he does, only to be disowned by her, once the deed is done, and to be pursued, at her behest, by Furies. The opera achieved no great success and has never held any permanent place in international operatic repertoire. Its overture, however, includes a Trojan prisoners' chorus. In their dungeon the Trojans lament their fate:

Troia! qual fosti un di!
Di te che resta ancor?
Ah! qual balen spari
Il prisco tuo splendor!

Troy! How splendid you once were!
And what is still left of you?
Ah, how at a stroke
your ancient splendour has vanished!

Keith Anderson

Prague Philharmonic Choir



The Prague Philharmonic Choir was established in 1935 and has since become one of Europe's leading vocal ensembles. The choir has been a regular guest at Czech and international festivals and also at renowned opera houses, including La Scala in Milan, the Munich Bavarian State Opera, Madrid Teatro Real, Monte Carlo Opéra, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, Dresden Semperoper, Zurich Opera House and the National Theatre in Prague. Among a large number of recordings for major international labels are Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims* under Claudio Abbado and more recently Anna Netrebko's *Souvenirs* (both for Deutsche Grammophon). It has collaborated with top orchestras including the Berlin Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Vienna Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, San Francisco Symphony and Czech Philharmonic orchestras, and leading conductors such as Rafael Kubelík, Václav Neumann, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Charles Mackerras, Riccardo Muti, Pierre Boulez, Seiji Ozawa, Simon Rattle, and Christian Benda in the Verdi *Requiem*.

Prague Sinfonia Orchestra



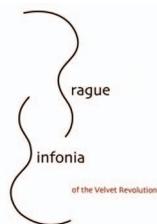
During the celebrations of the Czech National Day, the former President of the Czech Republic Václav Havel became Honorary President of the Prague Sinfonia Orchestra in a gala concert under Christian Benda at the Czech National House in New York City. The orchestra was created as an expanded version of the Prague Chamber Orchestra during the latter's sixteenth tour of North America. It has collaborated with conductors such as Václav Neumann, Gerd Albrecht, Charles Mackerras and Trevor Pinnock, and now for over ten years with Christian Benda, its chief conductor and artistic director. The orchestra has toured widely throughout the world, and is a regular participant of Czech musical life, with concert series in Prague and participation in festivals such as Salzburg, Bregenz, Berlin, Dresden, Lucerne, Montreux, Cheltenham, Besançon, and Biarritz. Solo artists performing with the orchestra have included Maxim Vengerov, Arturo Benedetti-Michelangeli, Friedrich Gulda and Christoph Eschenbach. Recordings for companies including EMI, Decca, Sony Classics, Naxos, Polydor, Nippon Columbia, Denon, BMG, Telarc, Ariola, Eurodisc and Supraphon have won a number of prestigious prizes, including the Wiener Flötenuhr, the Grand Prix du Disque Académie Charles Cros twice, and, after having sold one million records, the Golden Disc Award.

Christian Benda



Photo: Flavio Frascarelli

Christian Benda is descended from a long line of musicians. First guest conductor of the Turin Philharmonic, he appears worldwide with orchestras including the Prague Symphony, Shanghai Philharmonic, Orchestra della Toscana, Polish National Opera, Budapest Concert Orchestra MÁV, Cyprus State, Moscow Virtuosi, Münster Philharmonic, Ulster Orchestra, Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo, and Suisse Romande Orchestra, invited by festivals such as Schwetzingen, Echternach/Luxemburg, Cité de la musique Paris, Prague Spring, George Enescu Bucharest, Hong Kong Arts, Kiangbogen Wien, and the Menuhin Festival in Switzerland. Christian Benda is chief conductor and artistic director of the Prague Sinfonia Orchestra with which he has recorded numerous standard classical works, as well as Schubert's and Rossini's complete overtures. Singers such as Renée Fleming, Barbara Hendricks, Cheryl Studer, and Simon Estes have appeared under his baton. In collaboration with the Vienna State Opera he has devised a new introduction to opera for the general public and young people, *High-Lights and Micro-Opera*, based on Goethe's colour theory, with the participation of narrator and dancers.



Rossini wrote some of music's most masterful and lovable operas. His gift for comic and tragic forms was matched by a relish for characterisation, qualities that are always evident in his overtures. *La gazza ladra* (The Thieving Magpie) is perhaps the most famous, one of the world's most popular concert openers. But in *Otello* he reveals his more complex turns of phrase and in *Le siège de Corinthe* the writing is dramatic and colourful. The overture for *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra* was used again a year later by Rossini for *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. This is the first of four discs of the complete *Rossini Overtures*.

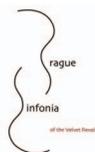


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ROSSINI
(1792-1868)



Complete Overtures • 1

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|---|---|--------------|
| 1 | La gazza ladra | 9:50 |
| 2 | Semiramide | 12:27 |
| 3 | Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra
(Il barbiere di Siviglia) | 7:28 |
| 4 | Otello | 8:34 |
| 5 | Le siège de Corinthe | 9:34 |
| 6 | Sinfonia in D 'al Conventello' | 4:03 |
| 7 | Ermione* | 8:08 |



Prague Philharmonic Choir*

Prague Sinfonia Orchestra • Christian Benda

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