

***Overture to “L’italiana in Algeri”***

**Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)**

Written: 1813

Duration: Eight minutes

Gioacchino Rossini was seventeen when he wrote his first opera. During the next twenty years he wrote nearly forty more operas and then, at the ripe old age of thirty-seven, he retired—fabulously wealthy. Considering that operas generally last several hours, how did Rossini write such a vast amount of material in such a short time?

“[I] wait until the evening before the opening night. Nothing primes inspiration more than necessity, whether it be the presence of a copyist waiting for your work, or the prodding of an impresario tearing his hair. In my time, all the impresarios of Italy were bald at thirty.”

Yes, he was stretching the truth. The primary reason that Rossini could compose so quickly is that he composed according to a set formula. Deep thought or music challenging to the listener was not the point. As an old man he wrote, “Delight must be the aim of this art. Simple melody—clear rhythm.” The French composer Hector Berlioz wrote bitterly of his disappointment with Italian music:

“Music for the Italians is a sensual pleasure and nothing more. For this noble expression of the mind, they have hardly more respect than for the art of cooking. They want a score that, like a plate of macaroni, can be assimilated immediately without their having to think about it, or even to pay attention to it.”

In spite of Rossini’s flippant attitude, his operas were immensely popular. Verdi reckoned him to be “the glory of Italy.”

To shore up its precarious financial situation, the Theater of San Benedetto in Venice asked Rossini to write, with very little lead-time, “something vivacious.” Rossini obliged with *L'italiana in Algeri* in only eighteens days—or so he says. It was Rossini’s first attempt at a comic opera and it was an immediate hit.

The overture to *L'italiana in Algeri* begins with very quiet *pizzicato* strings interrupted by a comical percussive bang. The oboe gets a gorgeous melody with a few more sudden surprises. The fast section features frantically fast string playing and lots of percussion. The woodwinds get to play tunefully and then there is the *Rossini crescendo*—a short melodic fragment played repeatedly while getting louder. If things were not comical enough, the ending gets almost hysterically fast.

© 2014 John P. Varineau