

LA CENERENTOLA – OPERA BY GIOACHINO ROSSINI

Researched by George Kurti Plohn



Rossini, 3 years after composing *La Cenerentola*; Mezzo-soprano Elīna Garanča (exquisite voice and beauty)

Gioachino Rossini born in 1792, was a very precocious opera composer making his full debut already at the age of eighteen with his first opera. He worked staggeringly fast, completing most of his operatic works within just a few weeks, so that *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella in English), composed at age of 25, was already in fact opera number 20! The vivacity of the music created by Rossini during his lifetime made him to be considered the most popular opera composer there had ever been, and he became not only an idol of the Italian opera public, but also a renowned public figure.

Rossini is widely known today for his comic operas, especially *The Barber of Seville*, which we featured here last month. However, many of his operas' exhilarating overtures are so well conceived that they are also performed as standalone orchestral concert pieces, including the overture to our *Cenerentola*.

In December 1816, Rossini, at age 24, was given the task of composing a new opera for the Teatro Valle in Rome but his proposed topic had been vetoed by the papal censor. His librettist, Jacobo Feretti, racked his brains and eventually came up with a suggestion that seemed to pique the somewhat hard to please composer's interest, namely the well-known fairy tale *La Cenerentola*. The story, based on the fairy tale *Cendrillon* by Charles Perrault was well known in Italy, but Rossini had some conditions. It would have to be a non-magical version of the fairy tale, due to limitations with theatrical special effects. In this variation of the traditional Cinderella story, the wicked stepmother is replaced by a wicked stepfather, Don Magnifico. The Fairy Godmother is replaced by Alidoro, who is a philosopher and is also the tutor of the Prince. Cinderella is identified not by her glass slipper but by her bracelet.

Both composer and librettist set to work, and the opera, miraculously completed in a period of only three weeks, is considered to have some of his finest writing for solo voice and ensembles. It was premiered in 1817 following the success of *The Barber of Seville* the year before and

since then it enjoyed ever increasing popularity during Rossini's own lifetime, today being a staple of the operatic repertoire.

Rossini retired early from composing in 1829 at the age of just 37, in order to indulge his passions for cooking and eating! Today, there are a several dishes named "alla Rossini" that were created either by or specifically for him. Well, he had worked very hard, producing 39 operas in 19 years! So that he deserved all that. Probably the most famous of these culinary creations is the *tournedos Rossini*, a French steak dish created by the celebrated French chef Auguste Escoffier, still served in many good restaurants throughout the world.

Rossini died at the age of 76 of pneumonia at his country house near Paris in November 1868. He was buried at the famous Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. On one of my own trips to Paris, I was privileged to be able to visit that place of rest for most of France's luminaries: artists, composers, writers and singers, and I stood wonderstruck in front of this great composer's tomb, not far from that of Molière, the great French playwright of the XVIIth century, a moment in my life I will never forget.

Synopsis

Act I.

When the opera begins, the impoverished baron Don Magnifico is on the verge of social and financial ruin. The only solution is for his daughters to find rich husbands. Years ago when he still had some money, he married a widow who already had a little daughter, Angelina. The baroness bore for her new husband two more daughters, Clorinda and Tisbe. Since her mother's death, the kindhearted Angelina has had a hard time at the hands of her vain and arrogant half-sisters and her stepfather, who joins his daughters in all the petty humiliations they deal out to Angelina. Nicknamed Cenerentola (Cinderella) and forced to do the most menial housework. Angelina bears it all with patience.

Not far from Don Magnifico's house is the castle of the young and wealthy prince Ramiro. The prince wants a bride, and has chosen an odd way to find one, sending out his tutor Alidoro, to look for a suitable girl. He and his valet Dandini follow up Alidoro's leads, but they pretend that the prince is the servant and the servant is the prince. When Ramiro first looks at Angelina, they connect immediately, love at first sight, unknowing for Angelina who in fact he is in reality. The entire household is invited to the prince's castle for a ball when the prince will select her bride. Don Magnifico however forbids Angelina to go, but then Alidoro, the tutor of the prince tells her that he will take her to the ball. Soon they all arrive to the prince's castle. After some comic interludes, an unknown lady arrives, lavishly dressed, but veiled. When she lifts her veil. all sense something familiar about her and feel they are in a dream, by now on the verge of being awakened with a shock. Ramiro, the real prince, but still disguised as Dandini the servant, bids the guests to the table and promises to choose "his" bride after dinner, during the dancing.

Act II.

Convinced that the prince will marry one of them, Don Magnifico exhorts his daughters to let Papa share in the hoped-for benefits of their elevation in due course. In a reverie, the baron pictures

himself as a would-be man of influence, with petitioners at his feet. Ramiro, the real prince, muses over the resemblance between the poor girl he met earlier in the day and the dazzling beauty who has come to the ball. He hides to watch Dandini, his tutor, who is also smitten with the charms of the fair stranger, paying court to her. To Ramiro's delight, she rejects the supposed prince's wooing, telling him she loves his servant, in fact the real prince. Ramiro losing no time, steps in and proposes to her. Cenerentola, who has her own reasons to keep her identity a secret, insists however on a test. She gives him a bracelet and tells him he will have to come and find her in the circumstances she normally lives, and then if he still so inclined, to repeat his expression of love. He will recognize her by another bracelet, which is identical to the one she has given him. Ramiro calls his men together to begin searching for her. Meanwhile, Dandini, the valet, confesses to Don Magnifico that he is really Prince Ramiro's valet. Don Magnifico becomes highly indignant, and Dandini orders him out of the palace.

At Magnifico's house, Cenerentola, once more at home and again dressed in rags, is tending the fire and singing her ballad about the king's son. Magnifico and his daughters return from the ball in a vile mood, and order Cenerentola to prepare their supper. Outside, a thunderstorm breaks out. Dandini, the valet suddenly appears at the door to say that Prince Ramiro's carriage has overturned outside and brings him into the house. Cenerentola fetches a chair for the prince and she is amazed but bewildered to discover that the man she loves is not the servant but the prince himself. Ramiro on the other hand, finds the bracelet on her arm and leaves her in no doubt as to his joy. Don Magnifico, Clorinda and Tisbe are furious. Angered by their cruelty to Cenerentola, Prince Ramiro threatens to punish them, but Cenerentola asks him to be merciful. As Cenerentola leaves with her prince, Alidoro, the tutor, thanks heaven for the happy outcome.

The next scene is in the throne room of Ramiro's palace, Don Magnifico tries to curry favor with his stepdaughter, the new princess, but she only wants to be acknowledged as his daughter. Cenerentola asks the prince to forgive Magnifico and the two stepsisters. Her father and stepsisters embrace her as she declares that her days of toiling by the fire are over. And all wrongs are forgiven and forgotten. Cenerentola's leniency moves not only her hard-hearted kinfolk, but also the entire court to tears and every one rejoices in the happiness of the young prince and his princess.

This recording of *La Cenerentola* is of a live performance of the Metropolitan Opera on May 9, 2009 with the Latvian-born mezzo-soprano Elīna Garanča, an excellent actress and an outstanding diva, with a dazzling look, in the title role. About her, the British newspaper Daily Telegraph wrote: *"A throwback to another musical age, when style was grand and voices were plush, the regal Latvian mezzo-soprano Elīna Garanča is a rare and exotic creature and one of the tiny élite of truly great singers active in the world today."* The American tenor Lawrence Brownlee is in the role of Ramiro, the Prince; the Italian bass-baritone Simone Alberghini is in the role of the valet Dandini, and the two "bad" sisters are the Australian soprano Rachelle Durkin and the American mezzo-soprano Patricia Risley. Don Magnifico is the Italian baritone Alessandro Corbelli.