

Notes on the Program

BY JAMES M. KELLER, PROGRAM ANNOTATOR

Overture to *La scala di seta* (*The Silken Ladder*)

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Born

February 29, 1792, in Pesaro, Italy

Died

November 13, 1868, in Paris, France

Work composed

1812

World premiere

May 9, 1812, at the Teatro San Moisè, Venice

New York Philharmonic premiere

January 14, 1934, Arturo Toscanini, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

November 27, 2007, Lorin Maazel, conductor

Estimated duration

ca. 6 minutes

In 1863 Gioacchino Rossini signed off in the postscript to his *Petite Messe solennelle* (*Little Solemn Mass*), a Mass that was none too petite and far from solemn, with a comment aimed on high:

Thou knowest, O Lord, that I was born to write opera buffa. Rather little skill, a bit of heart, and that's all. So be Thou blessed and admit me to Paradise.

Rossini knew himself well. By then 71 years old and on the verge of his 17th birthday — the fact that he was born

on February 29 brought him untold delight — he had written many songs and piano pieces, a substantial catalogue of sacred music, and even a handful of thoroughly serious operas on topics tragic, historic, and Biblical.

Still, there was no getting around the fact that Rossini's most towering achievement had been as one of music's greatest comedians — as a composer of opera buffa. Writing great comedy, of course, is far from easy, so it is saying something that by the end of an evening spent enmeshed with any of his comic operas one is likely to feel five pounds lighter and certain that the world is not so hopeless after all.

When Rossini wrote his one-act *farsa comica* (translated as “comic farce”), *La scala di seta* (*The Silken Ladder*), he was practically a beginner in the art of writing stage works, but he was progressing rapidly. His first opera to have been produced was *Il cambiale di matrimonio* (*The Bill of Marriage*), on November 3, 1810. *La scala di seta*, premiered only a year and a half later, was his fifth to reach the stage, and three more would be unveiled before 1812 was over. By the middle of 1813 Rossini's fame would spread beyond Italian borders thanks to the premiere of his *Tancredi* (an opera seria after Voltaire, with its megahit aria, “Di tanti palpiti”) in February 1813 and the comic opera *L'Italiana in Algeri* that May.

The earliest of Rossini's operas that achieved unequivocal success was *L'Inganno felice* (*The Fortunate Deception*), which Rossini composed in Venice for the Teatro San Moisè, which first presented it on January 8, 1812, to considerable enthusi-

asm. It continued to play until the theater's season ended on February 11. The librettist was Giuseppe Maria Foppa (1769–1845), a busy writer — his output runs to more than 100 librettos — who specialized in crafting texts for comic operas. The theater's management quickly acted to capitalize on the work's success, so that a month and a day after *L'Inganno felice* closed, a Venice newspaper was able to report:

For the spring season to be inaugurated at the Teatro San Moisè on the second feast-day of Easter, the Signor Maestro Rossini will write a new farce of the poet Foppa.

That “new farce” would be *La scala di seta*, and it was generally agreed that Foppa's libretto for this work fell short of his achievement in the earlier one. Some of the objection derived from the plot's similarity to that of Domenico Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto* (itself a virtual rip-off of *The Clandestine*

Marriage by the English actor and writer George Colman and David Garrick).

Nonetheless, Rossini's new opera played on and off at San Moisè for about a month, on a triple bill with a one-act opera by Stefano Pavesi and a ballet, and it would go on to further productions: in Sinigaglia in 1813; a revival at the San Moisè in 1818; at Barcelona in 1823; and Lisbon in 1825. It has enjoyed only a few modern revivals, so that on the whole *La scala di seta* lives on through its overture alone. Even the Rossini biographer Herbert Weinstock wrote, “Almost everything after its overture is anticlimactic.” However, he continued,

That overture was one of Rossini's gayest and most artfully constructed, the earliest of his orchestral pieces presenting him at or near his unique best.

Instrumentation: one flute and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, and strings.

The Story

The librettist Giuseppe Maria Foppa derived the plot of *La scala di seta* directly from a French libretto by F.A.E. de Planard for Pierre Gaveaux's opera *L'Échelle de soie*, which had been premiered in Paris in 1808.

Rossini's opera revolves around Giulia, whose guardian wants to marry her off to a young officer whose friend is the true object of her affections. Giulia arranges things so that her cousin falls in love with the officer instead, and the couples line up so as to live happily ever after. Needless to say, a variety of ruses and missteps befall our characters as they sort things out, and — this being a farce — there is a fair amount of sneaking into closets and hiding behind screens. For a departure from the quotidian, the plot employs a silken ladder, which gives the opera its name.



A chalk drawing of Rossini by Thomas Lawrence in 1824, 12 years after the premiere of *La scala di seta*