

Notes on the Program

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Overture to *L'Italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Woman in Algiers*)

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Born

February 29, 1792, in Pesaro, Italy

Died

November 13, 1868, in Paris, France

Work composed

May 1813 (perhaps begun in late April)

World premiere

May 22, 1813, at the Teatro San Benedetto, Venice

New York Philharmonic premiere

October 10, 1929, Arturo Toscanini, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

May 3, 1994, Mariss Jansons, conductor

Estimated duration

ca. 8 minutes

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 plenty of songs and piano pieces, a substantial catalogue of sacred music, and even a handful of thoroughly serious operas on topics tragic, historical, and biblical. However, there was no getting around the fact that his most towering achievement was in having been one of music's greatest comedians, a composer of opera buffa. Writing great comedy, of course, is far from easy, and it is saying something that by the end of an evening spent enmeshed with any of Rossini's 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 two-act *drama giocosa*, *L'Italiana in Algeri*, he had been writing stage works for only three years. Nevertheless, he was hardly a beginner: in those three years, amazing to say, ten of his operas had already been staged. The last of these, *Tancredi* (an opera seria after Voltaire, with its megahit aria “Di tanti palpiti”), was given at Venice's Teatro La Fenice in February 1813, and in May the same city's Teatro San Benedetto unveiled *L'Italiana in Algeri*. Both were immensely successful at their premieres and they were the first operas that Rossini composed which gained international acclaim. *L'Italiana in Algeri* would be the first of his operas to receive productions in Germany (in Munich in 1816) and in France (in Paris in 1817).

While *L'Italiana in Algeri* is based on a libretto by Angelo Anelli that had already been set as an opera in 1808 by Luigi

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.” On the basis of his contributions to opera buffa, I would imagine that he got in, although he certainly had a few peccadilloes to answer for.

Mosca, it is obviously Rossini's version that hit the mark. Like *Tancredi*, it offered one aria that was destined for a life on the A-list: "Cruda sorte! Amor tiranno!" which is sung by Isabella, the "Italian woman" of the title, near the beginning of the opera.

We have here a typical opera buffa plot, although today its cultural assumptions and portrayals may make audiences a tad uncomfortable. Mustafà, the Bey of Algiers, is annoyed by his wife and decides to get rid of her by marrying her off to his Italian slave, Lindoro, who in his captivity is languishing for the love of Isabella, his girlfriend back in Italy. As it happens, Isabella is captured by pirates, who deliver her to Algiers. Following various misapprehensions, failed schemes, and some schtick involving sneezing, Isabella abducts her boyfriend and sails back to Italy, leaving the Bey to return to his wife.

The novelist Stendhal (Henri Beyle), who published an admiring if not unfailingly accurate biography of Rossini in

1824, loved *L'Italiana in Algeri*, but complained about its Overture: "The overture of *L'Italiana* is charming, but it is too frivolous; and that, indeed, is a great fault!" Really, Stendhal does seem rather churlish on this point. It's a thoroughly delightful opening for a preposterous comedy, full of delicious wind solos and Rossini's signature crescendos in which broadening orchestral textures are wed to increasing volume. And, cultural shortcomings aside, we are likely to smile also at the "banda turca," the percussion ensemble of triangle, cymbals, and bass drum that provides ostensibly "Moorish" touches to the orchestral fabric.

Instrumentation: Different editions of this work use greatly varying orchestrations; the Ricordi edition used in this performance calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, plus trombone, timpani, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, and strings.

Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

L'Italiana in Algeri was created as an eleventh-hour substitute for another Rossini opera, *La pietra del paragone*, which had been a huge success at its premiere in Milan the previous September but which did not rouse much enthusiasm when it was given in April 1813 at the Teatro San Benedetto in Venice. Realizing that it could not sustain its projected run, the Venetian theater's management commissioned a substitute opera from the composer Carlo Coccia. That piece failed to materialize, so in desperation they turned to Rossini, asking him to replace his own opera with a new one.

The *Giornale* of Venice reported that Rossini finished his new score in 27 days; the Venice correspondent to the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in Leipzig said that it was only 18. In

either case, Rossini wrote it very quickly indeed, and he had an assistant to help out with some of the recitatives and one (perhaps two) of the arias.

Fortunately for all concerned, the Venetians went wild for *L'Italiana in Algeri*. The day after the premiere Rossini said, "I thought that after having heard my opera the Venetians would treat me as a crazy man, but they have showed themselves to be crazier than I am."



The title page of the first edition of the vocal score of Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* showing Isabella's arrival on the Algerian coast