

Notes on the Program

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Overture to *La gazza ladra* (*The Thieving Magpie*)

Gioachino Rossini

Let us begin with a prayer:

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.

That's how, in 1863, Gioachino 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. 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 tragical, historical, and Biblical. But there was no getting around the fact that his most towering achievement had been as one of music's greatest comedians — as a composer of comic operas. After spending an evening enmeshed with any of Rossini's comic operas, one is likely to reach the end feeling five pounds lighter and certain that the world is not so hopeless after all.

La gazza ladra (*The Thieving Magpie*) was one of four Rossini operas unveiled in 1817, the others being the “comic drama” *La cenerentola* (the composer's take on the Cinderella tale, premiered in January) and the serious “dramas” *Armida* (November) and *Adelaide di Borgogna* (December). Certainly, *La gazza ladra* contains aspects of comic opera, but it is also a product of its politically charged age and accordingly veers into near-tragic territory through ominous twists. Here's the plot in a nutshell: A

housemaid at a prosperous farm resolves to hide her father, who has deserted the army to evade execution for arguing with an officer. The father gives her a spoon she can sell to raise money needed for his undercover survival. Enter the local mayor, whose romantic designs the servant girl steadfastly resists. A spoon is discovered missing from the farmhouse, and the servant girl is arrested, to the mayor's vengeful delight. At her trial, her father emerges to argue on her behalf, but he is recognized as the fugitive deserter and is taken into custody. The housemaid is found guilty of stealing the spoon and is sentenced to death. She marches to the scaffold, but at the last minute a reprieve arrives from the king for both the father (because the king is moved by a spirit of clemency) and for the daughter, because it comes to light that a magpie has been stealing shiny objects — including the missing spoon, which is shown to be different from the spoon sold to support the father's hiding.

In Short

Born: February 29, 1792, in Pesaro, Italy

Died: November 13, 1868, in Paris, France

Work composed: 1817

World premiere: May 31, 1817, at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan

New York Philharmonic premiere: April 24, 1846, Henry C. Timm, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 26, 2017, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 10 minutes

It should be clear from this plot (and there's more of it, be assured) that *La gazza ladra* is not a hilarious *opera buffa* in the style of, say, Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*), which preceded it by a year. With tragedy looming over the action, *La gazza ladra* falls into the category known as *opera semiseria*, a hybrid between entirely serious operas and entirely amusing ones. Opera lovers will notice in this plot more than a few echoes of other titles of the then-recent Napoleonic era, including Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which also involves political imprisonment, heroic efforts of a family member, and a last-minute reprieve.

But so far as the Overture to *La gazza ladra* is concerned, it is purely drawn from

the workshop of *opera buffa*, and it announces an evening that audience members have every reason to believe will be filled with amusements. In retrospect, one may notice musical references that point to the opera's tragic overtones, such as the rolling snare drums, some walking-on-eggshells bits in the minor mode, and a passage of "Rossini storm music"; but even these can be written off as prefiguring tempests in teapots rather than the high-stakes judicial proceedings that will actually occur in the ensuing opera.

Instrumentation: flute and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani, two snare drums, bass drum, triangle, and strings.

Classical Smackdown



The middle-aged, intense Beethoven (top); the youthful Rossini (bottom)

One of the most musically literate of novels is Thomas Pynchon's 1973 masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow*. At one point the characters Gustav and Säure engage in a debate over the relative merits of Beethoven and Rossini. We're not taking sides, of course; we're just passing along a snippet from their argument:

"I'm not so much for Beethoven qua Beethoven," Gustav argues, "but as he represents the German dialectic, the incorporation of more and more notes into the scale, culminating with dodecaphonic democracy, where all notes get an equal hearing. Beethoven was one of the architects of musical freedom — he submitted to the demands of history, despite his deafness. While Rossini was retiring at the age of 36, womanizing and getting fat, Beethoven was living a life filled with tragedy and grandeur." "So?" is Säure's customary answer to that one. "Which would you rather do? The point is," cutting off Gustav's usually indignant scream, "a person feels good listening to Rossini. All you feel like listening to Beethoven is going out and invading Poland. Ode to Joy indeed. The man didn't even have a sense of humor. I tell you," shaking his skinny old fist, "there is more of the Sublime in the snare-drum part to *La gazza ladra* than in the whole Ninth Symphony. With Rossini, the whole point is that lovers always get together, isolation is overcome, and like it or not that is the one great centripetal movement of the World. Through the machineries of greed, pettiness, and the abuse of power, love occurs."