Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

The overtures of Rossini

Extraordinary stereotypes stand between the modern listener and the Rossini overtures. Some reflect well on them, for few can remain insensitive to their melodic and rhythmic vitality, propulsive force, lucid orchestration, and throbbing crescendo. But others throw doubt on their artistic merit, with critics suggesting they are all too similar, have little relation to the operas they introduce, and were therefore reused indiscriminately by their indolent composer for different operas. Even Rossini bears witness against himself through a spurious "letter", endlessly quoted, in which he thus describes his compositional procedure:

"I wrote the overture to 'La gazza ladra' the day of the first performance under the roof of La Scala, where I was imprisoned by the director and guarded by four stagehands, who were under orders to throw my manuscript from the window, page by page, to the copyists, who were waiting below to prepare the parts. If the music paper wasn't ready, they were under orders to throw me from the window. For the 'Barbiere I did better: I didn't compose an overture but took one already intended for an *opera semiseria* called 'Elisabetta'. The public was thoroughly content." Even were this letter authentic, reflecting the bitter witticisms Rossini used in later years to ridicule himself and others, it cannot be accepted as a serious statement about his overtures.

An overture was indeed the final number of an opera to be written. Composers were obliged to provide first music which required rehearsal with singers on stage. Instrumental parts of the overture could be given the orchestra just before a performance. Some of Rossini's self-borrowing may stem from this, for in his early years there was little time to waste between premieres. "L'inganno felice" was first performed in Venice on 8 January 1812; his next opera, "Ciro in Babilonia", followed early in March. Little wonder that he reused the previous overture. But Rossini was hardly alone in composing overtures at the last moment: Mozart did the same.

We can dismiss the letter's tone. The primary pitfall of Rossini biography is the paucity of documentary evidence from his most active years, 1806 through 1829. Even his authentic statements of "aesthetic principle" are those of an elder statesman of the musical world residing in Paris from 1855 until his death in 1868. His frequently jocular words attempts to conceal the feelings of a composer whose music was respected but no longer performed. To understand Rossini well we must search his music itself for clues, and when we do both music and man yield up their secrets. The overtures embody in microcosm the phenomenal growth of Rossini as an artist from his earliest works through his masterpiece and final opera, "Guillaume Tell" (1829).

There does exist an "archetypical" design for the Rossini overture, a theoretical construct of which no individual work necessarily fulfils all parts. It opens with a slow introduction, whose stately beginning yields to an elegiac melody assigned to a wind instrument, oboe, clarinet or horn. As the tune concludes the music settles on the dominant harmony, which is resolved when the quick main section begins. The latter follows the sonata principle of an exposition with contrasting themes in different keys. A simple transition from the exposition to the recapitulation replaces the development section, traditional in sonata movements but generally absent in overtures. First themes, presented by strings in the tonic, are motivically conceived, with scalar figures predominating. As Rossini matures, first themes, though basically symmetrical in design, are ever more expanded and even distorted internally. By contrast, second themes, presented in the dominant or relative major (if the tonic is minor), are lyrical and feature solo winds. Rarely are their symmetries disturbed: to give added

dimension Rossini repeats the tunes with different instrumental colours. The two themes are linked by a transition immediately set off from the first theme by volume (it is attacked *fortissimo*), orchestration (it is scored for full orchestra), and phrase structure. A single short phrase, usually of four measures, is repeated four or more times, leading onward to the new tonal region. After the lyrical second themes comes the infamous "Rossini crescendo". Though probably invented by another and unquestionably overused by his followers, the crescendo in Rossini's hands is a sophisticated manipulation of harmonic rhythm, phrase structure, melodic design, register, dynamics and instrumentation, all carefully controlled to produce the maximum excitement. The cadential section which follows the crescendo, using repeated phrases of progressively shorter length, closes the exposition at full volume.

A usually perfunctory passage leads back to the main theme and recapitulation. It differs little from the exposition. The first theme can proceed directly into the second or move through a recast transition, which remains in the original key. Second theme and *crescendo* are stated in the tonic, sometimes with lovely orchestral variants. Final cadences, either derived from cadences in the exposition or newly composed, conclude the overture.

This archetype, though important for our understanding of all Rossini's overtures, defines conclusively only those of his first maturity, from 1813 through 1817, including "L'Italiana in Algeri", "La Cenerentola", and "Il barbiere di Siviglia". But Rossini wrote almost 40 operas and some 25 overtures. His operatic career can be divided into five significant periods, not all of the same length, each having a quite distinct artistic profile. The overtures represent them very nicely.

In his first period Rossini was a student, then an assistant at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, and finally a fledgling composer writing one-act *farse* and larger works for northern Italian theatres. In his earliest overtures, the "Sinfonia al Conventello" (1806–07?), "Demetrio e Polibio" (1806–08?), and those written as scholastic exercises, the Sinfonia di Bologna (1808) and the Overture in E flat (1809), reused with minor alterations in his first performed opera, "La cambiale di matrimonio" (1810), Rossini struggles with a form he has not mastered. Of particular interest is the "Sinfonia al Conventello", very likely his first overture, recently discovered by Paolo Fabbri and recorded through the kind co-operation of the Fondazione Rossini of Pesaro. It was written for Agostino Triossi, a wealthy merchant from Ravenna, and performed at "Conventello", his summer home. These earliest overtures already contain such a wealth of melodic inspiration and sparkling rhythmic qualities that their frequent structural and harmonic weaknesses seem easily forgivable. Indeed Rossini employs some of these themes in early opera overtures (the first theme of the "Sinfonia al Conventello" reappears in "Il Signor Bruschino", the second of the "Sinfonia di Bologna" in "L'inganno felice"), where they shine even brighter.

Other overtures of the first group, "L'inganno felice" (1812), "La scala di seta" (1812), "La pietra del paragone" (1812) – later reused in "Tancredi", and "Il Signor Bruschino" (1813), reflect techniques learned under Padre Mattei at the Bologna conservatory. ("L'equivoco stravagante", for which it is sometimes asserted Rossini wrote the overture later attached to "Il barbiere di Siviglia", almost certainly used the overture to "La cambiale di matrimonio".) Rossini gains control over the basic techniques of sonata form, but only gradually do elements of the archetypical structure which define his personal style cohere. Slow introductions lack lyrical passages, first and second themes are not always well differentiated, crescendos do not have their characteristic form, nor do transitions. Yet the very appeal of works such as "La scala di seta" and "Il Signor Bruschino" is their singularity . Each approaches the mature archetype, but is further dominated by a unique musical idea: in "La scala di seta" the characteristic use of the wind ensemble as a *concertante*, in "Il Signor Bruschino" the wonderful and absurd effect of violins tapping their bows rhythmically against the metal shades of

their candle-holders, or (less authentically) against their music stands. By 1813 all significant elements of the fully developed archetype were in place. Rossini had invented and mastered the genre.

Rossini's second period, his early maturity, is marked by his travels from Venice to Milan, south to Rome, and ultimately to Naples, and the composition of his greatest comic operas and first important serious ones. An independent overture was an obligatory part of every Rossini opera, and each overture exemplifies well the archetype, without necessarily adhering to it slavishly. These overtures include "L'Italiana in Algeri" (1813); "Aureliano in Palmira" (1813) – later used without change for "Il barbiere di Siviglia" and with modified orchestration for "Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra"; "Il Turco in Italia" (1814) – in part reused in "Sigismondo" (1814), which in turn became the more impressively scored overture to "Otello" (1816), recorded here; "Torvaldo e Dorliska" (1815); "La gazzetta" (1816) – more commonly known as the overture to "La Cenerentola"; and finally "La gazza ladra" (1817). There is also the orchestral prelude to Rossini's incidental music for "Edipo a Colono" (1815–17?), a fascinating piece though rather out of the mainstream.

Yet within this period of his most popular overtures, Rossini was becoming uncomfortable with the genre. His recourse to borrowing from earlier works becomes endemic, and time alone could not have been responsible, for Rossini prefaced his first two Neapolitan *opere serie* ("Elisabetta" and "Otello"), for which he had ample time, with older overtures so extensively reorchestrated that new autograph manuscripts had to be prepared. While the increased incidence of self-borrowing suggests a careless attitude towards the relevance of an overture to its opera, Rossini's growing use of themes from an opera in its overture links them more closely. Such quotations, absent in first-period overtures, now become commonplace. Usually they are mere thematic points of reference, but the overture to "La gazza ladra", through its character and thematic references, is so intimately related to the opera as to be programmatic, the stark contrast between military themes and lyrical sections capturing immediately the core of the drama. Is it fanciful to suggest that these ostensibly opposite tendencies both reflect dissatisfaction with a form the composer may well have found increasingly constricting? His dissatisfaction was soon to become outright rebellion.

From 1815 through 1822 Rossini resided primarily in Naples, and after 1817 his non-Neapolitan operas during this period are of little significance. He concentrated primarily on *opera seria* and began fundamentally to rethink elements of his style. An earl y and obvious manifestation is his virtual renunciation of the archetypical overture he had cultivated so assiduously. Of the seven Neapolitan operas from 1817 to 1822, only two, "Armida" (1817) and "Ermione" (1819), have closed overtures, both of strikingly unusual design, while the orchestral opening of "Ricciardo e Zoraide" (1818) can be considered complete only after the opening chorus, as heard in this recording. For non-Neapolitan operas, Rossini continued to provide overtures, on which he wasted little energy. "Adelaide di Borgogna" (1817) resurrects the long-forgotten overture to "La cambiale di matrimonio", "Adina" (1818) has no overture; the overtures to "Eduardo e Cristina" (1819) and "Bianca e Faliero" (1819) are closely related, as is "Matilde di Shabran" (1821), identical to "Eduardo" except for its second theme and not recorded here. In these pieces Rossini makes a half-hearted attempt to produce a kind of overture which no longer interested him.

"Armida", although worked out with the economy of means typical of Rossini, is quite unlike the archetypical overture. Its opening march, featuring low brass and timpani, is a musical portrait of the Crusaders; later in the opera it is contrasted with the lush, sensual world of Armida and her enchanted kingdom. In his remaining Neapolitan works, Rossini's primary goal is immediately and unequivocally to involve the audience with the drama. He tries various measures. "Mosè in Egitto" (1818) gives up all pretence to an overture. "La donna del lago" (1819), the original version of

"Maometto II" (1820), and "Zelmira" (1822) avoid the problem by opening with an orchestral passage immediately repeated or paraphrased by the chorus.

"Ricciardo e Zoraide" and "Ermione" both attempt to link the overture and introduction. "Ricciardo" begins with a wonderful variety of orchestral miniatures, suggesting the tale of knightly prowess and passion to follow, with European Crusaders, Asian kings and princesses, and African warriors. The choral entrance brings this "Sinfonia e Introduzione" to a close. "Ermione" has a more standard design, but Rossini anticipates the music of the introduction by employing the chorus, which laments the fall of Troy from behind the still-lowered curtain, at key moments during the piece – a bold and effective gesture.

By 1822 Rossini's Neapolitan career was ending. Looking towards the rest of Italy and Europe, he realised that his most experimental Neapolitan operas were practically unknown elsewhere and hence he undertook a re-evaluation of his style, one whose direction was unquestionably conservative. He was to compose opera for Italy again only during the Carnival season of 1823, at the Teatro la Fenice in Venice; but that single season, in which he revised "Maometto II" and wrote "Semiramide", was crucial for Rossini and the history of Italian opera. He was faced with the dilemma of being true to his own artistic needs while composing for an audience unprepared to appreciate his more advanced style. Both operas begin with full overtures following the archetypical design, and hence, on the surface, seem to negate the Neapolitan experience. Yet these overtures were unquestionably influenced by Naples, for they manifest a significant expansion of Rossini's musical language, leading to remarkably richer musical ideas within the archetypical framework. Compare the first theme of "Semiramide" with similar designs in "L'inganno felice" and "La pietra del paragone". The growth in proportions and complexity reflect Rossini's Neapolitan years, but these stylistic elements are now reconciled with the archetypical forms.

In 1823 Rossini left Italy for the final phase of his operatic career. After a season in England he proceeded to Paris, where he served first as director of the Théâtre-Italien, then as composer for the Opera. For the former he wrote "Il viaggio a Reims" (1825), but provided no overture. (The piece commonly believed to be its overture is a non-authentic adaptation of a dance from "Le siège de Corinthe".) His first three works for the Opéra were adaptations: "Le siège de Corinthe" (1826) of "Maometto II" again; "Moïse" (1827) of "Mosè in Egitto"; and "Le Comte Ory" (1828), in part, of "Il viaggio a Reims". Rossini's last opera, one of the greatest works of French operatic history, was "Guillaume Tell" (1829). "Le siège de Corinthe" and "Guillaume Tell" have full overtures. For the others Rossini prepared short orchestral "Préludes", impressionistically setting a tone for the operas, taking the formal position of an overture while providing more direct access to the drama. Meyerbeer and later Italian composers were to prefer this model.

The overture to "Le siège de Corinthe" basically adheres to the Italian archetype, but it is filled with unusual moments which help to develop a compelling sense of dramatic movement. The old formal barriers barely hold their shape: it lacks a normal crescendo and avoids a formal recapitulation of the first theme. While French composers introduced crescendos and Rossinian structural devices into their overtures, Rossini with "Guillaume Tell" abandoned them. Its four-part overture is a vast programmatic design, which Berlioz describes well. The first section, with its imaginative use of five solo cellos, paints "the calm of profound solitude, that solemn silence of nature, when the elements and human passions are at rest". The storm is Rossini's most drenching downpour, though Berlioz points out resemblances to the "little showers" of "Il barbiere". The third movement is "a pastoral scene of the greatest freshness", with its dependence on characteristic Swiss melodies. Neither a century of band transcriptions nor the rides of the Lone Ranger in America should prevent our appreciating the excitement of the final section. In a revision of "Tell", Rossini used this music as a

new finale with the text: “Des bois, des monts, de la cité / Aux dieux òu ton père est monté, / Qu’un cri, qu’un seul soit repété, / Victoire et liberté.” (From the woods, mountains, and cities, to the Gods where your father has ascended, let one sole cry be repeated, “Victory and liberty!”) It is unlikely that Rossini had this text in mind while writing the overture, but its appropriateness is incontestable. The music is a cry of triumph.

There are sources for some of the techniques used in “Tell” in Rossini’s earlier overture, but here they form a new union, unthinkable before. It is the reinterpretation of the archetype, in which earlier procedures are extended, rearranged, and developed to yield a work of art far more flexible than the archetype could ever sustain. After following Rossini’s development to this point, one can better understand these pointed remarks he made to his publisher, Tito Ricordi:

“Remember me to Boito, whose fine talent I greatly appreciate. He set me his libretto for ‘Mefistofele’ from which I see he wishes too precipitously to be an innovator. Do not think I declare war on innovators! I desire only that what should be accomplished in the course of many years not be crammed into a single day. Let dear Giulio [son of Tito] study *with kindness* my first work, ‘Demetrio e Polibio’, and ‘Guillaume Tell’. He will see that I didn’t sit still!” [Literally: “that I wasn’t a crayfish!”]

There can be no more convincing and delightful demonstration than listening to this wonderful, complete collection of Rossini’s overtures.

Philip Gossett

Overtures

Guillaume Tell
Le siege de Corinthe
La Cenerentola
La gazza ladra
La cambiale di matrimonio
La scala di seta
Tancredi
Il Signor Bruschino
Il Turco in italia
L'inganno felice
Maometto II
Il Ricciardo e Zoraide
Sinfonia al Conventello
Sinfonia di Bologna
Semiramide
Il viaggio a Reims
Il barbiere di Siviglia
L'italiana in Algeri
Bianca e Faliero
Otello
Demetrio e Polibio
Edoardo e Cristina
Armida

Edipo a Colono
Ermione
Torvaldo e Dorliska