The Barber of Seville's **Revolutionary Roots**

The Barber of Seville is one of the most beloved operas in the modern repertoire. Its classic story of young love triumphing has been retold four times in operatic form, though composer Gioachino Rossini and librettist Cesare Sterbini's 1816 adaptation is by far the most popular. *Barber*'s music has become representative of opera itself with "Figaro Figaro!" the "To be or not to be" of the opera canon.

The Barber of Seville is one of the great operatic comedies not only because of Rossini's sparkling music, but also because Sterbini's libretto hews closely to both the spirit and the letter of its source material. The opera is based on a play of the same name by French author Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais*. Barber* is the first in a trilogy of plays featuring the Count Almaviva, his wife Rosina, and his servant Figaro. Opera lovers are familiar with the second play in the trilogy, *The Marriage of Figaro,* from its brilliant adaption by Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte. The final play in the trilogy, *The Guilty Mother,* is rarely performed today in either theatrical or operatic form.

Like Figaro, Beaumarchais was breathtakingly adept at escaping from difficult situations. Described by scholar David Coward as, "artisan, courtier, musician, financier, diplomat, merchant and ship-owner, army contractor, secret agent, publisher, litigant, and controversialist on the grand scale," he thrived at the royal court and later survived the French Revolution. In his early years, Beaumarchais enjoyed royal patronage, teaching music to Louis XV's daughters and designing a watch for Marie Antoinette. Marie herself played Rosina in private performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* at Versailles a 1785 where Louis XVI's brother played the title character.

Beaumarchais' inspiration for *The Barber of Seville* came from his travels in Spain, where he saw short comic plays called *entremeses*. These performances often took place during meals and featured stock and *commedia*-inspired characters including Brighella, a wily and adaptable servant that was an inspiration for Figaro. Rossini and Sterbini's opera derives from a parallel tradition in musical performance. *Opera buffa* – comic operas featuring contemporary characters and settings – began as comic interludes between serious works before evolving into stand-alone performances.

Beaumarchais' *The Barber of Seville* has music and misadventure at its core. It was first written as a comic opera, but was rejected by the Comédie Italienne in 1772. Beaumarchais then re-wrote it as a five-act play with music. It was accepted by the Comédie Française and approved by the censor, but performances were

delayed because Beaumarchais was in prison due to a legal dispute with a Duke. When *Barber* finally premiered on February 23, 1775, audiences hated it.

According to one of Beaumarchais' friends, the public was exhausted by the play's "superabundance of wit". According to Beaumarchais, newspaper publishers were out to get him. In his words, they thought that the play was "conceived without a plot, is lacking in unity, has no real characters, is bereft of any intrigue and is devoid of humor." Fuming, he revised *Barber* in three days, cutting most of Act IV in what he described as a sacrifice to the "God of the hissers, sneerers, spitters and disturbers of the peace." It worked, and the four-act version that premiered on February 26, 1775 was an instant success.

Of the three plays in the Figaro trilogy, *The Barber of Seville* is the most straightforwardly comedic. Count Almaviva rescues Rosina from a forced marriage with Figaro's help. In the next play, *The Marriage of Figaro,* the Count tries to stop Figaro's wedding and seduce his fiancée while Rosina pines for the early days of their romance. *The Guilty Mother* is barely a comedy at all in which Figaro desperately attempts to salvage the happiness of the Count and Rosina's illegitimate children.

The Figaro trilogy's descent into chaos reflects the revolutionary sentiments of its times. In the seventeen years between the premiere of *Barber* in 1775 and *The Guilty Mother* in 1792, the French and American Revolutions transformed society on both sides of the Atlantic. When *Barber* premiered, Louis XVI was King of France and the American colonies were under British control. When *The Guilty Mother* premiered, both France and the United States were republics and Louis XVI would be executed within a year. Both Beaumarchais and Figaro played important roles in these upheavals.

Despite Figaro's popularity with the French royal family onstage, he became a symbol of revolutionary sentiment, a theatrical representation of genuine discontent among future sans-culottes who believed that they too could outwit their aristocratic masters. Danton declared that "Figaro killed off the nobility" and Napoleon described *The Marriage of Figaro* as "the Revolution in action." Scholar David Coward characterizes Figaro as an "impertinent barber, the Sweeney Todd of the ancient régime, a rebel whose razor turned into a guillotine blade."

While Figaro stoked rebellion in France, Beaumarchais supplied American revolutionaries. After fighting broke out in New England in the year of *Barber'*s premiere, Beaumarchais organized a corporation that sent military equipment to the colonists to support their fight against England. The arrival of a large shipment

of ammunition and guns in the spring of 1777 contributed to the Continental Army's decisive victory at the Battle of Saratoga and helped turn the tide of the war. Beaumarchais personally funded some of the shipments and remained unreimbursed at his death. Partial restitution to his heirs was made in 1865 but it is estimated that the United States is still nine million dollars in his debt.

While the literal debt that the U.S. owes Beaumarchais is high, its cultural obligation may be even greater. While the opera of *The Barber of Seville* was not an instant success at its commissioned premiere at the Teatro Argentina in Rome in 1816, it was a tremendous hit in the first regular season of Italian opera in New York City in 1825 and has been part of the American repertoire ever since. Beaumarchais would have been pleased by the excellent newspaper reviews which declared, "We were last night surprised, delighted, [and] enchanted…the repeated plaudits with which the theater rung were unequivocal, unaffected bursts of applause." *The Barber of Seville* was finally a great comedic opera as its author originally intended.

This Italian opera based on a French play set in the Spanish countryside inspired generations of American artists. Singers interpolated songs by American composers into the lesson scene of *Barber* throughout the eighteenth century, and Walt Whitman reviewed a "beautiful" New York production in 1847. He later wrote, "But for Opera, I could never have written *Leaves of Grass.*"

In an letter written after *Barber's* initial failure Beaumarchais wrote, "We find it hard to laugh at other men's merriment when we ourselves are out of humor." May we all approach this opera in the spirit of delight in which it revels, with Rosina declaring at the end "this is the joy I have longed for!"