

b Pesaro, February 29, 1792; *d* Passy, November 13, 1868

The most prominent Italian composer of the first half of the 19th century, Gioachino Rossini transformed the form and content of Italian opera. Though best known for his comic works – and for music that is sensuous, brilliant and rhythmically vital – Rossini’s contribution to stage works of mixed genres is equally important, making him Verdi’s most significant forerunner.

Born into the closely knit community of Pesaro, Italy, at a time of war and political upheaval in Europe, Rossini was brought up by parents who were both working musicians. His father, a horn player and teacher at Bologna’s prestigious Accademia Filarmonica, was also an ardent and outspoken Republican who was imprisoned briefly by the Austrians. Rossini’s mother, despite her lack of musical training, was a reasonably successful soprano.

Rossini entered Bologna’s Liceo Musicale at the precocious age of 14 and began composing as early as 1802–03. Shortly after finishing his studies, he obtained a commission for a one-act farce, *La cambiale di matrimonio*, for the Venetian Teatro San Moisè. Further commissions from Venice yielded more successes, and by the time *La pietra del paragone* had premiered in 1812, the 20-year-old Rossini was without a doubt the leading composer in Italy.

Rossini seemed equally confident in both serious and comic veins. *Tancredi* was a major landmark in opera seria and *L’italiana in Algeri* was the same for opera buffa – both were composed in 1813. In 1815 he had the good fortune to be secured by Domenico



A scene from Minnesota Opera’s 2000 production of *Semiramide*
(photo: Gary Mortensen)



A scene from Minnesota Opera’s 2006 production of *La donna del lago*
(photo: Michal Daniel)

Barbaja, impresario for the Neapolitan theaters, and significantly developed his style and technique over the next seven years. One of the Teatro San Carlo’s assets was Isabella Colbran, a soprano who specialized in opera seria; as a result Rossini wrote many works specifically for her voice. She was to become his mistress and later his first wife.

Rossini’s contract with the Neapolitan theaters allowed him to accept commissions elsewhere on the Italian peninsula, but by 1822, the composer showed signs of his patience wearing thin; during the contract period he had written a total of 19 operas. The composer later quipped, “If he had been able to do so, Barbaja would have put me in charge of the kitchen as well.”



A scene from Minnesota Opera's 2007 production of
The Italian Girl in Algiers
(photo: Michal Daniel)

After a short return to Italy, Rossini found himself back in Paris pursuing a lifetime annuity granted by Charles x but revoked by the new government of Louis-Philippe. What was to be a short stay turned into six years of litigation, and while his wife and father remained at Isabella's estate in Italy, Rossini formed a new romantic attachment with Olympe Pélissier. When his estranged wife died in 1846, they married soon after.

The Rossinis eventually set up house in an apartment on the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin and also built a villa in the Paris suburb of Passy. Their famous *samedi soirs* were initiated in 1858 – on Saturday evenings Rossini's salon became a meeting place for composers, artists and friends. The evening would have a prearranged musical program, mostly of Rossini's own compositions with the composer at the piano and many young singers making their debuts. The last occurred September 26, 1868; Rossini's chronic ill health finally overcame him, and he died two months later. Rossini was buried in Paris' Père Lachaise cemetery among the graves of his fellow composers Cherubini, Chopin and Bellini. In 1887 his remains were brought to the city of Florence – a procession of more than 6,000 mourners attended the re-interment in Santa Croce.

Rossini was released from his Neapolitan contract that year. The Viennese tour that followed proved enormously successful for the composer, whose works were now familiar all over Europe. Returning to Italy, Rossini signed another contract with La Fenice in Venice for what would become one of his greatest and grandest opera serias, *Semiramide*.

With Italy and Austria conquered, Rossini turned his attention to France and England. A contract was signed in London, but it appears no opera was ever produced. In Paris Rossini accepted the directorship of the Théâtre Italien for two years (1824–26) and oversaw the remounting and revisions of a number of his works. For the coronation of Charles x, he composed a new opera, *Il viaggio a Reims*, and a year later he refashioned an earlier opera seria, *Maometto II*, into *Le siège de Corinthe* for the Paris Opéra. He would present three more works at that theater: *Moïse et Pharaon* (reworked from the earlier *Mosè in Egitto*), *Le Comte Ory* (incorporating music from *Il viaggio a Reims*) and *Guillaume Tell*. Cast in the newly evolving form of French *grand opéra*, *Guillaume Tell* is a lengthy four-act work complete with ballet. It proved to be exceedingly popular (the opera had over 500 performances during Rossini's lifetime); it was also Rossini's last. He retired at age 37.



A scene from Minnesota Opera's 1998 production of La Cenerentola
(photo: Gary Mortensen)