Chapter 17: Opera in the Age of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Weber

I. Rossini
A. Introduction
   1. At the same as time Beethoven’s popularity in Vienna peaked, the operas of Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) were winning acclaim, and young Franz Schubert was writing his most famous lieder.
   2. Each of these composers represents the epitome of the genres with which they are most associated.
      a. Beethoven – instrumental music
      b. Schubert – smaller domestic pieces
      c. Rossini – opera
   3. Each man’s career as a composer ended within a few years of the others: Beethoven died in 1826, Schubert in 1828, and Rossini essentially retired in 1829.

B. The Popularity of Rossini
   1. Rossini inherited the legacy of opera after Mozart.
   2. His light, effervescent music was amazingly popular.
   3. Rossini composed an average of two operas per year, and several of the early ones (including the Barber of Seville) were written in a month or less.
   4. The conditions under which Rossini composed aided the quick presentation of his operas.
      a. He was part of a team in the theater.
      b. The product was commercial, and successful pieces were revamped for other productions.
      c. In this scenario, the composer was one of several service personnel, and the focus was on the performers.
   5. Rossini and Beethoven differed substantially in many ways.
      a. Rossini tossed off brilliant pieces effortlessly and was involved in the practical music world.
      b. Beethoven worked hard on his pieces and was removed from the practical music world.
   6. In opera circles, Rossini was seen as a great figure.
      a. Once he had landed the post in Naples, he had a fair amount of control over his operas.
      b. Despite his reputation for comedy, many of his operas are tragedies.
      c. His works were performed all over Europe.
   7. The opera Guillaume Tell (1829) expanded the scope of his operas in every aspect.
      a. The arias, though formulaic, are long and demanding.
      b. The musical texture is multifaceted, including the chorus on several occasions.
      c. It includes two ballets.
   8. The success of Guillaume Tell allowed Rossini to retire soon after its premiere, although he wrote a few works in later years, most notably the Stabat mater (1831–41) and Petite messe solennelle (1864).

C. Rossinian Conventions: The Overture
1. Whereas Beethoven seemingly worked against convention in form, Rossini worked within genres. His formulas for various genres (overture, aria) became standards for everyone. Three examples will demonstrate how. This part concerns the overture.

2. By the end of the eighteenth century, the opera sinfonia was similar to the first movement of a symphony, but a short one.
   a. Rossini’s “Barber of Seville” overture is in the typical three parts: slow introduction, bithematic exposition (second theme is for woodwinds), crescendo codetta in which the music bubbles over ostinatos (on tonic and dominant, alternating), leading to a full orchestra statement with the melody in the bass instruments.
   b. This does not mean that all Rossini overtures sound alike, and the details that distinguish them make for enjoyable listening.

D. Imbroglio: The Comic Finale
1. The finales of acts in Italian comic operas usually included comic ensembles, and Rossini surpassed all predecessors with silly fireworks that demanded stunning virtuoso performance.
2. The finale is the best place to highlight buffa style, and the best example is the finale to the first act of Rossini’s *L’Italiana in Algeri*.
   a. This piece is over 100 pages long but goes by very quickly.
   b. It comes at the height of the comic complication that drives the plot—the imbroglio.
   c. Rossini has the drama conveyed not through the meaning of the words but their sounds, within creative melodic lines that remain in the memory. This exemplifies his genius.

E. Heartthrobs: The Serious Aria
1. Rossini was also influential in opera seria, even if it is his comic operas we remember most today.
2. His formula for the serious aria was two main sections in contrasting tempos.
   a. The cantabile, a lyrical section that includes the chief emotion, where the singer pours out the feeling at hand.
   b. The cabaletta, a brilliant section that shows off the singer’s capabilities. Singers often improvised in this section.
3. The author Stendhal wrote a biography of Rossini that is useful for what it has to say as music criticism. Placing it alongside Hoffmann’s remarks on Beethoven encapsulates the Romantic divide between instrumental music (German, Protestant North) and vocal music (largely Italian, Catholic South).

II. Bel canto

A. Bellini and Bel Canto
1. In the nineteenth century, the “pants role” largely disappears in the cast, but the aesthetic remains in the lower-voiced female confidante for the soprano lead. Now the showy cadenzas represent friendship, not erotic love.
2. Rossini’s immediate successors, Vincenzo Bellini (1801–35) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848), are the chief proponents of opera seria. They are succeeded by Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901).
3. In less than ten years, Bellini composed ten operas, most with Felice Romani as librettist.
   a. In essence, these two defined bel canto style.
   b. The cavatina (opening, slow, beautiful melodic part) becomes the most important part of the aria—not the cabaletta of Rossini. Rossini confirmed this in a quote in the 1850s in which he names “Casta diva,” a cavatina from *Norma*, as representative.

   4. “Casta diva” represents the expansive aria of bel canto: It requires another soloist (bass), full chorus, orchestra, and band on stage. The spectacle of all these parts is a new dimension for the formerly reflective aria.
   a. Norma leads the chorus in prayer in the cantabile.
      1) This is an extremely long melody that is heard three times.
      2) The combination of both parts of the aria reflect the heroine’s dilemma. Such lengthy scenes had previously been reserved for ensembles, but here it is essentially focused on a single character.

B. Donizetti
   1. Donizetti wrote sixty-six operas, but most have been forgotten.
      a. Three comic ones remain in the repertory: *L’elisir d’amore*, *La fille du régiment*, and *Don Pasquale*.
   2. The most significant serious opera was *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), based on the novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) by Sir Walter Scott.
      a. The novel was very popular and belongs to the subgenre “Waverly novel” because it mixes Scottish elements with terrible, sometimes gory, plots—these elements are associated with the Gothic Romance, which was all the rage in the nineteenth century.
      b. Essentially, the plot follows the Romeo and Juliet theme (encountered many times in different operas) of family opposition to a young couple’s union.
      c. The sextet imbroglio from Act II is one of the most famous in opera.
      d. *Lucia* provided the prototype “mad scene,” in which the character, usually a soprano, expresses her madness through coloratura singing.

III. German Opera
A. German Romantic Opera: Weber’s *Der Freischütz*
   1. German opera had some difficulty getting established, in part due to the popularity of Rossini. The composer who succeeded with it was Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826).
   2. *Der Freischütz* (1821) represents a new type of Romanticism in opera, one that embraces orchestral sound and nationalism—both elements also detected in Beethoven’s music.
      a. It was the first opera to be seen as a national emblem.
   3. Weber was born into a musical family, was related by marriage to Mozart, and studied with Haydn’s brother. He also studied with Abbé Vogler, who influenced his vocal writing.
   4. His early vocal works associate with the distant past or exotic locales, both elements of Romanticism.
   5. *Der Freischütz* also contains attractive Romantic aspects in its story, particularly the supernatural.
   6. One of the most innovative elements of *Der Freischütz* is how Weber approaches the German people, *das Volk*. 
a. Now the heroes themselves are from the peasants, and the idealization of the peasant relates to the preoccupation with mythology seen in other works.

b. The plot involves good vs. evil, including the familiar pact with the devil.

7. Individual parts of the opera were also new.
   a. The overture pits light against dark, slow against fast, major against minor.
      1) The use of four horns in a “natural” context gives the opera’s overture a distinctive tone color; it also changed the way future composers wrote for horns.
   b. The Wolf’s Glen is signaled throughout the opera with a diminished seventh chord and drum strokes.
      1) In the Act II finale, which takes place in the Wolf’s Glen, Weber used chromaticism as a dramatic gesture to depict eeriness.
   c. Weber’s vocal writing is between song and “melodrama”—actual speaking over an orchestra.

8. Although some critics scoffed at the commercial light show (and similar gimmicks) that accompanied the opera, others—including Wagner—recognized the nationalism inherent in it. The idea of the pure and natural German Volk would become a major factor for the next century.