«Largo al factotum» Gioachino Rossini · Il barbiere di Siviglia (1816) · Listening Guide – Second Year of Middle School

Gioachino Rossini at a glance Gioachino Rossini was born in Pesaro in 1792 into a family of musicians: his father played the trumpet and horn, and his mother was a singer. He studied at the music school in Bologna and made his debut as an opera composer at just 18. In twenty years, he wrote around 40 operas, both comic and serious: L'italiana in Algeri, Il barbiere di Siviglia, La Cenerentola, La gazza ladra, La donna del lago and, finally, Guglielmo Tell (1829). At 37, at the height of his success, he stopped writing operas. He lived in Bologna, Florence and Paris, where he died in 1868. He is also famous for his love of fine food: a dish is named after him, «tournedos alla Rossini».

His style is full of energy: sparkling melodies, lively rhythms and the famous «Rossini crescendo», in which a phrase is repeated louder and louder, with more and more instruments, until it sweeps the audience away.

The opera Element Description

Title Il barbiere di Siviglia (a comic opera in two acts)

First performance Rome, Teatro Argentina, 20 February 1816

Libretto Cesare Sterbini, based on the play by Beaumarchais

Plot Count d'Almaviva loves Rosina, who is kept locked away by her elderly guardian, Don Bartolo, who wants to marry her. With the help of the clever barber Figaro, and through disguises and tricks, the Count manages to marry Rosina.

Interesting fact Rossini composed it in about three weeks. The opening night was a flop, but from the second performance onwards it was a triumph.

The aria: who sings it and when This is Figaro's cavatina (an entrance aria), sung by a baritone in Act One: Figaro comes on stage and introduces himself. He is the most sought-after barber in the city, the «factotum» (from the Latin fac totum, «do everything»): he trims beards and cuts hair, delivers love letters and arranges meetings. Everyone wants his help, and he is happy and proud of his life.

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Lyrics (extract) and meaning Sung text Meaning

Make way for the city's factotum! Make way for the city's jack-of-all-trades!

Quick, to the shop, for dawn is already here. Hurry to the shop: it is already dawn.

Ah, what a fine life, what a pleasure for a barber What a wonderful life, what a pleasure for a of quality! first-class barber!

Ready to do everything, night and day, He is ready to do anything, night and day, always he is always out and about. on the move.

Everyone asks for me, everyone wants me: women, Everyone is looking for me and wants my help: women, boys, boys, old men and young girls. elderly people and girls.

Figaro here, Figaro there, Figaro up, Figaro down! They call me from every direction. I do not have a moment's peace!

Let's listen: what to notice Element What you hear

Introduction The orchestra starts at top speed: you can almost see Figaro rushing in

Rhythm Allegro vivace tempo, with a bouncy rhythm in groups of three (6/8)

Voice Baritone: a middle-range male voice with a full, playful sound

Syllabic singing Very fast words, almost like a tongue-twister: this is «syllabic singing», or patter, typical of comic opera

Repetitions «Figaro! Figaro!» repeated, with falsetto voices imitating the people calling him

Crescendo Towards the end, tension and energy build up to the final high note

Mood expressed Joy, pride, humour, energy

Activities 1. Which instrument do you hear most often at the beginning? 2. Count how many times you hear the name «Figaro». 3. Why is this described as a «comic» aria? 4. Compare it with Verdi's «La donna è mobile»: what do they have in common? What is different?

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Self-assessment ☐ I know who Rossini was and when he lived ☐ I can tell the story of Il barbiere di Siviglia ☐ I can recognise patter singing and the crescendo ☐ I can explain the meaning of the aria