

## 4 The Rossini Renaissance

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We may define the Rossini Renaissance as the reappearance of his forgotten operas after decades of neglect. The word ‘forgotten’ is an important qualifier because one opera, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, was never forgotten, and in fact remained a constant presence in opera houses from its première in 1816. Even if we discount the anomalous popularity of *Il barbiere*, it would be inaccurate to say that Rossini ever completely disappeared from the repertory: performances cropped up every few years at one house or another.<sup>1</sup> Still, there is no escaping the dwindling of his presence: both the number of Rossini’s operas performed and the number of productions and performances of them declined.

It was not his other comic operas but the French serious ones – particularly *Moïse/Mosè* (as opposed to the Neapolitan *Mosè in Egitto*, 1818, of which it was a substantial revision) and *Guillaume/Guglielmo Tell* – that were most persistent in the six decades or so following the composer’s death. A revival of the *opere buffe* began between the world wars – mostly *L’italiana in Algeri* and *La Cenerentola* but occasionally others – alongside the continued occasional presence of *Mosè* and *Tell*. In a Rossinian season in Paris in 1929 *Guillaume Tell*, *L’italiana*, *La Cenerentola* and *Il barbiere* were all presented.<sup>2</sup> Largely missing were the *opere serie* and *semiserie*; aside from *Semiramide* at the 1940 Maggio Musicale, Florence,<sup>3</sup> and *La gazza ladra* in an adaptation by Riccardo Zandonai in Pesaro, 1942, their revival took place after World War II, and this will be the focus of the remainder of this essay.<sup>4</sup>

The fate of Rossini’s *opere serie* and *semiserie* – the last to survive were *Otello* (disappeared in the 1870s) and *Semiramide* (1890s) – differed from those of his younger contemporaries Bellini and Donizetti. For both composers there was a decline in performances in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, but Donizetti’s most successful survivor was an *opera seria*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*.<sup>5</sup> Three of Bellini’s ten operas, *La sonnambula* (an *opera semiserie*), *Norma* and *I Puritani*, maintained places in the repertory. Thus there was already a presence of bel canto *opera seria* in the repertory upon which to build the revivals of Rossini’s. Up until the early 1960s these were very sporadic. Exceptional was the 1952 Maggio Musicale, which presented *Armida* and *Tancredi* as well as the comic rarities *Il conte Ory*, *La scala di seta* and *La pietra del paragone*, plus *Mosè* and *Guglielmo Tell*. These aside, there were stagings of *L’assedio di Corinto*<sup>6</sup>

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(Florence 1949, repeated in Rome 1951 and Naples 1952), *L'inganno felice* (Rome 1952 and Bologna 1954), *La donna del lago* (Florence 1958), *La gazza ladra* (Wexford 1959), *Otello* (London 1961), *Semiramide* (Milan 1962), and concert performances of *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* (Milan 1953) and *Otello* (New York 1954 and 1957, Rome 1960). Starting in 1964 the number of productions (both staged and concert) of Rossini *serio* increased slowly, as did, in the late 1970s, the list of operas revived, so that all his *opere serie* and *semiserie* have finally reappeared (the last *seria*, *Eduardo e Cristina*, in 1997; the last *semiserie*, *Adina*, in 1999). The following statistics will show the trend:<sup>7</sup>

#### Productions of Rossini's *opere serie*

Years	Average number of productions (staged and concert) per year	Average number of staged productions per year
1949–63	0.8	0.5
1964–79	3.7	2.9
1980–90	10.0	7.1

The increase starting in 1980 coincides with the inauguration of the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro. The first season consisted of the *semiserie* *La gazza ladra* and *L'inganno felice*. The next three summers saw *La donna del lago*, *Tancredi* and *Mosè in Egitto* – a commitment to Rossini *serio* that has continued to this day. Commercial recordings of many of the *opere serie* have been issued, at first only *Semiramide* (1966), then a steadily increasing number beginning in the mid-1970s.

Up until 1970 the most frequently performed of these operas was *Otello*; especially noteworthy was the production of the Rome Opera of 1964, with Virginia Zeani, which then travelled to Pesaro, Berlin and New York. But *Otello* was soon surpassed in popularity by *Semiramide*, whose 1962 revival at La Scala saw the first appearance in Rossini of Joan Sutherland. In the mid-1970s *Tancredi* also became quite popular, so that by 1989 *Semiramide* had had forty-eight productions and *Tancredi* thirty-three; *La gazza ladra* led the *opere semiserie* with twenty-one.

### Critical response

As they had during his years of popularity, critics' opinions of Rossini differed during the years of decline.<sup>8</sup> One school of criticism viewed him as the epitome of Italian melody whose quality had become lost at the hands of modern composers, a creator of 'beauties that are absolute and not dependent on the diversities of time and place.'<sup>9</sup> The more progressive critics,

especially those who supported the ‘music of the future’ (that is, Wagner), objected especially to the formal conventions and elaborate vocal style as undermining drama and expressivity. (An intermediate critical view saw Rossini’s late works – *Mosè* and *Tell*, in which the use of conventional forms and ornamentation was reduced – as themselves harbingers of the music of the future.) And yet even as pro-Wagner a critic as George Bernard Shaw, after denouncing Rossini as ‘one of the greatest masters of claptrap that ever lived. His moral deficiencies as an artist were quite extraordinary’,<sup>10</sup> wrote of his surprise at finding Rossini’s music genuinely moving.

Yet the Swan came off more triumphantly than one could have imagined possible at this time of day. *Dal tuo stellato soglio* was as sublime as ever . . . The repeats in the overtures were, strange to say, not in the least tedious: we were perfectly well content to hear the whole bag of tricks turned out a second time. Nobody was disgusted, *à la Berlioz*, by the ‘brutal crescendo and big drum’. On the contrary, we were exhilarated and amused; and I, for one, was astonished to find it all still so fresh, so imposing, so clever, and even, in the few serious passages, so really fine.<sup>11</sup>

The complaints that Rossini’s music was formulaic, overly ornate and therefore inexpressive go back to his own day and remain constants of Rossini criticism.<sup>12</sup> Around the time of the revival of Rossini’s *opere buffe* in the 1920s, these aspects of his style became objects of praise by neo-classicists and Futurists who, in reaction against both Romanticism and Impressionism, saw Rossini as the cure for what ailed music: ‘After the magnificent heroics of Wagner, the austere and pathetic dissertations of the Franckists, the iridescent shimmerings of the impressionist school, we should doubtless have more ease and simplicity. In this regard, the example of Rossini would be salutary. Our young musicians would find in him precisely what they themselves lack: youthfulness [la jeunesse].’<sup>13</sup> The composer and critic Alfredo Casella, a self-proclaimed Futurist, declared Rossini ‘the man who was the last to know how to laugh. Rossini has been reproached with shallowness . . . He was quite probably a smaller genius than the great Germans. But then a “small” genius is so often more amusing than a great one.’<sup>14</sup> Casella noted support for Rossini by Honegger, Milhaud and Poulenc.<sup>15</sup> However, these writers thought of Rossini as a composer of comedies, and it is doubtful whether hearing Rossini as a proto-Futurist ironist could ever have led to an appreciation of his serious works.

From this same period, but quite different in tone, came the magisterial study of the composer by Giuseppe Radiciotti.<sup>16</sup> Radiciotti, for whom Rossini was ‘the greatest Italian composer of the nineteenth century, one of the most remarkable geniuses by whom humanity is honored’, announced as his goal the production of ‘a biography that is neither an apology nor a

diatribe', based on 'documents, positive facts, [and] irrefutable testimony', together with 'a serene and unprejudiced analysis of his works' (p. ix). At 1,429 pages it was certainly the longest study of an Italian composer to that time. To be sure, not every 'positive fact' has proved true, and the author offers many judgements that are debatable, but the work is still useful to scholars, particularly for the wealth of primary-source material (letters, contemporary reviews and comments) that it reproduces.

At a time when Rossini's *opere serie* were completely absent from the opera house and from critical discourse, Radiciotti examined them all and found much to praise: in *Tancredi*, *Armida*, *Mosè in Egitto*, the third act of *Otello*, the first act of *La donna del lago* – all of which he thought, on the whole, moving and dramatically convincing. Nevertheless, he too was bothered by the same things that bothered earlier critics: the extensive use of coloratura and the conventionality of form.<sup>17</sup> The French operas, particularly *Guillaume Tell*, are for him the culmination of Rossini's art, at least in part because they contain more of the simplicity that Radiciotti admires and less of the conventionality that he dislikes.

In the English-speaking world, the beginnings of a Renaissance may be observed in the 1934 biography of the composer by Francis Toye.<sup>18</sup> He begins candidly:

To the best of my belief there is no demand whatever for a life of Rossini in English. Supply, however, sometimes creates demand . . . Moreover, there are undoubted signs of a renewed interest in his music other than the immortal *Barber of Seville*. The most important overtures . . . are beginning to creep back once again into the programmes of our more enterprising concerts. Some of the songs . . . have made many new friends in recent years. (p. vii)

Toye goes on to chastise current English musicology ('too often inspired by a *furor Teutonicus* surpassing that of the Teutons themselves' (p. ix)) for ignoring the importance of Rossini for the history of music. Toye acknowledges his great debt to Radiciotti, and his judgement of the operas, like Radiciotti's, is not very different from the critics of the 1860s. He shows enthusiasm for the *opere buffe*; towards the *opere serie* he is more equivocal. He too is unable to accept the formal conventions of Rossinian *opera seria*, to hear Rossini's musical language (including the tradition of *fioritura*) as sufficiently expressive. He generally prefers the French operas, especially *Moïse*.

Toye's sense that the 'furor teutonicus' had passed and that the Anglo-Saxon world might be ready for a Rossini revival was borne out by a comment by Shaw on the publication of his collected criticism in 1935. He no longer found all musical truth to reside in Wagner: 'When the wireless strikes up the

Tannhäuser overture I hasten to switch it off, though I can always listen with pleasure to Rossini's overture to William Tell.<sup>19</sup> However, after the war critics both scholarly and journalistic continued to reject or ignore Rossini *serio*. In Donald Jay Grout's *A Short History of Opera* (New York, 1947), two pages are devoted to Rossini in 536 pages of text (as opposed to five for Weber; perhaps the 'furor teutonicus' had not quite passed after all). Like Toye, Grout seems to prefer the comic operas, but he offers no strong judgement of the *opere serie*. In the second edition (1965), the section on Rossini is expanded to three pages, and Grout praises the third act of *Otello* as 'some of the most beautiful music he ever wrote' (p. 353). This is a step forward compared to the British *Pelican History of Music* (1968), which in praising his comic operas grants only that Rossini outshone his contemporaries in 'light, catchy melodies' and, like Casella, forgives him for 'declining the effort which could have revealed greater depths of expression';<sup>20</sup> Rossini's two pages are found in the section on French opera (Bellini and Donizetti are in the section on Wagner).

Many newspaper critics, reviewing post-war revivals of the *opere serie*, heard in them at best occasions for beautiful singing, at worst dramatic incongruousness and absurdity. Franco Abbiati, long-time critic of the leading Italian daily *Il corriere della sera*, denounced both *Armida* (at the 1952 Maggio Musicale) and *Semiramide* (La Scala, 1962) as overly ornate, prolix and old-fashioned (*Semiramide* 'expressed sentiments that we no longer understand' and 'transmits the echo of musical and theatrical practices and customs that had faded in the same period in which Rossini was alive', 18 December 1962). In the *New York Times*, we read, from 1954, that '“Otello”, like *William Tell*, is an ungainly great brute of a score, magnificent passages alternating with tedious ones' (J[ohn] B[riggs], 11 November 1954); to 1968, that 'Rossini's "Otello" . . . is not a particularly interesting work. It is one of Rossini's formula operas, organized like so many early 18th-century [*sic*] Italian operas' (Harold C. Schonberg, 16 June 1968); and then to 1990, that 'the evening offered the opportunity not so much for music drama as for a feast of voices, as any work in the bel canto tradition should' (Donal Henahan, 3 December 1990).

There were dissenters, to be sure, who took serious Rossini seriously. In the sympathetic category we should especially mention Andrew Porter, whose lengthy reviews in *The New Yorker* magazine from 1975 to 1986 are some of the most thoughtful pieces written about this music.<sup>21</sup> Some post-war critics found themselves unexpectedly moved by Rossini's serious operas, as Shaw had been in the late nineteenth century, e.g. Howard Taubman (chief critic of the *New York Times*, as Schonberg and Henahan were to become): 'At its best, [Rossini's] operatic setting of *Otello* is a work of stunning power and searching pathos . . . [O]ne wondered how the world

could afford to neglect an opera of this stature' (11 December 1957);<sup>22</sup> or Stanley Sadie: 'There are . . . fine things [in *Elisabetta*]. A superb first Finale, for one . . . – a scene of splendid tension and excitement, musically sustained . . . a trio . . . with three-part writing of uncommon beauty and subtlety . . . a prison scene for Leicester, where Florestan-like he sees his beloved in a vision – comparable, this, with *Fidelio* (almost) or Handel's *Rodelinda*' (*The Times*, 28 February 1968). These opinions, although a minority view, suggest that neither neo-classical praise nor Romantic rejection, two sides of the same coin, told the whole story, and at least for some listeners there was more to Rossini's music than pretty tunes and sparkling wit.

### Singers

Nor did providing occasions for vocal display explain the Rossini Renaissance, since, as several critics noted, the early revivals were frequently populated by singers inadequate to the demands of the music, and the vocal writing was often simplified to accommodate the limitations of the performers. However, there were singers who could have sung Rossini *serio* had they so chosen, singers adept at bel canto and coloratura who sang *opera seria* rôles by Bellini and Donizetti and sometimes Rossini's *opere buffe*. Lily Pons, for example, made her Met début as Lucia in 1931 and sang ninety-three performances of the rôle in her twenty-nine seasons there. She also sang Rosina in *Il barbiere*, Amina in *La sonnambula* and two additional Donizetti rôles (Marie in *La Fille du régiment* and the title rôle in *Linda di Chamounix*). Norma attracted a different sort of singer – Rosa Ponselle, Gina Cigna, Zinka Milanov – who sang such heavier rôles as Aida, Leonora (both *Forza* and *Trovatore*) and Santuzza, and in fact Cigna sang Anaide in *Mosè*.

I therefore disagree with the more or less general consensus among modern critics that bel canto was dead before it was revived by Maria Callas.<sup>23</sup> And while Callas through her dramatic force gave a new respectability to bel canto *opera seria* and expanded the repertory slightly (she also sang Bellini's *Il pirata* and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*), her direct contribution to the Renaissance of Rossini *serio* was small. She sang only one Rossini *opera seria*, *Armida*, part of the 1952 Maggio Musicale devoted to Rossini, and despite the spectacular showpiece it makes for a soprano (and, several commentators notwithstanding, the relatively minor demands on the numerous tenors called for), Callas never attempted this opera again, nor did anyone else until 1970, nor did Callas ever record it (pirated recordings exist).

In addition to Callas, some very fine singers participated in the early years of the Rossini Renaissance before going on to quite different

repertoires – Renata Tebaldi, for example, a native of Pesaro (*L'assedio*, 1949–52; *Tell*, 1952); Teresa Stich-Randall (*Tancredi*, 1952); Eileen Farrell (*Otello*, 1957); Janet Baker (*La gazza ladra*, 1959). Towards the end of her career, Jennie Tourel sang in two serious operas, *Otello* (1954) and *Mosè* (1958). However, the only singer from before 1960 who could remotely be considered a true Rossinian was the mezzo-soprano Giulietta Simionato, who sang *Tancredi* opposite Stich-Randall's Amenaide and later *Arsace* opposite Joan Sutherland's Semiramide.

Sutherland's appearance as Lucia at Covent Garden in 1959 had been sensational. Then, when she made her New York début, in a concert performance of Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda* in 1961, joining her as a last-minute replacement for Simionato was the relatively unknown Marilyn Horne, also making her New York début. Thus was inaugurated a partnership that was to be extremely important for Rossini. Sutherland and Horne sang together again in *Norma* (Vancouver, 1963) and then finally *Semiramide*. Sutherland had sung her first *Semiramide* (the first post-war *Semiramide*), with Simionato, at La Scala in December 1962. In January 1964 she was joined by Horne in this same opera, touring from Los Angeles to New York to Boston. They also performed it together in London (Drury Lane, 1969) and Chicago (1971), and both sang the opera with others, Horne as late as 1990 at the Metropolitan. At least as important as the performances was the recording of the complete opera in 1966, which allowed for its far wider dissemination than individual performances and also made the music permanently available.

*Semiramide* was uniquely suited to this pair of singers. Its use of mezzo-soprano for the 'male' lead gave Horne an appropriate rôle, but the opera shares this feature with a number of Rossini's *opere serie*. *Semiramide* combines the mezzo-soprano hero with a queen rather than a young girl as soprano (the statuesque Sutherland excelled as the queenly *Norma* and *Anna Bolena*, although of course she also sang the more girlish *Lucia* and *Amina*). Moreover, the writing is especially brilliant, and the musical forms are closer to those of Bellini and Donizetti than is true of Rossini's earlier *opere serie*. Finally, the tenor rôle is relatively unimportant and is easily reduced without affecting the story.

This appropriateness perhaps explains why, despite her considerable success in this rôle, Sutherland never sang another Rossini opera. Horne, on the other hand, has sung many Rossini rôles, both comic – *Rosina*, *Cenerentola*, *Isabella* in *L'italiana* – and serious. Between 1964 and 1989, Horne sang seven *serio* rôles – *Arsace* (*Semiramide*), *Neocle* (*L'assedio di Corinto*), *Tancredi*, *Malcom* (*La donna del lago*), *Falliero* (*Bianca e Falliero*), *Andromaca* (*Ermione*), *Calbo*<sup>24</sup> (*Maometto II*) – opposite eleven sopranos: Sutherland, Beverly Sills, Joan Carden, Margherita Rinaldi, Katia Ricciarelli, Montserrat

Caballé, Frederica von Stade, Lella Cuberli, June Anderson, Paula Scalera, Christine Weidinger – a list that includes some of the greatest voices of the late twentieth century. As Horne explained it, ‘mezzos are *always* looking for interesting rôles, because there are so few in the standard repertory . . . [I]t’s heaven to sing beautiful music of the kind Rossini wrote for his favorite artists.’<sup>25</sup> She has also sung and recorded many Rossini songs. No singer comes near her in importance for the Rossini Renaissance.

As late as the mid-1970s critics still noted a shortage of adequate singers, but there was no longer talk of simplified vocal lines (however much there may have been simplification in actuality, as we may hear from Salvatore Fisichella as Rodrigo on the 1979 recording of *Otello*). Thereafter critics may be critical of individual singers, but they assume that it is reasonable to expect good singing. In fact, many sopranos and mezzo-sopranos capable of meeting Rossini’s vocal demands have emerged over the last several decades. The number of good Rossini tenors has remained smaller, however. While a light lyric tenor can perform much Bellini and Donizetti adequately, Rossini expected his tenors to have the same vocal flexibility as his sopranos. Moreover, Rossini wrote many of his *opere serie* for two principal tenors, and this has perhaps kept these operas from assuming a larger place in the repertory.

## Musicology

After Radiciotti, little of significance occurred in Rossini studies until the 1960s. Friedrich Lippmann’s 1962 dissertation on Bellini for Kiel University<sup>26</sup> brought a new level of scholarship to the study of bel canto opera, including a fifty-page chapter on Rossini, although his conclusion that ‘the dominant colour in the manifoldly iridescent spectrum of Rossini’s style is playfulness . . . Rossini’s most fundamental achievement was the preservation of lightness’ (p. 206) seems not very different from the *Pelican History*. More important, and in contrast to Bellini and Donizetti, the revival of Rossini has been aided by the musicological enterprise of the critical edition. The idea of critical editions of this repertory was in the air by the mid-1960s when Philip Gossett began work on his dissertation, ‘The Operas of Rossini: Problems of Textual Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Opera’ (Princeton, 1970), and had spread to Italian thinking, to judge from Fedele D’Amico’s acerbic comment that those who dream of critical editions should instead defend the traditional editions against new editions that are much worse (Claudio Abbado’s rewriting of Bellini’s *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* was his example).<sup>27</sup> In response was the conductor Alberto Zedda’s edition of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (conducted by an evidently repentant Abbado at La



Scala in 1968, published in 1969); based on Rossini's autograph, it stripped away the layers of orchestration added in the late nineteenth century.

In 1971 Gossett made contacts among interested Italian scholars and musicians, especially Bruno Cagli, who had recently become artistic director of the Fondazione Rossini, and Zedda. The Fondazione, founded by Rossini's legacy for the purpose of supporting a conservatory in Pesaro, had begun two publishing ventures: editions of music in the *Quaderni rossiniani* (nineteen volumes from 1954 to 1976, mostly of chamber works, cantatas and songs) and Rossini scholarship in the *Bollettino del centro rossiniano di studi*. Begun in 1955, the *Bollettino* at first published very short articles (one to three pages) mostly tied to the activities of the conservatory; beginning in 1971 under Cagli's direction, it became an international scholarly journal.

Spurred by the much-criticised edition of *L'assedio di Corinto* used in the 1969 production at La Scala,<sup>28</sup> the Fondazione in 1973 undertook the publication of a critical edition of the composer's complete works (discussed in chapter 15 of this volume), with Gossett, Cagli and Zedda serving as the editorial board. The first volume, *La gazza ladra*, appeared in 1979, edited by Zedda. The Fondazione is also publishing Rossini's letters and two additional series, one on librettos, which includes facsimiles of the first edition of the libretto and other relevant historical documents, and the other on iconography, that is, historical sets and costumes. It has also sponsored conferences and published their proceedings as well as other collections of scholarly essays.

The enterprise of the critical edition in turn inspired the creation of the Rossini Opera Festival, which describes itself as having been started 'with the intention of backing up and developing, by means of theatrical performances, the scientific work of the Rossini Foundation (in particular . . . the publication of Rossini's complete works in critical editions)<sup>29</sup> and which performed the Fondazione's *Gazza ladra* in 1980, its inaugural season. This has led to a collaboration between musicology and opera house that is very unusual, perhaps unique. The Festival has first rights to perform the edition, which serves the two organisations' mutual interests: the Festival has the prestige of offering the premières of the critical editions, while the Fondazione sees its scholarly work realised in the theatre. In practice, not all of the Festival's productions have been based on critical editions, and sometimes preliminary versions of the critical edition have been first performed at other venues. Nevertheless, the Fondazione has adhered to the principle of hearing its editions performed before they are published.

The other area of musicology directly affecting the Rossini Renaissance, and the one most visible (or audible) to the audience, is performance practice. In Rossini, this has meant primarily the art of vocal ornamentation. Rather than the simplifications critics used to report, singers have

increasingly adopted the historically based practice of embellishing Rossini's vocal lines, thereby helping fulfil the operas' potential as vehicles for spectacular singing. However, one aspect of bel canto vocalism has rarely been adopted. We know that bel canto tenors used falsetto in the upper registers, a technique that even Rossini specialists today do not adopt for fear the sound would be too foreign to the ears of modern audiences. Curiously, Rossini (and Italian opera in general) has not been much affected by the movement to use period instruments. The Rossini Opera Festival, for one, has resolutely refused to experiment with them. This may be due in part to its reliance on outside orchestras brought in for the festival, but it would surely be possible to engage an original-instruments band if the Festival so chose. So far at least, the Festival's musical leadership has resisted the idea, and even Roger Norrington, whose reputation was made in the original-instruments movement, conducted a conventional orchestra in Pesaro.

### Why the Rossini Renaissance?

The post-war Rossini Renaissance was slow at first, led, it would seem, not by demands from singers or audiences, but by a few dedicated conductors (Vittorio Gui for *opera buffa*, then Tullio Serafin and Gabriele Santini in Italy and the now-obscure Arnold Gamson and his American Opera Society in New York), impresarios (like Francesco Siciliani, responsible for the Maggio Musicale of 1952), and the response of some listeners, reflected by some critics of the 1950s and 1960s, that these operas were in fact works of great beauty that still had the power to move. The growing number of singers adept at the style and the musicological commitment to the repertory has surely contributed to Rossini's increasing presence in the opera house since 1980. An additional factor has been the initiative of Pesaro, a small city (90,000) whose chief attraction was its beach. The commitment of that community, in the forms of the Fondazione Rossini and the Rossini Opera Festival, has made it and its favourite son a focus of international attention.

But then the revival of forgotten operas by many composers has been an important aspect of post-war musical life: Monteverdi, Handel, Donizetti, Massenet, Janáček have all had renaissances. We might well ask why, when such bel canto *opere serie* as *Norma* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* had remained in the repertory, Rossini's struggled to regain their place. The possible factors are many, stemming from Rossini's position at the crossroads between the eighteenth-century tradition of *opera seria* and the emerging Romanticism of the nineteenth, as seen, for example, in the transition from the castrato to the tenor in the heroic male rôles or from the happy ending to the tragic. The scarcity of Rossinian tenors and the assigning of heroic male rôles to

female mezzo-sopranos have surely hindered these works' acceptance. Then there is the problematic nature of Rossini's librettos, whose implied musical forms are similar to those of Bellini, Donizetti and early Verdi but whose plots favour complication and the fraught situation rather than logically directed action. That *Tancredi* and *Otello* had both happy endings and tragic endings suggests a lack of the dramatic inevitability that modern audiences expect. Other structural problems abound; for example, Act 1 of *La donna del lago* introduces three characters in three substantial arias, the succession interrupted only by a short *duettino*, which render the action inert.

The characteristics of Rossini's style that many critics have found disturbing have also been a contributing factor to the slowness with which his *opere serie* have regained acceptance. However, some recent critics have detected in opera audiences a growing anti-Romanticism<sup>30</sup> and anti-realism<sup>31</sup> that reminds us of Alfredo Casella and the Futurists of the 1920s. A paradoxical aspect of the Rossinian cult at Pesaro is that it is a descendant of the cult of Wagner at Bayreuth, and more broadly of the veneration of the heroic individual – quintessentially Romantic phenomena – but that it focuses on an altogether less pretentious artist than Wagner, one whose self description was 'little science, a little heart', whom commentators often oppose to Romanticism. To compound the irony, a small Rossini festival has recently begun in Bayreuth itself. Perhaps Rossini is the right heroic figure for an age that distrusts heroic figures.

However, the critics notwithstanding, signs that the general public is tiring of late-Romantic melodrama are scarce. Performances of Rossini's serious operas are still relatively infrequent, especially at the major opera houses, whose repertoires have broadened in many directions but whose heart is still Verdi and Puccini. In 1971 the critic Glenna Syse (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 25 September 1971) predicted that *Semiramide* would return to Chicago, but thirty years later it had not yet reappeared. Anne Midgette, in the *New York Times* of 1 July 2001, calls *La donna del lago*, *La gazza ladra* and *Otello* 'little-played works' and wonders 'whether the bel canto revival . . . remains a force in today's repertory'. On the other hand, in 2001 the Rossini Opera Festival did more performances of its operas than in previous years. There are those, few in number compared with the opera-going public as a whole, who return to Pesaro in August, year after year, those who attend a second Rossini festival in Bad Wildbad and now the one in Bayreuth, who seek out Rossini *serio* in other venues – who hear in Rossini not post-modern irony but the qualities that have surprised receptive critics from Shaw to Sadie, 'beauties that are absolute and not dependent on the diversities of time and place'.

