

PART ONE

Biography and reception

2 Rossini's life

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Rossini is one of the most enigmatic of the great composers. The reasons for the popularity of his best-known compositions have never been difficult to fathom. His music is sensuous and incomparably vital: 'Full of the finest animal spirits', wrote Leigh Hunt in his *Autobiography* in 1850, 'yet capable of the noblest gravity'.¹ It is also somewhat detached, causing his admirers to think him a fine ironist, his detractors to dub him cynical. Rossini himself was happy to cultivate the mask of casual unconcern. But the image which devolved from this – the gifted but feckless amateur who at an early age abandoned his career for a life of luxury and the otiose pleasures of the table – bears little relation to the facts of his life as we have them.

The formative years, 1792–1810

Rossini was born in the small Adriatic town of Pesaro during a time of severe political upheaval. Both his parents were musicians. His father, Giuseppe Rossini (1764–1839), a robust character, energetic, querulous and a touch naïve, was Pesaro's town trumpeter and a horn player of sufficient distinction to be admitted to Bologna's Accademia Filarmonica. An outspoken Republican, he was briefly imprisoned by the Austrians in 1799, a circumstance which forced his young wife into making more of her untrained talent as an operatic soprano than might otherwise have been the case.

Anna Rossini (1771–1827) was the daughter of a Pesaro baker, Domenico Guidarini, with whom Giuseppe lodged. After falling pregnant in the summer of 1791, she married Giuseppe in the town cathedral on 26 September and gave birth to their only child, Gioachino Antonio, on 29 February 1792. Rossini was five when his mother first took to the professional stage. For the next eleven years she appeared regularly in local opera houses, eventually acquiring a repertory of some fifteen rôles, all of them comic. 'Poor mother!' Rossini later told Ferdinand Hiller, 'she was not without talent, even though she couldn't read music.'²

In 1802 the family moved to Lugo, near Ravenna. Yet despite their partly itinerant life, the Rossinis saw to it that their precociously talented child received a basic grounding in reading, writing, mathematics and Latin. Musically he was well catered for. Under the guidance of Canon Giuseppe

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Malerbi he studied the rudiments of composition and had the run of the Malerbi family's extensive music library. It was here that he first delighted in the works of Haydn and Mozart ('the admiration of my youth, the desperation of my mature years, and the consolation of my old age'), whose music remained something of a closed book to conservative, chauvinistic taste in early nineteenth-century Italy. By the age of twelve Rossini was already ahead of the game, as proven by the six *Sonate a quattro*, composed in 1804 for performance in the villa at Conventello of the wealthy young amateur musician (and Republican sympathiser) Agostino Triossi (1781–1822). The attestation Rossini later added to the autograph manuscript is typically self-deprecatory:

First violin, second violin, violoncello, and contrabass for six *horrendous* sonatas composed by me at the country house (near Ravenna) of my friend and patron, Agostino Triossi, at the most youthful age, having not even had a lesson in thorough-bass. They were all composed and copied in three days and performed in a doggish way by Triossi, contrabass; Morini (his cousin), first violin; the latter's brother, violoncello; and the second violin by myself, who was, to tell the truth, the least doggish.³

Opera was meat and drink to him from an early age. On 21 April 1804 a formal application was submitted in his name for the use of Imola's Teatro Comunale. This evening with the Rossinis, mother and son, featured among other things a 'Cavatina sung by Citizen Gioachino Rossini, who will act fully-costumed in a *buffo* part'.⁴ In the autumn of 1805 he appeared on stage at the Teatro del Corso, Bologna (where the family had moved the previous year), in the cameo rôle of the boy Adolfo in Ferdinando Paer's *Camilla*. During Rossini's time in Bologna two singers visited the city who made a profound impression on him. One was the Spanish soprano Isabella Colbran (1785–1845), for whom he would write some of his most dramatically powerful roles, and whom he would later marry. The other was the great castrato Giovan Battista Velluti (1781–1861). Although the castrato tradition was all but extinct in contemporary operatic life, Rossini claimed to have been deeply influenced by what he called the purity and the miraculous flexibility of those voices and 'their profoundly penetrating accent'.⁵

In 1806, at the precociously early age of fourteen, he had entered Bologna's Liceo Musicale, initially to study singing, though he was quickly admitted to the composition class of the director of the Liceo, Padre Stanislao Mattei (1750–1825). He produced some accomplished work during his time at the Liceo, both privately (the so-called 'Ravenna' Mass, another Triossi commission) and for examination within the Liceo itself (his fine early cantata *Il pianto d'Armonia sulla morte d'Orfeo*); but when, in 1810, a further two years of study were proposed (plainsong and canon the prescribed

topics), his instinct to continue his education in the real world finally asserted itself.

Venice and Milan, 1810–1815

Rossini's decision to cast his bread on the waters was not inherently risky, given the nature of his talent and the huge demand for new works which existed in Italy's opera houses at the time. But where to start? It was the singer Rosa Morandi and her husband Giuseppe who, on the advice of theatre impresario Francesco Cavalli, pointed the eighteen-year-old Gioachino in the direction of Venice's Teatro San Moisè. It was there, on 3 November 1810, that he made his professional début as an opera composer with the one-act *farsa* *La cambiale di matrimonio*. What is remarkable about the piece, apart from the sheer vitality of the writing, is how an unusually successful structural plan appears to have formed itself in Rossini's mind at the very outset. Conditions in theatres such as Venice's San Moisè were ideal for an apprentice composer. Working to a strictly limited budget, a small company of singers (without chorus) would stage a one-act opera with minimal scenery and limited rehearsal. Between January 1812 and January 1813 Rossini wrote four such *farse* for the San Moisè, beginning with the hugely successful *L'inganno felice* and ending with *Il Signor Bruschino*, whose mixture of sharp wit and sentimentality makes it perhaps the most successful of Rossini's works in this genre.

Initially Rossini had less success away from the San Moisè. The ambitious two-act *dramma giocoso* *L'equivoco stravagante* (Bologna, October 1811) was costly to stage and ran into trouble with the local censor. This first encounter with a more complex plot and large-scale formal structures did, however, give him the necessary confidence to mastermind his first genuinely successful two-act opera, *La pietra del paragone* (Milan, September 1812). Stendhal thought the opera's Act 1 Finale the funniest of all Rossini's comic finales. His penchant for nonsensical banter ('Ombretta sdegnosa' with its 'Missipipì, pipì, pipì' refrain) and quotable jokes (the 'Sigillara' sequence in Act 1) made him the toast of Milan and guaranteed fifty-three performances of the opera in its first season. *La pietra* also cemented some important partnerships with singers, notably the contralto Maria Marcolini, for whom Rossini was to create a number of bespoke rôles, and the bass Filippo Galli. After his Milanese success, Rossini was able to designate himself a *maestro di cartello*, a composer whose name alone guarantees a public. He was also exempted from military service, no mean concession in 1812.

Tancredi (Venice, 1813) was a further landmark in his career, his first truly (and immensely) successful *opera seria*. In this two-act heroic idyll

he wrote some of his most flawlessly beautiful early music, whilst at the same time significantly advancing his mastery of individual forms and their co-ordinated use in ensembles. The opera also included a smash-hit which quickly travelled beyond Italy, the protagonist's cabaletta 'Di tanti palpiti'. Two months after the première of *Tancredi* Rossini was engaged at short notice by Venice's Teatro San Benedetto to re-work a contemporary story about an Italian girl in Algiers. Nothing demonstrates more clearly his emancipation from eighteenth-century Italian operatic practice, his innovative genius and the purely musical basis of much of his humour than this opportunistic reworking of Angelo Anelli's libretto for *L'italiana in Algeri*, which Luigi Mosca had first set to music in Milan in 1808.

Naples, 1815–1822

The year 1814 brought Rossini no runaway successes, but his new-found status was sufficient to land him a contract which would change the direction of his own career and the future course of Italian opera. It came from the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, one of Europe's most lavishly financed houses, built in 1737 by the Bourbon King Charles III as part of a programme of beautification of the city. The man who secured Rossini for Naples was the multi-millionaire builder, gaming magnate and impresario Domenico Barbaja (1778–1841). Barbaja was reputed to have made his money out of a coffee and whipped cream concoction which he invented whilst working as a waiter in Milan. In reality, building contracts, wheeler-dealing in military supplies during the Napoleonic wars and a gambling concession at La Scala, Milan, were the basis of his fortune. When the Teatro San Carlo burned down on the night of 13 February 1816 Barbaja himself advanced the entire cost of the rebuilding in return for an exceptionally generous concession on the opera house's future gambling revenues. His letters are full of cajolery, abuse, hectoring and self-pity. Yet he was the greatest musical entrepreneur of his day, with a nose for quality and a passion to promote it. Since his arrival in Naples in 1809 he had lured to the city a superb roster of singers, including Isabella Colbran (his mistress and later Rossini's wife), three distinguished tenors – Giovanni David, Manuel García and Andrea Nozzari – and the bass Michele Benedetti.

Rossini's contract with the Neapolitan theatres was an appropriately lucrative one and allowed him leave to work away from Naples. That said, its terms were complex, its schedules strenuous. These involved the composition of a series of grand new *opere serie*, the musical preparation of other composers' works (in 1820 Rossini oversaw the Italian première of the revision of Spontini's *tragédie lyrique Fernand Cortez*), and a good deal of

day-to-day administration. Rossini bridled at the work-load (he once expressed surprise that Barbaja had not insisted on him doing the washing-up as well), but the obsessive side of his nature ensured ready compliance with Barbaja's desire to have each new production meticulously staged, played and sung.

Rossini's reception in Naples in the late summer of 1815 was not especially warm. The *Giornale delle Due Sicilie* (25 September) was typically condescending: 'And finally a certain Signor Rossini, a choirmaster, who has come, we've been told, to present an *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* of his at this S. Carlo theatre, which still resounds with the melodious accents of the *Medea* and the *Cora* of the distinguished Signor Mayr.' When *Elisabetta* triumphed and *L'italiana in Algeri* had the audience at the home of Neapolitan comedy, the Teatro dei Fiorentini, in paroxysms of delight, the *Giornale* (31 October) was vaguely abashed: 'Signor Rossini – some will have found it strange that, the last time, we ignored his merits – today triumphs in the principal theatres of this ancient cradle of science and musical genius.'

The hostility of the press notwithstanding, Rossini was quickly absorbed into Neapolitan society. Outside the court, one of its hubs was the Palazzo Berio, home of the well-to-do literary dilettante Francesco Berio di Salsa (1765–1820), Rossini's librettist for *Otello* and *Ricciardo e Zoraide*. The Irish-born novelist Lady Morgan would recall in her *Italy* (1821):

The *conversazione* of the Palazzo Berio is a congregation of elegant and refined spirits, where everybody converses and converses well; and best (if not most) the master of the house . . . Rossini presided at the piano-forte, accompanying alternatively, himself, Rosetti in his *improvvisi* [*sic*], and the Colbrun [*sic*], the *prima donna* of San Carlo, in some of her favourite airs from his own *Mosè*. Rossini at the piano-forte is almost as fine an actor as he is a composer.⁶

Excluding the semi-pastiche *Eduardo e Cristina* (Venice, 1819), Rossini wrote eighteen operas in the six-and-a-half years between his arrival in Naples in 1815 and his departure in March 1822, nine of them for the San Carlo company. Sources ranged from the Bible, Tasso and Shakespeare to Racine and Sir Walter Scott, many of them ground-breaking initiatives, with Rossini himself taking a close interest in the drafting of the librettos. Away from Naples, he would consolidate his reputation as a composer of *opera buffa*. *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Rome, 1816) is a brilliant re-appropriation of Beaumarchais's play that iconoclastically outmanoeuvres Paisiello's earlier setting at almost every point, whilst *La Cenerentola* (Rome, 1817) mixes *buffo* antics with a degree of pathos unheard thus far in Rossini's comic operas, and perhaps influenced by the sentimental *semiseria* tradition.

Rossini's huge capacity for work and obsessive attention to detail are well illustrated by his involvement in 1817–18 with the gala opening of Pesaro's new opera house. On 27 January 1818 he wrote to the project's organisers, Giulio Perticari and Antaldo Antaldi, confirming that he was trying to engage the services of Colbran and Nozzari, possibly with *Armida*, his newest Neapolitan opera, in mind. The negotiations dragged on for two months, during which time it became clear that Pesaro could neither afford such celebrities nor give clear indications as to when they would be required. Eventually *La gazza ladra* (Milan, May 1817) was chosen, though this proved almost as difficult to cast and even more expensive to stage, not least because of Rossini's insistence on employing La Scala's distinguished stage-designer, Paolo Landriani (1757–1839), and his star pupil, Alessandro Sanquirico (1777–1849).

When a plea to his old friend Rosa Morandi to sing Ninetta came to nothing, Rossini engaged the eighteen-year-old Giuseppina Ronzi De Begnis and, at a reduced fee, her husband Giuseppe De Begnis as the Mayor. The savings made on the De Begnises enabled him to engage his protégé, the tenor Alberico Curioni, as Giannetto and Raniero Remorini as Ferrando. As the star of the show, Remorini was both expensive and difficult. 'He has put me through three days of hell', Rossini informed Perticari on 20 May, referring to Remorini's insistence on having an additional solo. 'Oh, what trouble!' This was nothing, however, to the trouble Rossini himself was taking over the production. Every inch the obsessive perfectionist, he insists on nominating and acquiring the finest local instrumentalists; the layout of the orchestra, the spaces between players, and the lighting of the music-stands are all specified; the co-ordination of designers and stage machinists is set in train; a reminder is issued about the whereabouts of the fake magpie.⁷

The gala opening on 10 June was a triumph, though shortly afterwards Rossini was struck down with 'a severe inflammation of the throat', perhaps an early warning of more serious stress-related illnesses to come. His death was noised abroad as far afield as Naples and Paris, but he survived. The following May he returned to Pesaro only to be hounded out of town by thugs in the pay of Bartolomeo Bergami, the lover of Caroline of Brunswick (the estranged wife of the English Prince Regent), whom Rossini had apparently snubbed the previous year. Rossini was twenty-seven, and though he survived into his seventy-sixth year, he never set foot in Pesaro again.

Though he returned to Naples in the autumn of 1818, talk in operatic circles was all of him leaving Italy, possibly for Paris, where *L'italiana in Algeri* had recently taken the Théâtre Italien by storm. In practice, the French musical establishment was in no mood to negotiate with him, nor was he perceived by musicians who knew him to be ready to go abroad. On

25 August 1818 the violinist Jean-Jacques Grasset wrote from Bologna to a friend in Paris: 'He is in good hands here for the two things he loves, the table and women.'⁸ In the summer of 1820 there was a rising against the Bourbon régime in Naples. Although it was rapidly quashed by the Austrians, it unnerved Rossini. The following year Barbaja signed a contract to take the Naples company to Vienna. Rossini, it was proposed, would also visit Paris and London before returning to Naples. He never did return. The press now worshipped him, but Neapolitan audiences were tiring of his high-minded *opere serie* as much as he was tiring of Neapolitan audiences (the failure of *Ermione* in 1819 had been a particular cause of distress).

Europe and Paris, 1822–1829

Rossini's last Naples opera was *Zelmira*. Setting out for Vienna on 6 March 1822, three weeks after the *prima*, he and Colbran broke their journey at Bologna where they were married in the small church of San Giovanni Battista in Castenaso. Rossini's parents were both present. Many years later he told the painter De Sanctis that it was his mother who had urged him to marry, possibly on grounds of propriety. Money may also have been a consideration: Colbran had recently inherited lands in Sicily as well as the villa at Castenaso. The near-hysteria with which the Viennese greeted Rossini confirmed that there were worlds beyond Italy waiting to be conquered. During his stay in Vienna he had a brief meeting with Beethoven. If, as Rossini reported, Beethoven really did say 'Above all, make more *Barbers!*', it was a fine compliment: proof that Beethoven had read this musically radical work with a good deal more insight than many of his contemporaries.

Returning to Castenaso in the late summer of 1822, Rossini closeted himself with his old friend, the librettist Gaetano Rossi, to work on *Semiramide* (Venice, February 1823), the swan-song of his Italian career. In November 1823 he and Colbran travelled to Paris, where they were fêted on a grand scale and where negotiations finally began about the possibility of Rossini accepting some kind of permanent position in the city's musical life.

The following month the Rossinis moved to London. After a stormy channel crossing, from which it took Rossini a week to recover, the couple settled in rooms at 90 Regent Street. On 29 December Rossini was received by George IV at the court in Brighton. His performance of Figaro's 'Largo al factotum' was well received, but his falsetto rendition of Desdemona's Willow Song scandalised staid opinion. The *Quarterly Musical Magazine* found him genial but bland: 'He certainly looks more like a sturdy beef-eating Englishman than a sensitive, fiery-spirited native of the soft climate of Italy. His countenance when at rest is intelligent yet serious, but bears

no marks of the animation which pervades and indeed forms the principal feature of his compositions.’⁹

Rossini’s immediate responsibility was the musical direction of a season largely given over to his own operas in the partly refurbished King’s Theatre. Neither *Il barbiere di Siviglia* nor *Zelmira* were much liked (an expensive mistake for the impresario Benelli, given the £1,500 fee Mme Colbran-Rossini had demanded), but *Otello* and *Semiramide* with Pasta and García won a large measure of approval from the public, though not from Rossini, who is reported to have remarked that Pasta sang ‘false’.¹⁰ The composer amassed a small fortune during his time in London, largely through numerous private appearances for which he made extortionate charges (100 guineas a ‘lesson’ at a time when the more usual rate was one guinea). These money-making sorties, which included two star-studded concerts at Almack’s Rooms, were ill-received in the press. Nor was his newly written *Il pianto delle muse in morte di Lord Byron* spared, despite exertions which left the soloist, Rossini himself, red-faced and perspiring in the summer heat. The Byron elegy and a *Duetto* for cello and double bass, written for the banker David Salomons and the double bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti, were the only works Rossini completed in London. A proposed opera, *Ugo, re d’Italia* (a reworking of music from *Ermione*), was never finished.

A draft contract with the French government was signed in London in February 1824. It proposed that, within the year, Rossini would provide for the Paris stage a new *grand opéra* and a shorter *opéra comique*. In the event it would be four years before he produced either. There were sound reasons for this delay. His command of French prosody and the French declamatory style had to be worked on; moreover, singers needed re-schooling as part of a process of re-aligning French and Italian traditions and methods. Rossini was also called upon to assist in the running of the Théâtre Italien, which his music had already taken over: in the season before he arrived in Paris, 119 of the theatre’s 154 performances featured works by him.

After the move to Paris in the autumn of 1824, Rossini’s first unavoidable duty came with the coronation of Charles X in June 1825. The celebrations spawned a score of official entertainments of which Rossini’s *Il viaggio a Reims* was one. It delighted everyone except the king himself. After four performances Rossini withdrew the score, not because of royal disfavour but because he had more permanent plans for the music, much of which would re-appear in intriguing new configurations in *Le Comte Ory* three years later.

Rossini’s first French-language operas for the Paris stage were revisions of earlier works: *Le Siège de Corinthe* (from *Maometto II*) and *Moïse et Pharaon* (from *Mosè in Egitto*). The composer was prudently testing French musical waters, making numberless changes to the scores, both large- and

small-scale. Theatrically, however, the revisions were far from prudent. In revising *Maometto II*, originally a story about Venetians and Turks, Rossini and his librettists turned the drama into a tragedy of the Greek people at a time when the French government was in strategic alliance with the Turkish cause but public opinion was sympathetic to the Greek one. The staging itself was also revolutionary, not least the final scene depicting the sacked and burning Corinth: 'The entire stage is on fire!', notes the production book; 'the curtain falls on this horrifying tableau'.¹¹ Rossini's promised *grand opéra*, *Guillaume Tell*, which eventually had its première in August 1829 – after an eleventh-hour battle of wills with the government over Rossini's demand for a life annuity – offered a very different view of the world, embodying ideals which were rather closer to Rossini's heart: familial harmony and the politics of a people who seek independence with peace.

Bologna and Paris, 1829–1836

In September 1829 Rossini returned to Bologna. It was a sad homecoming. His mother had died two years previously after a short illness and, though his father soldiered on, Isabella was becoming progressively more impossible, bored and addicted to gambling. The following spring Rossini was in correspondence with the French government about the possibility of an opera based on Goethe's *Faust*. Then, in the summer of 1830, the government fell. Charles X fled into exile to be replaced by Louis-Philippe, the 'citizen king'. Committed to policies based on 'fairness' and 'accountability', the new government slashed investment in the Civil List, cancelling Rossini's life annuity and invalidating his contract with the Opéra. Rossini rushed back to Paris to attend to the matter, but it was only after five years of lobbying and litigation that the annuity was restored when an appeal by the Ministry of Finance against an independent tribunal's ruling in Rossini's favour was thrown out by the courts (the fact that Charles X's own signature was on the contract of April 1829 had proved decisive).

Well-off now, but wearied by litigation and in increasingly poor health (he had contracted gonorrhoea in 1832), the 43-year-old Rossini was in no fit state to return to the operatic fray. There had been talk of his retiring from operatic composition as early as 1816, after the fiasco of the first night of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Clearly such talk was premature, but his father's remark in a letter written in 1827 – 'he has toiled long and wearily enough' – is very much to the point. Certainly thirty-nine operas in nineteen years, few of them outright failures, many of them masterpieces or works of significant imagination or innovation, is a formidable record. Tiredness, family concerns, and political, artistic and social change all played their part

in what Rossini biographer Francis Toye misleadingly termed ‘the great renunciation’.

Rossini was thirty-seven at the time of the completion of *Guillaume Tell*, an age when even the most naturally gifted composers can lose the facility they once possessed. Creative failures, suicides, unanticipated deaths and lapses into silence far more complete than Rossini’s have been legion at this stage in the lives of many great artists. Rossini had made his mark and established his line. Returning to the Théâtre Italien in 1830, he was able to watch with interest the work of Meyerbeer, Donizetti and Bellini. His grief at Bellini’s death at the early age of thirty-three in 1835 was marked; difficult though Bellini had been, he was one of the first of Rossini’s several surrogate sons, the exemplary bearer of the torch Rossini himself had lit.

In February 1831 Rossini, now based mostly in Paris, travelled with his friend, the Parisian banker Alexandre-Marie Aguado, to Madrid, where he was persuaded to create a new work for Aguado’s friend, the priest and state counsellor Don Francisco Fernández Varela. A *Stabat mater* was suggested. Rossini accepted the commission and half completed it before farming out the remainder of the work to his colleague Giovanni Tadolini. The Rossini/Tadolini setting was first performed in Madrid on Good Friday 1833. Rossini did not travel to hear it. Furthermore, he stipulated that, after its first performance, the work should remain in manuscript, unpublished and unperformed, a stipulation which would return to haunt him.

In the midst of the *Stabat mater* project Rossini wrote a cantata for voice and piano, *Giovanna d’Arco*, ‘expressly for Mademoiselle Olimpia Pélissier’. Born in 1797, Olympe was the illegitimate daughter of a woman who later married Joseph Pélissier, whose name she adopted. The erstwhile mistress of the painter Horace Vernet, Olympe was described by Balzac as ‘the most beautiful courtesan in Paris’. The character of Fedora in his novel *La Peau de chagrin* (1831) was partly inspired by her. Fedora is described there as being physically opulent, sexually chilly (the one aspect of the character probably not inspired by Olympe), snobbish and insecure, yet possessed of a strange inner warmth, a private serenity.

Although it would be a mistake to think of Balzac, Rossini and Olympe as a *ménage à trois*, they certainly saw a good deal of one another in the early 1830s. Balzac was a Rossini addict who physically rather resembled his hero and was, like him, subject to a form of manic depression. To judge by the pages devoted to the Rossini cult in *La Peau de chagrin*, Balzac understood the ambiguous nature of the phenomenon as well as anyone. Seen from one perspective, Rossini is an urbane figure from a bygone age, a musician descended from the school of Cimarosa and Paisiello, an emblem of that sweetness and classical decorum which the besotted wretches of Parisian society yearn for in their morning-after moods. Seen from the other

perspective, his music is disruptive and noisy, representative of a world where dissipation, high living and heightened sensation are the order of the day. Both were true, but it was the former vision to which Rossini himself clung: in his *Les Soirées musicales* (1835) populist material is treated with courtly sophistication.

Bologna and Florence, 1836–1855

His annuity secured, in the autumn of 1836 Rossini moved back to Bologna, Olympe following him there a few months later. By now he was suffering a hell of his own devising: the effects of gonorrhoea and its attendant afflictions. Although he is said to have 'at the age of forty-four tempered his passion for women and stopped the abuse of liquors and heating foods',¹² it was too late. Nowadays his condition could be cured with a mixture of antibiotics or chemotherapy; in the 1830s there was no known cure. He also suffered from chronic dysuria and various bladder infections. A predisposition to manic depression was almost certainly exacerbated by the pain and humiliation these illnesses brought in their wake.

By now Olympe had ceased to be Rossini's lover and become his nurse. In 1837–8, after Rossini had formally separated from Colbran, he and Olympe wintered in Milan, where he met and befriended Franz Liszt. But events continued to wreak their havoc. A fire at the Théâtre Italien in Paris in January 1838 claimed the life of Rossini's friend Carlo Severini. In October his father celebrated his eightieth birthday, but he was in poor health and died the following April. News also reached Rossini of the death of Varela and the appearance in a Parisian auction room of the manuscript of the Rossini/Tadolini *Stabat mater*. He immediately set about establishing his legal rights to the piece. More importantly, he determined to complete it. The new, all-Rossini *Stabat mater* made its sensational public début in Paris in January 1842. Two months later it was performed in Bologna: too nervous to conduct, Rossini asked Donizetti to take charge of the performance. Rossini was in poor physical and mental shape and might well have died, had it not been for a decision in the spring of 1843 to return to Paris to consult France's leading urologist, Jean Civiale. The treatment lasted three months, during which time Rossini was confined in a semi-darkened bedroom, much obsessed, it is said, with thoughts of death.

In October 1845 news reached him that Colbran was gravely ill. He visited her shortly before her death on 7 October 1845. The following August he and Olympe were married. The year 1846 also saw the election of Pope Pius IX, a liberalising pontiff who, it was hoped, would help reconcile Catholicism and Italian nationalism. Rossini honoured the Pope's election with a grand

cantata (his last such work) for performance in Rome on New Year's Day 1847. What neither Pius IX nor Rossini had bargained for was the disruptive power of the revolutions which were about to engulf Europe. With Italian nationalists confronting Austrian troops on the streets of Bologna in April 1848, Rossini beat a hasty retreat to Florence, where he remained until 1855, returning to Bologna only to settle his affairs and sell the villa at Castenaso. His uneasy but none the less co-operative relationship with the Austrians was noised abroad by radicals as the collaborative act of a decadent bourgeois. Rossini retaliated by dubbing Bologna 'that sewer'.

To pass the time he buried himself in the minutiae of domestic and legal affairs. Visitors, whom he often burdened with gruesome and embarrassing details of his physical condition, found him morbid and excitable. He claimed to have contemplated suicide but confessed that he was too much of a coward to take the decisive step. Gossips reported him incurably insane. He was not, but his mood-swings were extreme. Amid the gloom there are letters from this period in his best *buffo* style. The new complete edition of the works of J. S. Bach gave him real pleasure, and he continued to pass amusing and acerbic judgements on fellow composers. Hearing music in his own home often left him in a distracted and tearful state, but his executive skills remained undimmed. Emilia Branca Romani recalls him weaving a brilliantly improvised accompaniment round Matilde Juva's rendering of 'Bel raggio lusinghier' from *Semiramide* and describes his improvisation on Desdemona's Act 3 romance in *Otello* – a 'fantasia alla Thalberg' as Rossini called it – as 'magnificent, astonishing, dumbfounding'.¹³

Paris, 1855–1868

In 1855 Olympe insisted that they return to Paris, to French doctors and French society. The removal had no immediate effect, but slowly the clouds began to lift. On 15 April 1857 Rossini presented to Olympe a set of songs entitled *Musique anodine*. The dedication reads: 'I offer these modest songs to my dear wife Olympe as a simple testimonial of gratitude for the affectionate, intelligent care of which she was prodigal during my overlong and terrible illness (Shame of the [medical] faculty).'¹⁴

The Rossinis took an apartment in the rue de la Chaussée d'Antin and land was acquired in Passy for the building of a sumptuous new villa. On 18 December 1858 the first of the famous *samedi soirs* was held. The food bordered on the execrable (Olympe making good use of the endless 'samples' sent to the gourmet maestro) and Rossini himself often stayed apart in a nearby room chatting with cronies. But the music, much of it newly written by him for the occasion, was exquisite. Rossini dubbed these pieces 'Sins of

Old Age'. Over the next ten years musical Europe beat a path to Rossini's door. Few invitations were more coveted.

Rossini led a carefully regulated life in Paris. After rising at eight and breakfasting, he would attend to his mail and, if circumstances were propitious, take a brief walk or drive or visit one of a select band of well-to-do friends. He rarely ate lunch, dined at six and, after a short nap, might receive friends before retiring on the stroke of ten, 'the canonical hour'. He assumed no public duties (his presidency of a government commission on musical pitch was purely honorary) and attended no public performances of his, or anyone else's, music.

He was fascinated by young musical talent, however. In 1860 the Marchisio sisters – Barbara (1833–1919) and Carlotta (1835–72) – starred in a new production of *Semiramide* at the Paris Opéra. Although Rossini was firmly of the opinion that the art of singing had fallen into decay by the time of *Guillaume Tell*, he seems to have found in the voices of the Marchisios echoes of past beauties. On the evening of Good Friday 1861 a musical soirée was given over to his *Stabat mater*, performed by a chamber ensemble which included the Marchisio sisters and, in lieu of the orchestra, a double string quartet.

This was the prelude to an altogether more important initiative, the creation of his last major work, the *Petite messe solennelle*, written for the dedication in March 1864 of the private chapel of the Countess Pillet-Will. In an epigraph to the *Messe* Rossini tells his Maker:

Dear God, here it is finished, this poor little Mass. Is this sacred music which I have written or music of the devil? (Est-ce bien de la musique Sacrée que je viens de faire ou bien de la Sacrée Musique?) I was born for *opera buffa*, as you well know. A little science, a little heart, that's all. Be blessed, then, and admit me to Paradise. G Rossini. Passy 1863.¹⁵

The Mass's title is not a joke (*solennelle* indicates a sung mass, a *missa solemnis* as opposed to a *missa lecta*), although it does hint at its scale: just twelve voices, including the four soloists, two pianos and harmonium. The work has moments of radiance and uninhibited joy, but also a stranger, darker side, which tests conventional faith to its limits. In something like the irksome little E minor figure which dominates the Agnus Dei there is a sense of death as extinction, empty of all meaning.

Towards the end of 1866 Rossini suffered a mild stroke from which he made an unexpectedly full recovery. He was pathologically obese, however, with hardening of the arteries in his legs making walking increasingly difficult. The following February he celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday. In 1868, while the Paris Opéra celebrated the '500th performance' of *Guillaume Tell*, he became embroiled in controversy about the funding of Italy's music

schools. In August he received a letter from a young composer, Costantino Dall'Argine, who proposed to dedicate his own setting of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* to him. Rossini wrote a wise, witty and gracious reply acceding to the young man's request. Later that same month he penned a long and wide-ranging letter on musical aesthetics to the critic Filippo Filippi, in which for the last time Rossini affirmed the classical virtues of the early *Ottocento* style and railed against 'imitative' (as opposed to 'expressive') music and the decline of vocal art.¹⁶

The final *samedi soir* was held on 26 September 1868. For some time Rossini's doctor had been aware of what he took to be a rectal fistula. It was in fact a malignant tumour. Rossini was referred to Professor Auguste Nelaton, a pioneer of abdominal surgery at Paris's Hôpital St Louis, who scheduled an operation for 3 November. Since chronic bronchitis and cardiac weakness made Rossini an anaesthetic risk, Nelaton removed as much of the malignancy as he could in a five-minute operation, which he was forced to supplement with further surgery two days later. Nelaton was confident of success, but the use of unsterile equipment proved fatal, causing a rapidly spreading infection of the skin. Delirious with fever and pain, Rossini lapsed into a coma and died shortly before midnight on Friday 13 November.

The funeral, which took place at the church of the Trinity in Paris at noon on 21 November, was attended by over 4,000 people, after which Rossini's body was laid to rest in Paris's grandest cemetery, Père-Lachaise. He died a wealthy man. His estate passed to Olympe and, after her death in 1878, to the municipality of Pesaro for the founding of a new Liceo Musicale, which opened on 5 November 1882. In 1887 his remains were removed to the church of Santa Croce in Florence, a temple to the glories of the young Italian nation modelled on Westminster Abbey. Olympe had been apprised some years earlier that this would be the case. When she proffered the hope that she might be moved there too, Italian opinion (including Verdi's) was scandalised, a situation this most resolute yet modest of musical wives accepted with characteristic grace and forbearance: 'After the removal of my husband's mortal remains to Florence,' she wrote in her will, 'I shall remain there [Père-Lachaise] alone. I make this sacrifice in all humility; I have been glorified enough by the name I bear. My faith and my religious feeling give me the hope of a reunion which escapes earth.'¹⁷ It was not until 1902 that a proper memorial was erected at Rossini's tomb in Santa Croce, the words 'Pesaro–Firenze–Parigi', which are engraved on it, an obvious (and surely intentional) slight to Bologna and Naples.