7 The dramaturgy of the operas

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The idea of a 'Rossinian dramaturgy', which is occasionally given an airing, may be a misleading abstraction: much as *Tancredi* or *La Cenerentola* may seem epiphanies of a personal poetic, to what extent were they the largely predictable results of contemporary artistic convention? The 'author's intentions', however powerful, always have to reckon with a sort of 'opera's intentions', a fixed framework within which the composer has limited space for manoeuvre: to compose within a genre means, after all, submitting at least partially to its language and structure, if one does not want to see the work excluded from the genre itself. While this is the case for every artistic genre, it is all the more so for Italian opera, which until the early nineteenth century flourished on this fertile dialectic between originality and convention.

What is more, opera could be called a trinitarian text: a syncretic product resulting from the confluence of three distinct texts, verbal, musical and visual, technically known as the libretto, the score and the *mise en scène* or staging. Each has a different author: poet (librettist), composer and staging director respectively. (The identity of this last gradually changed over time, and is fragmented today into the different professions of director, scenographer, costume designer, choreographer and lighting designer. For convenience we will consider these as one 'author', similar to librettists or composers who worked as a pair.) Each of the three texts has a different weight: on the creative level, the verbal text precedes and conditions the others; on the level of transmission and reception, the score becomes the primary aesthetic object, the only one capable of sustaining theatrical interest in the work; and finally, on the executive level, the staging inevitably boasts a prominence which at times overwhelms (or impoverishes) the musico-dramatic text upon which it is superimposed.

Rather than Rossinian dramaturgy, then, we might speak of a dramaturgy of Rossini's operas, in which artistic responsibility is divided among a group of authors just as in other contemporary operas. The more individual and original aspects of each opera, meanwhile, elude any attempt at classification precisely on account of their idiosyncrasy. They include the stylistic traits which differentiate *opera seria* from *opera buffa*, the early works from the mature ones, Italian from French: every genre, every style, even every score, it could be argued, presents its very own dramaturgy. What we seek to

delineate here, therefore, is a 'lowest common denominator' of Rossini's operas – which is inevitably common to all early nineteenth-century Italian opera.[1]

While the three constituent texts of an opera are autonomous, each is, however, insufficient in itself. Furthermore, the visual text is much less codified than the other two; we have little evidence of its original appearance (that is, what the audience saw at the première of *Semiramide* or *Guillaume Tell*): a few images in prints and sketches in addition to brief stage directions annotated in the libretto and score, realisable in an infinite number of different ways. In Rossini's time as well as today the visual text was as changeable from one production to another as it was vital for its impact on the audience, and in this sense comparable to the creative input of singers through their stage presence and vocal gifts. These contributions were indeed crucial in the economy of the opera, often bearing the real responsibility for its success or failure, and often overly influential in modifying or distorting the dramatic design of the original text. However, the ephemeral nature of both the visual dimension and such personal inflexions, lying beyond the fixity of a written text, precludes discussion of them here, even though their influence on the act of composition is clear: the composer worked with the scenic and vocal capacities of a theatre company already in mind. We will concentrate, then, on the verbal and musical texts of opera as fixed on paper.

A morganatic marriage between words and music

The libretto is a fully fledged poetic work, even though it has traditionally been neglected by literary historians, who tend not to consider it literature because it is not aesthetically autonomous. Although structured in acts and scenes and furnished with stage directions like any verse tragedy for the spoken theatre, without song an opera libretto would be completely inadequate for recitation on account of specific characteristics which mark it out as expressly predisposed for setting to specific musical forms. For example, we see a clear opposition between two distinct metrical systems specifically designed for corresponding compositional systems: sections in *versi sciolti* alternate with sections in *versi lirici*.[2] In the Metastasian system, current for a good part of the eighteenth century, *versi sciolti* had been used for dialogue between the characters, to inform the spectator of the minute details of the plot and advance the action, while *versi lirici* had dealt more specifically with moments of reflection, 'lyrical' outbursts in which a sentiment or thought was extended in a brief composition of one or two stanzas. In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, a decisive

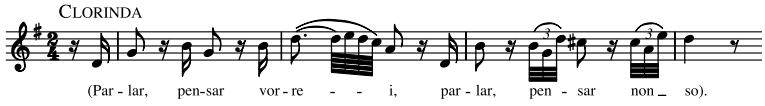
homogenisation occurred: rhymed strophes of *versi lirici* were used to set passages of action just as often as soliloquies.

The juxtaposition of these two metrical systems was however functional in the construction of the musical score, which adopted an equally polarised compositional style. *Versi sciolti* are sung to rapid, stereotyped melodic formulas (more or less unchanged from the Baroque era), sustained by simple harmonies in either the basso continuo (secco recitative) or the strings (accompanied recitative). The name 'recitative' refers to the character of simple recitation, with a declamatory rhythm that closely follows that of an actor in the spoken theatre. The attention of the spectator is directed wholly to the 'referential' meaning of the word, the music remaining in a supporting rôle deprived of aesthetic prominence. *Versi lirici*, on the other hand, are intended for real musical composition (arias, duets, choruses, etc.), where the spectator's attention is firmly directed towards the 'poetic' dimension of sound, particularly the voice. The verbal text often seems nothing more than a pretext for triggering communicative processes more complex than the simple narration of an event in music: displays of vocal virtuosity, but also of expressivity, dramatic force, compositional skill and everything else that makes an opera score like any other musical score. It is, in fact, these truly 'musical' moments – the so-called 'closed pieces' – that demonstrate the stylistic differences between composers, historical periods and genres.

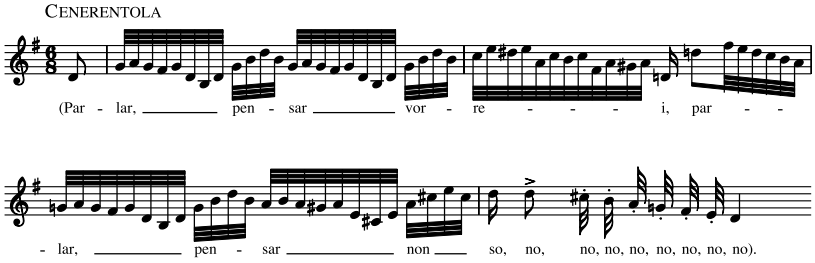
In musical performance *versi sciolti*, subordinated to recitative formulas, stretch out into prose, while *versi lirici* risk being blurred by the stretching and compression, expansion and acceleration, omission and repetition to which the musical declamation often subjects the text after a first linear exposition. The same verse, for example, can be sung with a scansion relatively similar to spoken recitation – save for some stretching which exaggerates its regularity (ex. 7.1a) – or it can be drowned in a sea of notes, the word becoming a mere support for the singing, pure phoneme (ex. 7.1b). As much as the intonation of recitative verses allows semantic perception to be safeguarded, in closed pieces this tends progressively to diminish the more the voice shifts away from dry declamation towards sheer vocalisation. This is exacerbated by the singing technique adopted in the opera house, which hampers clean, consonant articulation, particularly in female voices and in the highest registers.

The limited comprehensibility of the verbal text is in fact a distinctive trait of opera that sets it apart from other theatrical genres. The classic anxiety of the first-time spectator to understand every word said by every character is unjustified – understanding the text is a feat impossible even for mother-tongue spectators. Especially in the sections of *versi lirici*, librettos are by constitution redundant texts, awash with words necessary only to sustain melody. As Stendhal wrote, 'whoever worries about the *words* in *opera seria*? They are always the same, *felicità*, *felice ognora*, *crude stelle*, etc.

Example 7.1a *La Cenerentola*, Andante maestoso, 'Parlar, pensar vorrei', in Act 1 Finale



Example 7.1b *La Cenerentola*, Andante maestoso, 'Parlar, pensar vorrei', in Act 1 Finale



etc., and I doubt if a single person in all Venice ever read the text of a *libretto serio*; not even the impresario himself who had commissioned and paid for it!'[3]

Situations and musical numbers

The merit of a libretto does not lie in its intrinsic poetic value, then; even Verdi, praising the libretto for *Rigoletto*, said that it was 'one of the most lovely librettos ever, except for the verses'.[4] Rather, the quality of a libretto depends firstly on its *appropriateness for musical setting*, determined by particular rhythms and structures in the text being suited to the given musical style (the predisposition of *versi sciolti* for recitative, *tronco* words at the end of each stanza, and the natural floweriness of the poetic style are relevant here). Secondly, and above all, the libretto must be *suitable for drama in music*, furnishing the composer with a series of scenic situations to spark the musical imagination. Stendhal, again, snapshots Rossini for us during a bout of fury with an unskilled librettist: 'You have provided me with verses but not with situations!'[5]

The nature of Rossinian opera, indeed Italian opera up to and including Verdi, rests substantially on the dramaturgical concept of *situazioni* (situations). This ambiguous term, used with different nuances by Italian opera librettists in their letters and by contemporary critics in their writings, should not be confused with the plot. The latter is the succession of various events that constitute the story to be told; *situazioni*, on the other hand, are the most powerful moments of that narrative, which punctuate the opera

like the individual images in a picture book. They are the moments – for the most part stereotyped and common to the genre as a whole – on which the composer focuses his greatest attention: the serenade, the prayer, the solitary outburst, the palace feast, the drinking song, the hymn, the oath, the duel, the abduction, the recognition, the unexpected meeting, the public curse, the suicide, the hero's dying breath and so on.

Every situation, prepared through the recitative dialogue, gives rise to a single musical fresco, a 'closed piece' which can take the form of an aria, a duet, a trio, a chorus or a Finale. It is the situation which creates the music, sets the piece alight with a spark of drama; and the various pieces which constitute an opera are nothing but a succession of more or less conventional *dramatic situations*, transformed in turn into no less pre-constituted *musical situations*. Such musical passages, to which each section of recitative leads, were called 'numbers' by composers because they are numbered progressively from the first (usually called *introduzione*) to the last (in general a concluding grand aria, or a short Finale – *Finaletto* – for several characters). The sum of these various 'numbers' (fifteen, on average, in a two-act Rossinian opera; half as many in a one-act *farsa*), along with the intervening recitatives and an opening overture (Sinfonia), constitutes the musical score: a fragmentary and unhomogeneous product, in which the musical grey of the recitatives functions as an effective contrast to the intermittent colour of the musical numbers – a vital alternation which prevents monotony.

An opera of this type is thus rather like an exhibition of pictures in sound, which, although subject to a dramatic text and connected by a developing narrative, is dominant in aesthetic terms over the other artistic parameters. (One goes to the opera to enjoy musical, not verbal, narration; to be beguiled by a sonorous plot, not a dramatic one; to such a degree, indeed, that the lack of originality of the story was never considered problematic, most librettos deriving from stage dramas or novels.) But this musical predominance does not at all mean the reduction of opera to a concert of arias or duets: lack of originality in the plot does not mean lack of dramatic interest, which was instead always feared by librettists and composers alike. The narrative dimension of the music alone is not enough in itself, as recent staged exhumations of Rossini's *cantate sceniche* (cantatas for the stage) without any real stage action have demonstrated. 'The different *pezzi cantabili*, from which a libretto is woven', Carlo Ritorni wrote in 1841, 'should proceed from *situazioni*, each intended for musical setting.'[6] Without a strong dramatic situation to sustain a musical number, the score sounds like a series of effects without cause; this impression is given even in the best operas when an aria begins without a real dramatic reason, having been included solely to comply with theatrical conventions demanding a certain number of particular pieces in particular places in the score.

The *programma musicale*

The librettist's first task, therefore, was to parcel out the narrative into individual, well-defined dramatic moments, which were to become equally distinct musical forms. This was a process of continuous mediation between what compositional convention and customary expectation required and what the chosen subject suggested, the dramaturgical unit always remaining the musical number.

To see for ourselves how the structure of a Rossini opera was developed from an initial sketch or programme of musical situations ('programma' or 'ossatura'), we can read an account of the genesis of *La Cenerentola* left to us by librettist Jacopo Ferretti:

> There were only two days left before Christmas in the year 1816, when . . . I was begged to find and write a new subject at great speed . . . We holed ourselves up in the house . . . I proposed twenty or thirty subjects; but this one was considered too serious . . . this one too complicated, this one prohibitively costly for the impresario . . . and finally this one not suited to the singers for whom it was destined. Tired of suggesting, and half dead on my feet from fatigue, I mumbled through half a yawn: 'Cendrillon'; and Rossini . . . sitting up . . . 'Would you have the heart to write *Cendrillon* for me?', he asked me, and I replied to him: 'And you to set it to music?', and he: 'When will we have the programme?', and I: 'Despite my exhaustion, tomorrow morning' . . . and I ran home. There . . . I paced the length and breadth of my great bedroom with my arms folded, and when God willed it, and I saw the scene before my eyes, I wrote the programme for *La Cenerentola* and the following day I sent it to Rossini. He was happy with it.[7]

Unfortunately, no such outline for *La Cenerentola* seems to be extant; but it is easy to get an idea of its form by looking at the analogous 'programme' another librettist had formulated for *Il barbiere di Siviglia* a few months earlier (see chapter 5). Those who know the opera will see in this preliminary outline a good approximation of the layout of the final score. Note, though, that the sequence of events is viewed almost exclusively in terms of the music, and voices in particular ('Tenor's Cavatina', 'another for the Prima Donna'). There are very few indications about the development of the narrative; it is not a succession of events so much as a plan of musical numbers destined to incarnate single events, single situations.

'We have drafted the outline [ossatura]', wrote the librettist Gaetano Rossi to his friend Giacomo Meyerbeer, recounting his first meeting with Rossini about *Semiramide*. 'He approved all the situations that I had already settled on' (GRLD, vol. II, no. 344). Evidently the poet had satisfyingly distributed the dramatic material among the obligatory musical numbers. These usually

included an *introduzione*, which is an almost ritual opening, formally complex and incorporating many voices. It often throws the audience into the thick of the action in a deliberately bewildering fashion, until events finally begin to be clarified in the first recitative (a similar opening gambit is used in many Steven Spielberg films). Then there was a series of dramatically static cavatinas, that is, arias which present the main characters (one was sometimes placed in the *introduzione*); they were so obligatory that not giving one to a protagonist only served to make her more conspicuous by her absence (see *Otello*, *Armida*, *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, *Ermione*, *Zelmira*). Duets for the principals in various combinations were interwoven throughout, and there were also numbers for groups of voices (trios, quartets, quintets, sextets, with or without chorus, according to dramatic necessity), of which one, the largest and most complex, functions at the end of Act 1 as the central Finale. There were usually a *rondò* for the protagonists, that is, grand arias with chorus placed in Act 2, one of which might function as the closing number (*Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*, *La Cenerentola*, *La donna del lago*, *Bianca e Falliero*, *Matilde di Shabran*). Otherwise, the closing number was a *Finaletto* in vaudeville style, where the characters sing in turn a short parting stanza, with the chorus providing interjections (*Tancredi*, *Aureliano in Palmira*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *La gazza ladra*, *Ricciardo e Zoraide*); or a moral intoned collectively at the footlights, on the eighteenth-century model (*L'equivoco stravagante*, *L'italiana in Algeri*, *Il turco in Italia*, and the one-act *farse*); or some other less codified structure (*Mosè in Egitto*, *Maometto II*, *Semiramide*) composed according to the requirements of the action.

The rest of the opera the composer was free to shape as he wished, particularly the remainder of the second (or third) act, which might include supplementary arias. These were usually also called cavatinas, in the eighteenth-century manner, if in one movement (Amenaide's 'No, che il morir non è' in *Tancredi*, Uberto's 'Oh fiamma soave' in *La donna del lago*), or *romances* in French opera if they were strophic in form (Mathilde's 'Sombre forêt, désert triste et sauvage' in *Guillaume Tell*). There may also be *canzoni*, stage songs understood to be heard as songs by the characters onstage, and which would also be sung in the spoken theatre (Desdemona's Willow Song, Cenerentola's 'Una volta c'era un Re'); choruses that stood alone or, more often, were annexed to solo numbers (chorus and cavatina; chorus and *rondò*); generic *scene*, that is, recitatives with notable orchestral support which introduced solo numbers (*scena* and duet; chorus, *scena* and *rondò*); and instrumental pieces, from the overture to the dances and accompanimental pieces for marches, battles or other pantomimes. An early-nineteenth-century Italian opera is the sum of all this (see the list of numbers in the index of any score).

Once the outline was fixed, the librettist versified each item in accordance with the formal conventions for that particular musical number.[8]

This draft of the libretto inevitably proceeded in blocks: in the case of *La Cenerentola*, 'On Christmas Day [1816], Rossini had the *introduzione*; on Santo Stefano [26 December] the cavatina for Don Magnifico; on San Giovanni [27 December] the duet for the Prima Donna and Tenor', and so on, until the libretto had been completed.[9]

The value of conventions

La Cenerentola went on stage on 26 January 1817, exactly one month from the first contractual agreements. In those thirty days, a librettist reinvented a dramatic subject starting from an earlier libretto by somebody else (fairly distant from Charles Perrault's fairytale model), organised it into a musical outline suited to an opera score of the period, conceived dialogues and translated them into poetry. In the meantime the composer set the verses to music, while one of his collaborators was busy writing the recitatives and three less important numbers in order to speed up the work (as in Renaissance painting studios). A censor read the libretto and suggested modifications considered necessary to public decorum, while a typographer waited for the definitive version to set for printing. In the theatre, scenographers and costume designers were begging the librettist to tell them as quickly as possible how many and which characters would be employed onstage, in what dress and which settings, so that they could provide what was necessary, while a copyist extracted the parts from the score. These the singers and chorus members had to commit to memory, and the orchestral parts had to be duplicated the necessary number of times for the orchestra. The one who suffered most was the impresario, always at risk of a heart attack, terrified that the slightest accident would delay the opening night: given that in 1817 Carnival would end on 18 February – the unchangeable date for the Lenten closure of the theatres – very few days would be left to recover his costs from ticket sales (always assuming that a fiasco would not oblige him to retract the score on the opening night!).

In this finely balanced production line, the acceptance of convention by all parties was indispensable, speeding up work by eliminating the need for explanations and negotiations. Everything, in a sense, was defined *a priori*, beginning with the engagement of a company of singers formed according to a cast of stereotypical rôles, which then corresponded to the number and types in the libretto. A contralto *prima donna*, a soprano *seconda donna*, a *primo tenore*, a *buffo cantante*, a *buffo caricato* and a less important bass could competently perform not only *Il barbiere di Siviglia* but *La Cenerentola* or *L'italiana in Algeri* – or any other new comic opera, Rossini's or not. Shorthand phrases such as 'cavatina with choruses', 'aria for the tutor' or

'aria for the *seconda donna*' in the outline for *Il barbiere* imply a much more exact agreement between poet and composer than those simple words at first seem to indicate: behind the titles lie an extremely precise vocabulary, forms and styles familiar to everyone in the theatre from the impresario to the librettist, the composer to the singer, the audience to the reviewer. For the tutor's aria, for example (traditionally a comic aria), Rossini would certainly have expected the librettist to provide an endless series of stanzas, which most often derived their comic character from a barrage of words and images.[10] For the *prima donna*'s or tenor's aria, on the other hand – rôles that were vocally and dramatically more serious even in comic opera – the formal structure was the same multi-sectional one as in *opera seria* (see below). For a secondary rôle, the model remained the da capo aria of eighteenth-century lineage, in comic opera just as in the serious and semiserious genres. A quick glance at a libretto of the period therefore provides many signs as to the nature of the score, and the musical personalities of its characters. The structure of a libretto was prescriptive, even though the composer was free to interpret its suggestions in his own way.

The typical structure of a musical number

The most frequent formal model in a Rossini libretto is a structure as present in the repertory as it is elusive on account of its polymorphism. Before analysing this structure, typical of a good 70 per cent of Rossini numbers (duet or finale, in *seria* or *buffa*, Italian or French opera), we should recall part of our earlier discussion. The Metastasian dichotomy between action recitatives and reflective arias had been superseded by the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the steady introduction of action into the body of the closed number. The musical number continued to function as the 'emotional outcome', amplified and sublimated in music, of action conveyed in the preceding recitative; but more often it took that action further – in fact, almost everything significant in Rossinian drama occurs in a closed number. The moment of stasis, of reflection, does not disappear entirely: it remains the key moment, but it has to share with other elements of the drama, which encroach on it from either side. The closed number thus became less and less closed in itself, now articulated in *musical subsections*, each one of which corresponds again to *dramatic subsections*. Nobody at the time named this formal structure; nobody labelled its constituent parts; but its presence and persistence in contemporary writings, not to mention its distinctness in aural terms, is indisputable.

It is worth re-emphasising that the closed number is both dramatic and musical in nature; in this sense its lineage may be traced back to

late-eighteenth-century grand arias. As in many arias for Mozart's heroines, an Adagio was followed by an Allegro, melodic *cantabilità* by rigorous virtuosity, self-reflection by renewed strength to react to events. These two dramatic-musical sections, called 'cantabile' and 'stretta', provided the basis for the early-nineteenth-century number.[11] Dozens of Rossini's arias are limited to this simple two-part scheme, especially when the character finds herself alone on stage without interlocutors to act as *pertichino* (literally, 'extra horse with the job of hauling', and metaphorically 'a sidekick who provides interjections'). Consider, for example, the *scena* and cavatina for Malcom (Rossini's spelling) in *La donna del lago*. After a long recitative with orchestra (*scena*, 'Mura felici, ove il mio ben si aggira'), in which the hero delights in thoughts of love, his affection for the woman is idealised in a bipartite aria (cavatina, with its cantabile 'Elena! oh tu, ch'io chiamo!' and *stretta*, 'Oh quante lacrime – finor versai'). In the nineteenth century, as in the eighteenth, a cantabile still relied on a variety of formal structures (ABA, for example); the *stretta*, however, assumed a well-defined shape: a melodic period, complete in itself, is repeated with the same text. This is the 'cabaletta', a term of uncertain origin which probably implies an 'intriguing little motive, captivating for its marked melodic character'. Some 'bridge' bars, melodically 'grey', separate the two statements, the latter leading finally to a powerful coda. It does not need an expert in musical analysis to identify this segmentation: the structure is clear to any theatregoer, now as then, and it is the essential foundation for the pre-ordained rhetorical sweep from dry introductory recitative, through rocking cantabile to the fireworks of the concluding *stretta* (which many call cabaletta, by synecdoche).

In complex pieces, however, the two principal areas, cantabile and *stretta*, share the musical number with more dynamic supplementary sections which inject action into the piece, as mentioned above, and which can reach massive proportions. (The single unifying element, among so much multiplicity, is the key of the piece, almost always re-established at the end of the number, whatever deviations may have occurred unexpectedly during its course.) Contemporary terminology helps us still less with these sections: today the terms 'tempo d'attacco' or 'primo tempo' are common for the opening section, which precedes the cantabile, and 'tempo di mezzo' is used for the section between the cantabile and the *stretta*.

All this can be illustrated by a passage from *La Cenerentola*, a musical number in clear four-part form, which the librettist would simply have indicated in the musical outline as 'grand'aria del tenore' – as did his colleague for *Il barbiere* – or more technically, 'rondò' (in Rossini's autograph it bears the generic title 'aria Ramiro'). The dramatic situation is quickly described: Prince Ramiro has allowed the mysterious beauty he met at the palace to

escape, leaving behind a single clue to her identity (here a bracelet rather than a shoe). The long preparatory *scena*, first in secco recitative and then accompanied recitative, has advanced the action as far as the Prince's resolution to find his beloved at any cost, with the sole help of the clue; the shift from prosaic secco recitative (used throughout the preceding verses) to the noble accompanied recitative underlines the significance of the following aria in dramatic as well as musical terms:

RAMIRO [. . .] di tante sciocche si vuoti il mio palazzo. (*chiamando i suoi seguaci, che entrano*) Olà, miei fidi, sia pronto il nostro cocchio, e fra momenti . . . Così potessi aver l'ali dei venti.	RECITATIVE **(0) preparatory *scena***
Sì, ritrovarla io giuro. Amore, amor mi muove: se fosse in grembo a Giove, io la ritroverò.	ARIA **(1) *tempo d'attacco*** dramatically kinetic, in real time; communication between characters is active
(*contempla lo smaniglio*) (Pegno adorato e caro che mi lusinghi almeno, ah come al labbro e al seno, come ti stringerò!) CHORUS Oh! qual tumulto ha in seno; comprenderlo non so.	**(2) *cantabile*** dramatically static, in expanded time; introspection; communication among characters is for the most part suspended
RAMIRO AND CHORUS Noi voleremo, – domanderemo, ricercheremo, – ritroveremo.	**(3) *tempo di mezzo*** dramatically kinetic, in real time; communication among characters resumes
RAMIRO AND CHORUS Dolce speranza, – freddo timore dentro al mio/suo core – stanno a pugnar. Amore, amore – m'hai/l'hai da guidar. (*parte con i seguaci*)	**(4) *stretta*** (cabaletta I, bridge, cabaletta II, coda) dramatically static, outside time: the action is already completed; strictly musical logic

It is worth taking time to discuss each segment in more detail.

No. 1: *tempo d'attacco*

'Yes, I swear I will find her again. Love, love moves me. Even if she were in the arms of Jove, I would find her again.'

Calling the moment dramatically *kinetic* calls attention to the sense of action within the aria:[12] the prince's emphatic oath before his court dignitaries unfolds before the audience as an event in real time. The florid technique that Rossini adopts here has no less an expressive value than the trumpets which sound ritually in the orchestra: virtuosity is by convention the language of nobility, of heroes. The style of this oath strengthens its rhetorical import, with the grandiloquence one might expect from a prince.

No. 2: *cantabile*

'(*contemplating the bracelet*) Beloved and adored token, that gives me at least hope, oh, how I will press you to my lips and heart!'

Here we arrive at the heart of the aria. The musical colours soften; the modern director lowers the lights – an effect already achieved in musical terms in the orchestra – and spotlights the character; he comes to the footlights, removing himself from the reality surrounding him. This is the moment of introspection; communication between characters is suspended, as the parentheses around the verses demonstrate, and the prince's thoughts go unheard by those on stage ('Oh, what tumult is in his breast! I cannot understand it'). We are in the realm of the unrealistic, in keeping with the operatic nature of such moments. In spoken theatre, or cinema, this brief act of passionate contemplation would be expressed in a simple languid sigh, a silent look; in opera, the introspective moment develops into a full musical passage which lyricises the fleeting moment. If a clock were onstage, its hands would have to slow down until they had almost stopped, illustrating the concept of the relativisation of time.[13]

No. 3: *tempo di mezzo*

'We'll fly, we'll question, we'll seek, we'll find.'

The lights come back on, real time resumes, as does communication between the prince and his dignitaries. If we were in spoken theatre or a film, the scene would end at this point, with the characters hurrying towards their new venture. But opera is a spectacle infamous for incongruous cries of 'I'm coming to save you' while the character remains onstage for repeat after repeat. This seems a little less absurd, though, if we consider it in the context of the operatic principle whereby the 'referential' function of the drama must always allow for the 'poetic' function of the music, vocal performance in particular. Therefore:

No. 4: *stretta*

'Sweet hope, cold fear within my/his heart are battling. Love, love, you must guide me/him. (*He leaves with his courtiers*).'

All that needed to be said has already been said; therefore the character promptly withdraws and yields to the singer – the prince to the tenor – for an impressive conclusion, outside dramatic time and intended to coax applause from the audience. The structure of this section is designed specifically for the gratification of the performer and his fans: in the customary repetition of the cabaletta (a practice that is slowly being revived today) the composer gave the performer free rein to intervene at will in the vocal line, in an outburst of musical invention and vocal display complete with a final high note on the dominant chord (not the tonic, as is so often heard today).

Such a dramatic-musical structure suits not only arias, but all the principal 'situations' of the plot, whether solos, duets or ensembles. An example of its typical application to a duet might be the following: (0) two lovers meet after a long separation, during which he has mistakenly understood her to be unfaithful; (1) the two confront one another, flinging accusations: 'Faithless one, don't come near me' – 'Don't treat me so unjustly', etc.; (2) an interior monologue for both, each on their own: 'What have I done to deserve such pain?'; (3) they advance reciprocal explanations: 'We have been misled, we should make peace'; (4) common joy: 'United forever!' Such a structure is even more suitable for a central Finale, the moment at the end of the first act where the plot is brought to a point of crisis: (0) the characters convene in the same place, often inadvertently; (1) they meet each other, and agitation mounts progressively until the explosion of a dramatic and musical bombshell (a curse, a fatal revelation, the unexpected appearance of another character who upsets everyone's plans, etc.); (2) grand ensemble of shock: everyone is astonished at the event, and expresses their dismay in a large ensemble, a broad tapestry of sound; (3) return to reality: dialogue until the definitive crisis; (4) great uproar, musical babel, with words that add nothing to the action, since everything has already been said.

Playing with forms

The single sections of this form – called *la solita forma* ('standard' or 'usual form') according to a neologism of dubious pedigree but effective impact[14] – are really self-contained modules (which is one crucial premise for the phenomenon of Rossinian self-borrowing).[15] They can also occur in a varied form, perhaps missing a section or engulfed by one much larger than the others, without losing their identity. The essence of a cantabile lies not

in its placement in second position, but in its dramatic-musical nature. It is therefore still perceived as such both in a cavatina or a *rondò* without the first section (actually the majority of cases), or in an expanded sub-species of *rondò* which in Rossini goes by the name of *gran scena*, and provides two distinct cantabiles, the first a lyric episode in the introductory recitative (the cavatina of eighteenth-century heritage mentioned above), the other an integral part of the *rondò* proper (*Ciro in Babilonia*, *Tancredi*, *Aureliano in Palmira*, *Ermione*, *Bianca e Falliero*). The same can be said for certain central finales (in *Tancredi*, for example, or in *Otello*), where a double *coup de scène* provokes two distinct *larghi concertati* (the name given to section 2 of ensemble pieces, where 'largo' refers to the generic slow tempo and 'concertato' to the compositional technique, often a canonic opening in which each voice retains autonomy, 'concertising' with the other voices).

In other cases, numbers intersect, creating irregular forms. Usually, however, the classic subsections can still be discerned. In the sextet from *Il viaggio a Reims*, for example, a *canzone* of three whole strophes, accompanied by solo harp, is inserted wedge-like into the *tempo di mezzo*: a completely self-sufficient musical number is developed within another. Or there are numbers that never run their full course because another character arrives and cuts in, singing a new *solita forma* in all its glory (rather than the remainder of the number thus far sung). This is the case in Act 2 of *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*, where the two women are interrupted by their common lover during the *tempo di mezzo* of their duet. This immediately mutates into a *tempo d'attacco*, which in turn starts off a full-scale four-part trio. (Interestingly, we can see from the libretto that the poet had foreseen quite another structure, with a single three-voiced concertato; the composer remodelled it to his own ends.)

A musical number therefore runs a well-defined course, both dramatically and musically, which is planned by agreement between a librettist and a composer who work within the same theatrical conventions, yet are always ready to subvert them quietly. The audience is nonetheless capable of perceiving the number (notwithstanding possible ambiguities) for what it is: a pre-ordained micro-drama presented in a rhetorically effective form. When such a four-part structure is applied to an encounter between two or more characters, the narrative trajectory is rendered even more vivid; even a solo aria, the most dramatically static piece, is however experienced as a musico-dramatic event complete in itself, with a beginning that seems to come from nowhere and a momentum towards a liberating end. As 'opera is a complete musical gallery' of contrasting affects, so the single number has to be 'a complete painting'.[16]

Action made music

An opera score of Rossini's time can therefore be read not only as a musical realisation of a succession of dramatic events, but also a 'dramatic' succession of musical events – in other words, the narration of a drama laced with musical, rather than verbal or visual, *coups de scène*. This was how Stendhal's Venetian gentlewoman with an aversion to librettos perceived the genre (see the beginning of chapter 5), and so might the cosmopolitan modern spectator, who through his or her own linguistic limitations grasps only the clues gleaned hurriedly from the programme book prior to the performance. Interest is maintained entirely by this musical drama, and the plot takes second place.

From this it follows that what really reaches the spectator's consciousness is not what is said, but what is sung: Rossini's Otello can express his love for Desdemona a million times, but if he never has a love duet with her the nature of his love will never be conveyed to the audience (a daring dramatic choice which, as is well known, Boito and Verdi subverted in their adaptation of the subject). By contrast, the protagonist of *La donna del lago*, wooed by three different suitors, continues to profess her faithfulness to her inexperienced teenage lover Malcom throughout the opera; but only when faced with the mature virility of the King does she sing, in turmoil, a musically overwhelming stretta *a due* ('Cielo! In qual estasi / rapir mi sento'). However much the words – incomprehensible, of course, to the listener – strain to affirm the contrary, any listener will perceive the heroine's unexpected desire, experienced for the first and only time in her life, and never to be revived for her young lover. The duet with the latter soon to follow is in fact a *duettino*, that is, a duet that stops after section 2 of the multi-partite structure: Rossini forbids her the thrills of excitement with Malcom in a *stretta*, allowing only a tender cantabile caress.

Vocal rôles

The all-musical dramaturgy of such a theatrical product ends up, then, transmuting into a narration of song-events: the characters of the plot are voices, which contrast and couple on behalf of the characters they represent. Everything is a function of voice, and on voice everything turns: the classic narrative triangle (him, her, the third party) could become a quadrilateral if, one season, there were an extra singer on a company's roster. Characters such as Rodrigo in *La donna del lago*, Calbo in *Maometto II* or Idreno in *Semiramide* (to mention three fully mature operas) could in other creative

circumstances just as well have been left out, or at least limited to secondary rôles. And perhaps it was no accident that, as if to justify their presence, Rossini gave them his most vocally arduous and thankless rôles of all.

That said, though, identifying a typical Rossinian triangle is far from straightforward, in so far as the years 1810–30 saw a decisive change in vocal practice – one which involved Rossini himself. The *prima donna*'s pre-eminence established and undisputed (be she a soprano or contralto, depending on availability), in comic opera the corresponding love rôle was usually in the tenor range, and 'mezzo carattere' (that is, neither completely serious nor completely comic). The antagonist was a 'buffo', a male character of low vocal register, and a comic part: a father, tutor, husband or someone else who could be characterised as an old grumbler. This vocal triangle is exemplified clearly by Isabella, Lindoro and Taddeo in *L'italiana in Algeri*, Rosina, Almaviva and Bartolo in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and Angelina, Ramiro and Magnifico in *La Cenerentola*. The contrast between the couple and the antagonist is clear in vocal terms: 'donna' and 'mezzo carattere' employ a 'noble', virtuosic style, while the buffo champions a 'prosaic', syllabic style (quite unrelated to social rank). Alongside this so-called 'buffo caricato', there is often a 'buffo nobile' or 'buffo cantante' (again, 'noble' in singing style, certainly not social rank) cast in the rôle of protagonist: Mustafà, Figaro and Dandini are typical examples, being the real driving forces of their respective operas even though they are outside the basic love triangles. Around this triangle a number of secondary characters, 'comprimari', also appear; however excellent these may be, they nonetheless remain secondary accessories – *seconda donna*, *secondo tenore*, *basso*, etc.

In *opera seria*, however, the rôle of male lover could be given to one of two voice types. According to the eighteenth-century tradition, he would be a 'soprano' or 'uomo' or 'musico', three equivalent but ambiguous terms used to indicate the rôle of a young male hero sung by a voice in the female range (castrato or woman; soprano, mezzo or contralto depending on the singer). On the example of *opera buffa*, however, the lover tended over the years to be given increasingly to the less idealised and more realistic timbre of a tenor. The antagonist (in general, a father, king or rival) would as a tenor make a triangle with the *prima donna* and the *musico* (*Tancredi*, *Aureliano in Palmira*, *Adelaide di Borgogna*, *Bianca e Falliero* etc.), while in the more modern vocal arrangement he occupied a lower male register, from the archetypical example of *Guillaume Tell* to more or less the whole production of Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi. The apparently anomalous vocal triangle of operas such as *Otello*, *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, *Ermione*, *Zelmira* and others from Rossini's period at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples (seven of his most productive years) is explained by the fact that, alongside the prima donna Isabella Colbran, a pair of first-class tenors (Andrea Nozzari

and Giovanni David, however different vocally they may have been) was engaged – more impresarial contingency than real artistic choice.[17] 'Today, looking back upon the occasion with a cool and detached mind, I would say that it was a mistake to have written the parts of Norfolk and Leicester for *two tenors*. However, I can answer for Rossini's rejoinder to *that* criticism: "I happened to *have* two tenors at my disposal, whereas I had no *basso* to play Norfolk." The truth is that, before Rossini's time, it was a tradition that major parts in *opera seria* should never be given to the bass.'[18]

Voice duels

That it is the voice that 'makes the drama', more than the character who acts it out, is clearly demonstrated by the continual adjustment of formal structures on the basis of this assumption. A duet, for example, is not only the meeting of two heroes, but above all a duel between two heroic voices pitted against each other. When an Otello and a Rodrigo challenged each other to combat in the second act of the opera, the duel was fought, to put it bluntly, by Nozzari and David in front of the Neapolitan audience. With voices for swords, thrusts and parries take the form of rivalling high notes; at stake are fame and career, in a confrontation where the two singers are restricted to proving themselves with the same notes, one after the other. In a solo aria the individual singer gambles independently with the different vocal styles skilfully encapsulated in the multipartite form; in an ensemble each section is the property of every character, and each singer must have the chance to put their skills to the test in a display of rhetorical power meant to convince the other characters with their words and gestures, but really intended to win the audience over with their vocal reasoning.

The duet in the first act of *Bianca e Falliero* illustrates the typical division of the form between two characters, starting with the poetic text. 'The form of the duet is produced by one character answering the other in the same number of words', Ritorni tells us.[19] The *tempo d'attacco* opens with two parallel stanzas that express opposing concepts:

BIANCA	FALLIERO
Sappi che un rio dovere al nostro amor si oppone . . . Sappi che il padre impone ch'io più non pensi a te.	Se tu mi sei fedele, se il cor non hai cambiato, il genitore e il fato sfido a rapirti a me.
Know that sad duty Sets itself against our love . . . Know that my father insists I think no longer of you.	If you are faithful to me, If your heart has not changed, I dare your father and fate To take you from me.

These stanzas are rather like open letters sent to the opposite party in the presence of the audience, two equally appealing speeches composed, as is usual, of a first, melodically open part (the first couplet) and a second, closing one.[20] Grand vocal gestures, roulades and magniloquent cadences follow each other without rest, displaying mastery of the entire vocal range, underlining the elocutive force of the statement. Only when the first character triumphantly concludes her offensive does the letter of reply by the second character begin, with different words but the same music, in order to demonstrate his ability to match his opponent's rhetorical force (the tonality might change to suit the second character; here, Falliero, a contralto, sings Bianca's proposal in the dominant). Then the exchanges become swifter, the voices gradually get closer, until they unite in the cantabile, where they slide over one another in thirds and sixths:

FALLIERO
Ciel! Qual destin terribile
tronca ogni mia speranza!

BIANCA
Ciel! Com'è mai possibile,
serbar la mia costanza!

BIANCA and FALLIERO
A questo colpo orribile
manca la mia virtù.

[FAL: Heavens! What terrible fate puts an end to all my hopes! BIA: Heavens! How is it possible to keep my constancy! BIA and FAL: My virtue falters at this horrible blow.]

Whatever the words, it is this vocal embrace between the two characters, who become one in the so-called 'comune', the sensual cadenza *a due* without orchestral accompaniment, that is the crowning moment of such passages. Climax achieved, the *tempo di mezzo* shifts the voices apart once again, and they chase each other in a fast *parlante* (the technique where the rhythmic-melodic interest is borne entirely by the orchestra, the voices uttering fragmentary phrases over it). Only the *stretta* remains to complete the vocal drama of the duet, divided between the two voices in a number of ways. The calabetta theme may be sung by each voice in succession (similarly to the *tempo d'attacco*, especially if set to different words), delaying a vocal coupling until the repeat. Or – as here ('Ah! Dopo cotanto / penar per trovarsi') – it may be sung triumphantly together from the very first statement, and then repeated together with suitable ornamental variants.

The poetic of the double

This game of mirrors, the continual repetition of formal elements, permeates even the most minute details, going far beyond the contingency of

two characters singing opposite one another. The use of repetition, of the 'double', in extreme cases takes us back into the realm of comedy (see the investiture of the 'Pappataci' in *L'italiana in Algeri*, and two similar gags in *L'equivoco stravagante*); but it is just as true that such musical parallelisms are fundamental to the artifice of early-nineteenth-century Italian opera and Rossini in particular. Everything, or almost everything, gets repeated, from macro-structures to micro-phrase-constituents. Behind such a behaviour lie deep-rooted anthropological models (parallelism of greetings, courtship, etc.), which have migrated to certain artistic forms.

In opera the benefits of repetition are felt on various levels. It provides for compositional economy, since the 'as above' and ritornellos indicated in manuscripts cover entire minutes of music without requiring further creative energy than writing the repeat sign. Comprehension of the verbal text is facilitated, since if the first statement is missed there is still a chance to understand the second. It is also more likely that significant melodic lines will be remembered, since already at the end of the first performance each important musical phrase has been heard at least twice. All this contributes to a satisfying listening experience.

This satisfaction is the real dramaturgical soul of an opera. Everything is meant to enhance the experience of listening, the *incontro* (the critics' technical term, literally 'meeting') with the audience constantly in mind. The audience is the motivating force of Italian opera, which is geared towards it and depends on it; and 'the gratitude of the audience towards whoever gives it great pleasure' wrote Balzac in *Massimilla Doni*, 'has something frenzied about it',[21] as Rossini proved in his day and does again in ours. He succeeded; other contemporary composers did not. Why does his *L'italiana in Algeri* delight us so much, while that composed by Luigi Mosca a few months earlier on the same libretto wrings from us a few smiles at most? 'Voilà, de l'électricité musicale!' they cried in Paris about Rossini's music. The real essence of his operatic dramaturgy – beyond the common traits of an entire production system examined here – could probably be traced by looking at these differences of 'incontro', through thorough examination of the strictly musical, audio-perceptual, elements. But investigations into this complex area are largely still to be undertaken.

(*translated by Laura Basini*)