

Meridian Music of the Week!

Issue No. 156 (based on previous Newsletter No.103 – October 2022)

Each week ALL our children will be listening to a piece of music as part of our music lessons. We'll be talking about it in class and discussing what we like, what we don't like and what it makes us think about.

Parents/carers/family - why not join in and listen for yourself at home! All music is available **free** on YouTube as well as paid services such as iTunes and Spotify.

This week's music...



‘Largo al Factotum’

(The Figaro Song)

from ‘The Barber of Seville’

by Gioacchino Rossini (1816)

Funny live version conducted by André Rieu [HERE](#)

A nice version with English subtitles [HERE](#)

Three parts of the Bugs Bunny cartoon featuring the music [HERE](#) , [HERE](#) and [HERE](#).

“Figaro! Figaro! FIGARO!”

It's opera again this week – but this one couldn't be any more different from Thomas Adès' ‘The Tempest’ if it tried! This one's a classic. It's possibly the most famous **aria** (song) from any opera **ever** written. The opera is ‘**The Barber of Seville**’ by Gioacchino Rossini and the aria is best known simply as ‘**The Figaro Song**’. One of the reasons I've chosen it is because our children enjoyed watching the cartoon of ‘Fantasia’ a couple of weeks ago (featuring ‘**The Sorcerer's Apprentice**’ by Dukas) – and THIS music also has a well-known cartoon featuring it. Not Mickey Mouse this time – but Bugs Bunny! There's actually a strange musical link between the two cartoons too, but I'll tell you about that later...

What's the opera about?

‘The Barber of Seville’ is an Italian **opera buffa** (which is Italian for a comedy opera). The story is pretty complicated but it's mostly about how a smart and cheeky barber called Figaro helps a young man called Count Almaviva to marry a beautiful girl called Rosina who has been locked away by the baddie of the story – Dr Bartolo. There's mistaken identity, disguises, characters being put in prison then released and a whole deal of confusion. But, as you can probably imagine, it all ends happily in the end.



A scene from the André Rieu version of the aria.

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'Largo al Factotum' is the song that the character of Figaro sings when he first appears in the story. It's his way of introducing himself to the audience because the song is all about him! He sings how happy and lucky he is to have a barber shop and how much he enjoys his life. He also sings about how popular he is in the village and how "everybody wants me!" He claims that he's the fastest barber around...

Figaro here, Figaro there, Figaro here, Figaro there,
Figaro up, Figaro down, Figaro up, Figaro down,
Ready, very ready I'm like lightning!

When he sings this bit, he also speeds up so that the words get sung so quickly it's almost like a tongue-twister!



A cartoon drawing of Rossini from 1867

Who wrote it?

It was written by Gioacchino Rossini – an Italian composer – and it was first performed in 1816. Rossini was famous for being very lazy! When he was a boy, he refused to study, wouldn't work and hated practising the piano. Rossini was born on the 29th February and people thought lazy old Rossini was pleased about this because he would only have to organise birthday parties once every four years! (29th February only happens in Leap Years). Rossini wrote a lot of operas – but stopped writing them at all at the age of 37. He lived for another **40 years** without bothering to write a single note of another opera. How lazy is that?!

Despite his laziness, Rossini became a very famous composer during his life. In 1823 he calculated that twenty-three of his operas was being played in different parts of the world at any one time. He made lots of money and was showered with gifts and honours from

Kings and Queens. On his 70th birthday, his friends raised a very large amount of money to erect a monument to Rossini featuring a statue of him on top. "What a waste of money!" Rossini said. "Give me the cash and I'll stand on it myself!"

'The Barber of Seville' – from disaster to triumph

Nowadays everyone thinks that this Rossini opera is one of the greatest and most successful ever written – but it wasn't always like that. The story of how the opera was composed and first performed was chaos from the beginning!

It all started when Rossini agreed to write an opera for some carnival celebrations in Rome. The organisers told him he would be paid very well for it, but he would have to write the music, adapt it for some particular singers, go to all the rehearsals and conduct the first three performances himself. Rossini liked the idea of being paid a lot of money, so he signed a contract agreeing to it. But it was only after he'd signed that they told him that the Rome carnival came early that year and so he would have to have the opera ready in **three weeks** or he wouldn't get ANY of the money!

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The character of Figaro in a recent performance by the Welsh National Opera

So, he threw away the opera story he had originally planned to use, went to the library and took out a well-known play called 'The Barber of Seville' that had previously been turned into an opera by at least five other composers before Rossini. He turned his house into a 'music factory'. Rossini would write the music in one room, with the person writing the words (the **librettist**) in the room next door. In the corridor he had people copying out all the parts for the different musicians and these were then sent to the singers who would rehearse upstairs!

Rossini realised there was no way he could write a whole brand-new opera in such a short time so, like other composers before and after, he decided to cheat! He surrounded himself with all the music he had ever written and stole bits and pieces from his other operas and musical compositions. He even went so far as to 'borrow' a few tunes that had been written by **other** composers. He was so busy over the three weeks that he hardly left the house and grew an enormous black beard in the meantime!

Rossini's little fib!

It was the day before the first performance and Rossini still hadn't written the **overture** (the opening music for an opera). So, he came up with a cunning (and lazy!) plan. He told everyone that he had already written a brilliant overture for the opera – but it had mysteriously disappeared! Everybody searched like crazy for it but, obviously, couldn't find it because it didn't exist! So instead, he just used an overture that he had already written some years earlier from a completely different opera.

A first night fiasco!

But there were more problems. I mentioned that other composers had written operas based on the story of the Barber of Seville. Well one of them, Giovanni Paisiello, was still around and was furious that Rossini was planning an opera based on the story Paisiello had used for his own quite successful opera only thirty years earlier. Rossini offered to change the name of the opera to 'Almaviva' but that didn't satisfy Paisiello!

On the night of the **premiere** (first performance) of Rossini's new opera, Paisiello sent some of friends along to the theatre to create demonstrations during the show. This distracted the performers and made them make mistakes. The hero, Count Almaviva, broke a guitar string that snapped in his face, the actor playing the part of a music teacher tripped



A poster for the original premiere performance of the opera – then called 'Almaviva'.

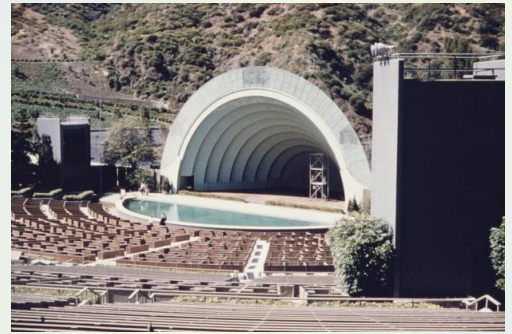
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over his costume on his first entrance onto the stage, scenery toppled over, one performer fell through a trap door in the stage and someone let a cat out onto the stage at the end of the first half. The premiere was a disaster!

Fortunately for Rossini, Paisiello's friends stayed away from the second night performance and it was a huge success. By the third performance, the crowd loved the opera so much that they gave Rossini a celebratory torchlight procession all the way home!

Loony Tunes!

So, what's any of this got to do with Bugs Bunny? Well, the links above are for a cartoon made in 1949 in which Bugs Bunny takes revenge on a pompous opera singer who keeps stopping Bugs from singing his own songs. The cartoon opera singer is practising singing the Figaro song from 'The Barber of Seville' for a performance of the opera at the Hollywood Bowl (a real, open-air American music venue). Bugs takes his revenge by turning up at the performance and ruining it in lots of different silly ways (not unlike what Paisiello did to Rossini!). It ends with Bugs destroying the whole of the Hollywood Bowl with the opera singer underneath in the rubble.



The Hollywood Bowl in real life.



Bugs Bunny as Leopold Stokowski.

The odd musical link between the Bugs Bunny cartoon and Disney's 'Fantasia' is this. The real-life conductor of the orchestra in 'Fantasia' is **Leopold Stokowski** – the world's most famous classical music conductor of the time. And in the Bugs Bunny cartoon, Bugs **pretends** to be Leopold Stokowski so he can play tricks on the opera singer. In real life, Stokowski often conducted orchestras at the Hollywood Bowl. That's the link!

Hope you enjoy listening to the music – **and** watching the cartoon. It was always one of my favourites and I'm glad this newsletter has given me the chance to watch it all over again.

Listen & enjoy!

Mr. Mole

Music Teacher

