

FACTOTUM FACTS

By Robert Vineberg, Manitoba Opera Board of Trustees

Factotum: an employee who does all kinds of work. From latin *fac* imperative of *facere* do, and *totum* neuter of *totus* whole (all). *Oxford Canadian Dictionary*

Figaro, in his famous aria, *Largo al factotum del città* (*Make way for the factotum of the city*), explains his ability to do everything for everybody in the opera, if not in the entire city of Seville.

Was *The Barber of Seville* the Fastest Opera Ever Written?

Quite possibly. It is said that Rossini composed *Barber* in 13 days. In any case, as it was commissioned by Duke Cesarini, the impresario of the Teatro Argentina, on December 26, 1815, it had to have been written between that day and its première on February 5, 1816, only 40 days later.

Rossini Treading on Dangerous Territory

Rossini was composing an opera based on the first play of Beaumarchais famous trilogy of plays: *Le Barbier de Séville*, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, and *La Mère coupable*. Twenty years earlier, Mozart had composed his opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, and comparisons between 'Barber' and 'Figaro' continue to this day. Furthermore, there was an earlier *Barriere de Siviglia*, composed by Giovanni Paisello in 1776. Paisello was still alive and Rossini was at pains not to offend the elder opera composer. He wrote to him, asking permission to use the same story and promising to call it *Almaviva, ossia l'inutile Precauzione* (*Almaviva or the useless precaution*). And, indeed, this was the name used at its première. However, the public soon dubbed it "Rossini's Barber of Seville" and so it has come down to us.

Old Composers Never Die, They Just Fade Away...

Like many great composers, Gioachino Rossini demonstrated musical genius at a young age. His first opera was produced when he was only 18. His first big hit was *Tancredi* in 1813 when he was 21, followed by *Barber* at age 23, *Cenerentola* at 25 and *Moses in Egypt* at 26. Rossini quickly became very wealthy both from his composing and contracts as a musical director. But musical tastes were changing and Rossini realized that his *opera buffa* style was being supplanted by newer approaches to opera. With *William Tell*, in 1829, he brought his opera composing career to an end at age 37. While he composed some non-opera work later, most notably *Stabat Mater* in the 1830s, he wrote very little music once he retired from opera. He enjoyed a long and comfortable retirement and died at age 76 in 1868.

What was going on in Spain at the time of the Opera?

The play and the opera do not have a specific date, but are merely set in the “seventeenth century.” Though the issues raised in the play were current issues at the time Beaumarchais wrote the play in 1775, it had to be set in another country and a previous century to gain approval of the censors. Spain, in the 17th Century was at the height of its imperial power, but cracks were beginning to appear in its far-flung empire and the supply of gold from the Americas that had fuelled the Spanish monarchy’s wealth was starting to diminish. The Protestant Reformation had also led Spain into many costly political and military adventures in Europe. Nonetheless, Spain remained a formidable political and cultural influence on Europe and the new world and Seville was an extremely wealthy trading city until the Guadalquivir River began to silt up, cutting off Seville’s access to the sea. Following this, the great plague of Seville at mid-century (1647-52) wiped out upwards of one quarter of the city’s population.

What was going on in Italy when Rossini was composing Barber?

In 1816, Italy was just recovering, as was most of Europe from years of Napoleonic domination. However, prior to Napoleon, Italy had been a disparate collection of small states, mostly under foreign control. In 1800, Napoleon unified Italy and most Italians, while glad to see the end of the Napoleonic Wars, were greatly disappointed when, at the Congress of Vienna, the leaders of Europe decided to again split up Italy much as it had been before Napoleon. However, the dream of Italian unity grew stronger and by Rossini’s death in 1868, Italy had been largely reunited, under Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia who was proclaimed King of Italy in 1861, although the Papal States including the city of Rome only were annexed in 1870, completing the unification of Italy.

What was going on in Manitoba in 1816?

Manitoba did not exist, as such, in 1816. The territory now occupied by Manitoba was part of “Rupert’s Land,” granted to the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) in its charter from King Charles II in 1670. First Nations people dominated the sparse population of the area. The Hudson Bay Company and the North West Company (NWC) were fighting over the valuable fur trade in the area and the presence of the Selkirk Settlers in traditional Métis territory further complicated issues. In March 1816, the HBC seized and later destroyed the NWC’s Fort Gibraltar. In turn, the Métis, under Cuthbert Grant, occupied the HBC post at Brandon House and then escorted an important supply of pemmican down the Assiniboine towards The Forks and then down the Red. The rivalries came to a head at the “Battle of Seven Oaks” when the HBC Governor, Robert Semple confronted the Métis at Seven Oaks. It seems likely that one of Semple’s party fired first, perhaps accidentally, as they were outnumbered three to one. In the ensuing fusillade, Governor Semple and 20 of his men were killed while the Métis only lost two of their men. This

conflict led, both to the eventual merger of the HBC and NWC in 1821 and to a realization by the Métis of their “nationhood.” For more on this subject, please see the article *Seven Oaks Incident* in the Encyclopedia of Manitoba, from which this account has been drawn.

***The Barber of Seville* in Cartoons**

The animated cartoon business owes much to opera as a great deal of its music has been lifted from operas and *The Barber of Seville* has contributed as much as any opera. Some of the classic cartoons using music from *Barber* include the following, with links to the original cartoon where it is available online:

Bugs Bunny

The Rabbit of Seville (1949) –

<http://ca.video.yahoo.com/watch/42703/964406>

Long Haired Hare (1948)

<http://revver.com/video/769820/bugs-bunny-long-haired-hare/>

The Woody Woodpecker - Barber of Seville (1944)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Jv3lL6imzU>

Tom and Jerry – The Cat Above and the Mouse Below (1964)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnmnEoxpdRE>

More recently, an episode of The Simpsons, entitled *Homer of Seville* (2007) has Homer acquire an operatic voice, an opera career and a fan club headed by a woman who stalks Homer. She is eventually killed by the opera hall’s chandelier crashing down on her. Perhaps the episode should have been called *The Phantom Homer of Seville....*