

## PROGRAM NOTES

By Peter Russell

During the seven-year period beginning in 1815 when he was under contract at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples as composer in residence, Gioachino Rossini wrote 18 of his 39 operas -- nine of them for that theater, all tragedies, and only three of the other nine comedies. Yet with the exception of the now obscure *Adina*, two of those three comedies turned out to be among the handful of Rossini operas that never went out of fashion during the composer's lifetime and beyond: *The Barber of Seville* and *La Cenerentola*, his setting of the Cinderella story; these premiered in Rome in 1816 and 1817, respectively. Of the fifteen serious operas from those very fecund years, a majority have enjoyed, thanks to the combined efforts of scholars, singers, and conductors on both sides of the Atlantic, a remarkable renaissance of reinvestigation during the past five decades. Having already offered the U.S. professional premiere in 2019 of the 1822 *Zelmira*, the last of Rossini's Neapolitan operas, Washington Concert Opera's Antony Walker now turns to *Maometto II*, Rossini's penultimate offering in 1820 to the San Carlo audiences. This marks the first Washington performance of a revised critical edition of the score, first heard in a 2012 Santa Fe Opera staging, and only its third airing anywhere in North America.

One of the principal reasons that musicologists and conductors have found new respect for Rossini's serious operas is the same characteristic that made some of them, *Maometto II* included, less than successful with audiences and critics at their premieres: Rossini's desire to experiment with musical structures that would break longstanding formulas. In the case of *Maometto II*, each of its two acts when performed uncut runs longer than 90 minutes. Further, the centerpiece of its first act is what Rossini labels as a Terzettone (literally translated as "big, fat trio"), a through-composed number for the heroine, her father, and her suitor with a duration of over 25 minutes. Such long movements require greater concentration than the "number operas" of the day that gave audiences arias and other set pieces to applaud and cheer at regular intervals. Neapolitan audiences had also come to expect that Rossini and his librettists would put his opera's heroines in great distress or peril, but that all would be resolved in their favor by the denouement, triggering a florid up-tempo aria, or cabaletta, to cue the final curtain. Not only does Rossini keep Anna, the heroine of *Maometto II*, onstage for 40 solid minutes of emotional agony and vocal gymnastics as the opera draws to a close, but he then has her take her own life rather than succumb to the title character's advances. Neapolitans were not amused: aside from having been deprived of a happy ending with a glittering display of vocal pyrotechnics, the original ending left "the bad guy" still alive. Latent Islamophobes knew that sultans and other rulers from the East deserved either to be given a comic comeuppance, as in Rossini's own *Il turco in Italia* and *L'Italiana in Algeri*, or to perish.

Unperturbed, Rossini decided when *Maometto II* was to be mounted at Venice's Teatro la Fenice in 1822 that a few revisions would make it more palatable to audiences there. He decreed that the title character would be killed, Anna would live, and that "*Tanti affetti*," the joyous rondo finale from one of his other Neapolitan operas, *La donna del lago*, would replace the original ending. It was more successful than it had been in Naples, but still didn't enter the core repertoire. Rossini revised the score more thoroughly in 1826 for the Paris Opéra, adding two ballets as was customary for French grand operas of the day, and working with a French libretto. This third and final revision transplanted the action from the Venetian colony of Negroponte in the Aegean to the Peloponnese, with the new title *Le siège de Corinthe* (*The Siege of Corinth*) in a topical nod to the then-raging Greek War of Independence from the Ottomans. This time, Rossini succeeded, and this version was performed in various countries over the next decade.

After that, the opera disappeared for more than 125 years. During the 1968-1969 centenary year of Rossini's death, Milan's Teatro alla Scala planned a new production of *Le siège de Corinthe* in an Italian translation and a new critical edition by American musicologist Randolph Mickelson. In the event, the edition itself was both a heavily cut version of the French score and bowdlerized with substitute arias, serving mostly as a vehicle for some spectacular singing from Americans Beverly Sills in her Italian debut (subbing for a pregnant Renata Scottò) and Marilyn Horne. Sills then chose the opera for her much belated 1975 Metropolitan Opera debut in the same production, but with Shirley Verrett singing the role Horne had performed in Milan.

Part of what hindered the stylistic authenticity of that version of Rossini's opera was the simple fact that tenors, baritones, and basses had not been trained since Rossini's heyday to sing with the same coloratura flexibility as sopranos and contraltos, which meant that the key roles of Pamira's father and Maometto himself were greatly simplified and cut. Those roles had been sung at the 1820 Naples premiere by two of the greatest singers of their era, tenor Andrea Nozzari, who created the tenor leads in all of Rossini's San Carlo operas, and Filippo Galli, for whom Rossini wrote Mustafà in *L'Italiana in Algeri*, Assur in *Semiramide* and the title role in *Il turco in Italia*. This imbalance was solved beginning in the 1970s with the gradual emergence of virtuoso tenors and basses of the caliber of tenors Rockwell Blake and Chris Merritt and bass Samuel Ramey, with the male leads finally giving their female co-stars a run for their coloratura money. Ramey starred as Maometto in 1985 stagings at both La Scala and Pesaro's Rossini Opera Festival and recorded it commercially. San Francisco Opera mounted it in 1988 with Simone Alaimo, June Anderson, Marilyn Horne, and Chris Merritt led by Rossini scholar and conductor Alberto Zedda.

Unfortunately, the musical edition created by conductor Claudio Scimone and used for all these 1980s revivals was yet another series of compromises and guesswork as to the composer's original intentions for the Naples premiere.

The root of the problem was that Rossini, inveterate tinkerer with his own operas that he was, did not begin a new manuscript score for either of the two revisions for Venice and Paris. Instead, he simply wrote his edits over the original orchestral score for Naples, leaving the original notes and words extremely hard to read. It took the Dutch musicologist and Rossini expert Hans Schellevis, under the supervision of American scholar Philip Gossett, and years of collaborative detective work and research, to pull together the critical edition published by Bärenreiter Edition we are hearing this evening. That is to say, we will be hearing the original version of *Maometto II* that premiered in Naples in 1820.

As mentioned, that score deals almost exclusively in huge blocks of music, and Rossini showers all four principal characters with bravura passages, both fast and slow. As he was to do with *Zelmira*, Rossini, knowing that he had a virtuoso performer and great audience favorite in bass Filippo Galli, delays Maometto's entrance into the drama for nearly 50 minutes into the first act. When he arrives, much like Ilo, *Zelmira's* tenor lead, he wastes no time in running the gamut from suave legato singing to full-bore coloratura intricacy. But Rossini also concentrates heavily in *Maometto II* on knitting together the concerted sections of his big musical numbers with much more recitativo accompagnato than was his wont, employing it in one of the drama's most striking moments: Anna's consecration of her soul to her mother's spirit just prior to Maometto's final entrance and her suicide. Add a larger brass contingent than usual to darken textures and lend a declamatory, bellicose tone to the scoring when needed. There are just enough elements to *Maometto II* of the new and unfamiliar in Rossini's compositional style for us to understand today why Neapolitans in 1820 weren't ready to embrace it fully. With the hindsight of perspective about what came after it and aided by a new generation of singers and conductors fully equipped to manage its technical and stylistic demands, audiences two hundred years after the premiere of *Maometto II* may at last be ready to appreciate its glories.