

Gioacchino Rossini (1792 – 1868)

(Gee-owh-CHEE-no Row-SEE-nee)

Costume Suggestion: white shirt; leggings or pants; belt and boots (not in the cart)

Introduction: Our composer for today never visited the old West, but he was interested in an item used in the old West – arrows! How would you feel if your father, as punishment, were required to shoot an apple off the top of your head with a bow and arrow? You may feel that you were about to die unless you were the son of William Tell. Our composer for today, Gioacchino Rossini was fascinated by this legend and told the story through his opera *William Tell*.

The Legend of William Tell: (Play the CD as you tell the legend)

The legend takes place in Switzerland around the 13th century. A powerful, Austrian ruler, Gessler, controlled the city of Atdorf. Gessler thought he was so important that the citizens should salute him even when he wasn't there. So he perched his hat on the top of a pole in the central square and commanded all who passed before it to bow in respect. William Tell, a hunter and Swiss patriot, arrived in town one day with his son and refused to bow or salute the hat. Gessler was very upset but instead of killing Tell right there, he challenged him to shoot an apple off his son's head with his crossbow. If he succeeded, William Tell could remain free.

The boy's hands were tied and an apple placed on his head. Tell put 1 arrow in his quiver and another in his crossbow, took aim, and shot. Can you guess what happened? (*He shot the apple of his son's head*) Gessler was impressed but curious as to what the second arrow was for. Tell looked the tyrant in the eye and replied, "Had I harmed my beloved son, this second arrow would have been for you."

Gessler was furious and had Tell dragged to his boat, intending to put him in the dungeon when they arrived at his castle in Kussnacht. During the trip, a violent storm arose on the lake and Gessler, afraid that the boat would heel over, released Tell so he could help steer them to safety. Tell maneuvered the boat close to shore and leapt to freedom.

Determined to see his task through and use the second arrow, Tell hurried to Kussnacht where he hid in a bush near the gorge that led to Gessler's castle. When the wicked Gessler arrived, Tell jumped out and shot the arrow straight through the tyrant's heart. This started an uprising that forced the invaders from Switzerland.

Music Description:

The music you have been listening to is the "William Tell Overture". Who remembers what an overture is? (*Introduction to an opera*) Opera overtures were originally written to give the people in the theater time to get to their seats and to stop talking before the action of the opera began. In the early days of operas, there was no way to conveniently "dim the house lights" since the house lights were candles, so they used music to get everyone's attention instead. The early overtures had nothing to do with the music one would hear later in the opera; they only served as fill music until the action got under way. Later they came to set the mood for what was to follow. The audience was in effect given a preview

of what was to come. Having listened to the overture, what do you think will be the mood of at least part of the *William Tell Opera*? (*Triumphant, exciting, heroic, fast-paced*)

With “William Tell”, some overtures became popular as an independent concert piece. Rossini is remembered as much for his overtures as for his operas. The *William Tell Opera* is seldom done because of the complexity and also because it’s very long – it requires 6 hours for a performance. Once when Rossini heard that the entire opera was to be performed in Paris, he exclaimed, “What – all of it?” The overture, however, has been used thousands of times in Westerns and Comedies. It was the theme song to “The Lone Ranger” and Disney used it in cartoons.

I’m going to play a portion of the overture again and ask you some questions about what you hear. (*Play CD*) What instrument do you hear at the beginning of the piece? (*Trumpet*) Why do you think Rossini used a trumpet to start the overture? (*Trumpets are loud, bright instruments. Trumpet calls are associated with royalty, the military, important events.*) What does the rhythm suggest? (*Horses*) What part of the orchestra moves along this “galloping rhythm”? (*Strings*) What percussion instrument do you hear most? (*Drum*) Rossini was a master of melody but are you drawn into the music because of the melody or because of the pulse/rhythmic intensity? (*Rhythm*) How would you describe the dynamics, loudness and softness, in the music? Does it stay the same or keep changing? (*Changes*) Think about how the dynamics help tell the story. Would the story be the same if Rossini had written everything to be played softly? Does Rossini make use of crescendo, a gradual increase in loudness? How does Rossini use dynamics? (*He uses sudden dynamic changes for effect. He makes loud entrances more effective by preceding them with soft sections, brief silences.*)

Rossini is also known for his different approach to the dialog in opera. Instead of the opera being an event only the well-educated and well-traveled person could understand, Rossini made the dialog understandable to everyone. He once joked, “Give me your laundry list, and I will set it to music!”

Biography

Who was Rossini? What was he like? Rossini was the type of man people loved to be around. He had a great sense of humor and loved to make people laugh and feel good. He and his music were described as “light, lively and amusing, never wearisome”. He loved parties, cooking and entertaining. He invited friends to his 18th birthday party when he was 72. Does anyone know how this would be possible? (*He was born on February 29, Leap Year Day, and had only seen 18 actual days of his birthday.*)

When he was young, Rossini stayed with his Italian grandmother while his musical parents traveled with an opera company. He was left to himself and allowed to run wild. Attempting to impose discipline on him, his parents apprenticed him once to a butcher and twice to a blacksmith, but each time he was soon given up as incorrigible. Finally, a priest noticed his beautiful voice and he began to sing in the church for \$.10 a service. This helped in paying his bills at home and nothing like working in a church for discipline. By the time, his parents were able to set up a permanent home again and attend to his musical education.

When he was 18, a friend recommended him for completing an opera that needed some help. In 3 days Rossini completed the opera and his life became a whirlwind. His success and demand for his talents were huge. By the time he was 22, he was the idol of Venice and the most famous opera composer in Italy. In one four-year time frame, Rossini wrote 15 complete operas, some in as little as 6 weeks! At one of his concerts, there were thousands of people who could not get into the theater. Rossini heard of the crowd and arranged an impromptu concert on the balcony. The music went on until 2.00 a.m. By the time he was 37, he had completed 38 operas and 23 musical compositions. He was welcomed by Kings and adored by the public. His love song from the opera *Tancredi* spread like a contagious disease. The Venetian law court actually ordered its citizens to stop singing, humming, and whistling the song continually! Even Beethoven, generally aloof toward visitors, warmly welcomed Rossini and encouraged him to write more music.

At 37, Rossini completed his last opera and never wrote another. He lived for another 39 years, but his last opera was *William Tell*. There is some speculation as to his motives, but perhaps he simply wished to enjoy the fruits of his labors. He did write church music and small pieces for piano and voice. He continued his love for parties and entertained lavishly and often. There was not a musician who did not aspire to be invited or to perform at a Rossini gathering. He became a fat and genial gourmet and Parisian dishes were created and named in his honor. It was said that he cared more for the glory of inventing a new salad dressing than for the honor due to him as a composer. Once as a dinner guest, he ate a magnificent meal with a great gusto for he was known for his immense appetite. When his hostess politely asked him when he would dine with them again, he smacked his lips and said, "Right away, if you wish, madam!" He never lost his sense of humor and his wit was quoted as widely as his operas were hummed.

Rossini established a much needed home for aged musicians outside Paris. He also founded a music school and became a mentor to young composers including Wagner. We talked about Wagner a couple of months ago in FAME. Do you remember what music he wrote? ("*The Wedding March*" from *Lohengrin*) Rossini's wit also extended to his fellow musicians. There was the time a young composer called on Rossini at his apartment in Paris to play for him two new compositions. Rossini listened to the first, and then said quickly, "I like the other one better."

At 76, he suddenly became very ill. Emergency surgery was done and a mysterious mass was found. He died of what is now thought of as cancer. When his body was brought down the street, can anyone guess what song he requested be played? ("*The William Tell Overture*") His life was filled with the unusual and refused to follow the normal pattern. Rossini was born in a leap year, on February 29. He died on Friday the thirteenth. He loved and enjoyed music and loved and enjoyed life until the end.

FAME V REVIEW

(Review as a class or game style in groups)

1. He was an American artist who loved the sea. In “Breezing Up”, he painted a father and his sons going home after fishing. (WINSLOW HOMER)
2. This composer knew how to handle the king. Afraid that George I would be angry with him for his long absences, he wrote *Water Music Suite* and followed the king down the river playing music. He also wrote *Messiah*. (GEORGE HANDEL)
3. He was fascinated by the night sky and painted “Starry Night”. He was mentally unstable and never sold any of his works. Yet in 1987 a painting of his sold for \$39 million! (VINCENT VAN GOGH)
4. This composer was fascinated with the planets and the myths surrounding them. He wrote a suite called *The Planets*. (GUSTAV HOLST)
5. This artist is known for his long, slim, oval faces; elongated necks; and vacant eyes. He liked to paint scrawny. (AMADEO MODIGLIANI)
6. This German composer loved “music dramas” and built his own opera house. Many brides today walk down the aisle to his song, “The Wedding March”. (RICHARD WAGNER)
7. This artist is known for his genre paintings during the Rococo period. His paintings such as “Le Billet Doux” are filled with light and warm color. (JEAN HONORE FRAGONARD)
8. This Italian composer achieved wealth and fame from his operas such as *La Boheme* and *Madame Butterfly*. (GIACCOMO PUCCINI)
9. This artist wanted to keep the primary colors pure. He developed a technique of paintings known as “pointillism”. You could say he liked to dot! (GEORGE SEURAT)
10. He is a Czech composer known for his nationalistic music. He began an American nationalistic music movement by encouraging his students to seek out and develop the folk and plantation music of the American South. (ANTONIN DVORAK)
11. Even though this artist was born in New York, he was famous for his western paintings and sculpture. He made the old West come alive and preserved in it an impressive 2700 paintings. (FREDERIC REMINGTON)
12. This composer is known for his light and lively operas. He was fascinated by the Swiss legend of the hunter who shot an apple off his son’s head. He told the story through his opera *William Tell*. (GIACCHINO ROSSINI)