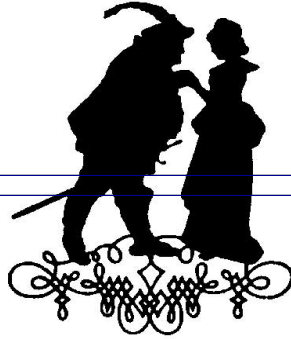


Opera con Brio

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Rossini's *La gazetta*: A Sparkling Premier New England Conservatory of Music, 2013

Boston's New England Conservatory recently presented a delightful production of the American premiere of the new Critical Edition of Rossini's charming comic opera *La gazetta*, which at the same time featured the world premiere of the recently discovered Act I quintet. What a treat it was, not only to encounter this lost material, music that filled a gaping hole at the center of the convoluted first act, but also to have performances that so sparkled with idiomatic fervor. Special thanks go to many connected with the project, including the talented two casts from NEC, but especially to Philip Gossett, editor of this new Critical Edition and historical and musical advisor to this production.



The chorus and opening set of NEC's *La gazetta*
Photo: Andrew Brilliant

As Dr. Gossett wrote in his article regarding the discovery of the quintet (first appearing in 2012 in German in the appropriately named journal *La Gazzetta*, published by the DRG, the German Rossini Society), "the absence of the Quintet and its recitative is palpable...it is not possible to understand the plot without the scene." The plot, edging on farce in true *commedia del arte* fashion, involves a pair of lovers and their fathers, all staying at the same hotel in Paris. One father, the pompous Don Pomponio (an archetypal "Pantalone" and buffo bass) advertises in *La gazetta*, the newspaper of the title, to find a husband for his feisty daughter, Lisetta (a coloratura soprano). She, however, is already

engaged to Filippo, the innkeeper. The other father, Anselmo, also wants to marry off his daughter, the soubrette Doralice to someone in whom she has no interest; she instead falls in love with Alberto, who thinks she is the girl advertised in the newspaper (Lisetta).



The Quintet with Soyoung Park (Lisetta), Gillian Cotter (Doralice), James Dornier (Alberto), David Lee (Filippo), Kyle Albertson (Don Pomponio)
Photo: Andrew Brilliant

With mistaken identities and comic posturing making up the essence of this elaborate piece, the quintet commences just after the first meeting of Doralice and Alberto. Indeed this central ensemble embodies the confusion typical of a one act Rossini *farsa* from his early years (like *La scala di seta*, whose recycled music in fact finds its way into the *tempo di mezzo* of the quintet.) Needless to say, the insertion of the quintet was so much more satisfactory than the compensation for its absence in the performance at the Rossini Opera Festival I attended in 2001. In that version the characters, as Dr. Gossett notes, “declaim the verses of the Quintet in what Director Dario Fo called a kind of *tamurriata* (popular dance) with the fortepiano playing the melody of the song ‘La Danza’ from the *Soirées musicales* of Rossini in the background.”

Indeed hearing this lively quintet in its proper context contributed to giving the first act all the shape and *tinta* of an early Rossini *farsa*, whose archetypal pattern of an overture and eight musical numbers, usually lasting roughly an hour and a half, included a miniature central finale, an ensemble of

complexity like this quintet. Happily it was the apt flavor of a *farsa* that characterized this entire production, reinforced by the charade of Filippo and friends disguised as Quakers at the end of the first act. Another charade toward the end of the second act, a Turkish party that further confuses and torments Pomponio, helps expand the piece to a full-length comic opera.

Director Joshua Major coaxed wonderfully funny and convincing performances from the talented young cast from New England Conservatory, who shone in the many carefully choreographed ensembles. Moments of stasis, highlighted by the selective lighting of Christopher Ostrom, aptly gave pause to the comic brio, letting soloists articulate Rossini’s mesmerizing score with precision and humor. The comic flavor itself was infectious, especially in such numbers as the Terzetto in Act II (the flamboyant mock sword fight for Alberto, Filippo, and Don Pomponio, recycled from *La pietra del paragone*) and another Quintetto of confusion toward the end of Act II (transferred appropriately from the masquerade of *Il turco in Italia*.) The comic antics rarely let up, from mid-way through the overture as the amused crowd in the opening scene at a Paris café mimicked and mocked the ludicrous Pomponio, to the final scene of his bewilderment amidst the Turkish soirée.



Bridget Haile (Lisetta), Leroy Davis (Don Pomponio), Jason Ryan (Filippo), Marco Antonio Jordao (Alberto Marco), Jaime Korkos (Doralice)
Photo: Andrew Hurlbut

The attractive set itself was initially the café outside a Paris hotel. Following the third number of the score, the hilarious Quartetto (“Mio Signore!”) as bemused onlookers mock Pomponio and his grandiose scheme, the handsome all white, art deco interior was revealed in an instant scenic transformation. The elegant hotel lobby with stairway on the

left leading to a balcony along the back wall over the hotel entrance, with balancing reception desk on the right, gave ample space for all the comic stage direction, disguised entrances, and the like. What a relief it was not to cope with some misguided director's bewildering concept opera, but just to enjoy a straightforward presentation of *La gazetta* with such a stylish and appropriate set.

The characters were mostly fashionable sorts from the 1920's. The outstanding female lead, especially chic and animated, was lyric soprano Soyung Park, captivating not only in her polished portrayal of Pomponio's daughter Lisetta, but also in her secure technique and spirited ornamentation. A participant in NEC's Artist Diploma in Opera program and a true Rossini soprano, she admirably took part in a recital of Lieder at the Conservatory two days after the final performance of the opera, where she displayed the same vocal flexibility and clarion tone in "Amor" – a Strauss song demanding similar skills. Opposite her, as her befuddled father, Don Pomponio, was the only Guest Artist of the double casts, bass-baritone Kyle Albertson, who stood out in his polished buffo manner. In the other cast, bass-baritone Leroy Davis (who performed in the Lieder recital as well) was also an engaging and animated Don Pomponio, paired with the Lisetta of Bridget Haile, of a more Verdian than Rossinian cut, but gamely energetic none the less. All were much aided by Dr. Gossett who advised on Nineteenth Century ornamentation and phrasing.



The second cast and set

Photo: Andrew Brilliant

Others in the double casts included two engaging sopranos as the soubrette Doralice, Artist Diploma in Opera singer Jaime Korkos and Gillan Cotter, each vivacious and idiomatic in their frequent ensemble work. All in the fine casts, too numerous to mention, were aided by the appropriate tempos of seasoned conductor, Joseph Rescigno, who brought Rossinian propulsion to the fore when appropriate, which was often. As originally performed in Naples, the opera was laden with copious recitative and Neapolitan dialect, written especially for the famous character actor and singer, Carlo Casaccia, who specialized in such roles. Dr. Gossett himself wrote the reduced recitative that both helped to maintain momentum and also to create an appealing contemporary flavor; meanwhile, Maestro Rescigno, evidently fluent in Neapolitan dialect, coached the singers portraying Don Pomponio, the character who "speaks" in dialect.

Rossini wrote *La gazetta* between the composition of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in 1816 (using part of the Finale I for the now restored quintet) and *La Cenerentola* in 1817 (which among other things usurps the overture from *La gazetta*). This neglected Rossini gem, treated as it was in the NEC production with such care and idiomatic sparkle, and with the lost quintet restored to its proper place, indeed deserves to share the stage with the same frequency as its popular buffa neighbors.

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Leroy Davis as Dom Pomponio

Photo: Andrew Hurlbut