

Dramma giocoso and Musical Jokes

"Nothing demonstrates more clearly his emancipation from eighteenth-century Italian operatic practice, his innovative genius and the purely musical basis of much of his humour than this opportunistic reworking of Angelo Anelli's libretto for *L'italiana in Algeri*."

Richard Osborne

The Italian Girl in Algiers is a frothy, wacky, comic opera from its overture to the finales of both acts. Considering the *commedia*-like comic situations, the glistening use of coloratura, the extended crescendos that build to improbable climaxes, and the rapid-fire patter sequences, Rossini deliberately planned hilarity in the music.

Dramma giocoso per musica, or jocular drama, refers to the text and the grand buffo scenes used as dramatic climaxes at the ends of acts. The Act I finale is a masterpiece of tension and humor, as the seven singers grow increasingly confused and agitated.

ELVIRA

In my head I have a bell, loudly ringing ding, ding, ding!

ISABELLA, ZULMA

My head's a sounding bell, loudly ringing ding, ding, ding!

LINDORO, ALI

In my head a hammer's beating, striking loudly, ta, ta, ta!

TADDEO

I am like a crow that's plucked, crying caw, caw, caw!

MUSTAFÀ

Like a shot out of a cannon my head goes boom, boom, boom!

Character types, familiar from the *commedia* tradition, instantly clue the audience that Mustafà will be a blustering and lascivious old man, that Lindoro will be handsome and faithful, and that Isabella will be both beautiful and smart. Because their behaviors are predictable, Rossini could craft the music to enhance comedic situations rather than develop character.

Coloratura passages—elaborate ornamentation and vocal melismas on one syllable—create comic effect because of their mocking, exaggerated delivery. When Mustafà sings sixty notes in several measures on the word "arrogance", the incongruity is downright funny.

Crescendo, a signature device of Rossini's, involves repeated phrases, increased volume, thickening texture, and layered melodies. The composer was so skilled at using louder and louder passages to heighten the humor that he was known as "Signor Crescendo".

Patter passages feature a humorous text sung very rapidly. Rossini must have enjoyed setting the silly Pappataci trio in Act II at breakneck speed.

Rossini has served up a deliciously funny opera plot delivered via musical jokes. Enjoy!

Resources: Boston Lyric Opera Study Guide, *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, and *Rossini* by Gaia Servadio

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PITTSBURGH OPERA
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera

The Italian Girl in Algiers

(*L'italiana in Algeri*)

Music by Gioachino Rossini • Libretto by Angelo Anelli

Vivica Genaux, as Isabella, is an aviatrix along the lines of Amelia Earhart in a glamorous production from Santa Fe Opera. In this sparkling 1930s period production, Isabella crash-lands an airplane along the Algerian coast in Act I, then escapes during the Act II finale via a hot air balloon. In between, the wacky action unfolds on an enchanting storybook that opens and closes!



Minnesota Opera production photo by Michal Daniel

“Rossini Fever” in a Changing Europe

Gioachino Rossini was born on February 29, 1792 in Pesaro, a small port on the east coast of Italy that was then a part of the Papal States. During his youth, Rossini witnessed the turmoil of a changing Europe—the French Revolution was in progress, King Louis XVI was sent to the guillotine, and Napoleon Bonaparte commanded the French army in Italy. The little town of Pesaro was governed by changing foreign powers. While his musician parents were away performing, the little boy Rossini was left in the care of his grandmother. Because Rossini had a fine treble voice, his parents considered surgery for him to preserve it into manhood as a *castrato*. Instead, Rossini began academic and musical training in Bologna, and by 18 made his professional debut as an opera composer.

Within three years, Rossini designated himself a *maestro di cartello*, a composer whose name alone guarantees an audience. During 1813, he oversaw the staging of *Il Signor Bruschino*, *Tancredi*, and *L'italiana in Algeri* in Venice, plus *Aureliano in Palmira* in Milan. The first of Rossini's operas to hold a firm place in the repertory, *L'italiana* was based on the popular legend of Roxelane, slave girl of Suleiman the Magnificent, and appealed to the prevailing taste for things oriental. With successive triumphs *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Cenerentola*, “Rossini fever” took the continent by storm. By the time he visited Paris, Vienna, and London, he was probably the most famous man of the age.



Gioachino Rossini
(1792—1868)

Give me a laundry-list and I'll set it to music.

The Italian Girl in Algiers Synopsis

In 1813, impresario Giovanni Gallo asked Rossini to provide a new opera for Venice a month before the scheduled premier. The 21-year-old toast of operatic Italy recycled Angelo Anelli's *L'italiana in Algeri* libretto, which had been set to music by Luigi Mosca in 1808. Rossini composed the *dramma giocoso per musica* and its extensive overture in only 27 days, without indulging in self-borrowing.

ACT I: In Algiers, at the seaside palace of the bey Mustafà, his wife Elvira complains that her husband no longer loves her; her attendants reply there is nothing she can do. Mustafà bursts in. Asserting he will not let women get the better of him, he sends Elvira away because she complains. Mustafà has tired of his wife and will give her to Lindoro, a young Italian at the court, to marry. Then he orders Ali, a captain in his service, to provide him an Italian woman—someone more interesting than the “boring” girls in his harem. Lindoro longs for his own sweetheart, Isabella, whom he lost when pirates captured him. Mustafà tells him he can have Elvira, insisting she possesses every virtue that Lindoro values.

Elsewhere along the shore, a wreck is spied, and Ali's pirates exult. Isabella arrives on shore, lamenting the cruelty of a fate that has interrupted her quest for her lost fiancé, Lindoro. Though in danger, she is confident of her skill in taming men. The pirates seize Taddeo, an aging admirer of Isabella's, and try to sell him into slavery, but he claims he is Isabella's uncle and cannot leave her. When the Algerians learn that both captives are Italian, they rejoice in having found the new star for Mustafà's harem. Taddeo is stunned at Isabella's aplomb on hearing the news, and they quarrel, but decide they had better face the predicament together.

Elvira's slave Zulma tries to reconcile Lindoro and her mistress to the fact that Mustafà has ordered them to marry. Mustafà promises Lindoro he may return to Italy—if he will take Elvira. Seeing no other way, Lindoro accepts, making it clear he might not marry Elvira until after they reach Italy. Elvira, however, loves her husband and sees no advantage in aiding Lindoro's escape. When Ali announces the capture of an Italian woman, Mustafà gloats in anticipation of conquest, then leaves to meet her. Lindoro tries to tell Elvira she has no choice but to leave her heartless husband.

Mustafà welcomes Isabella with ceremony. Aside, she remarks that she feels certain that she will be able to deal with him; he, on the other hand, finds her enchanting. As she seemingly throws herself on his mercy, the jealous Taddeo starts to make a scene and is saved only when she declares that he is her “uncle”. Elvira and Lindoro, about to leave for Italy, come to say good-bye, and Lindoro and Isabella are stunned to recognize each other. To prevent Lindoro's departure, Isabella insists that Mustafà cannot banish his wife, adding that Lindoro must stay as her own personal servant. Between the frustration of Mustafà's plans and the happy but confused excitement of the lovers, everyone's head reels.

Intermission



In the early 19th century, during the French conquest of North Africa, Algerian resistance fighters raised a flag with colors and symbols associated with Islam and the Arab dynasties of the region. In 1962, that flag was raised over an independent Algeria, whose official name is *Al-Jumhūriyah al-Jaza'iriyah ad-Dīmuqrāṭīyah ash-Sha'bīyah* (Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria). The current population of about 35 million includes 80% Arab and 20% Berber peoples. More than 80% of Algeria is desert; a little more than 3% is agricultural.

Characters of the Opera

Isabella [ee-zah-BELL-ah] *mezzo-soprano*
The Italian girl; she wrecks her plane on the coast of Algiers during a search for her love Lindoro.

Lindoro [leen-DOH-roh] *tenor*
Young Italian in love with Isabella; favorite slave of Mustafà.

Mustafà [mus-tah-FAH] *bass*
(or Mustapha) The bey, or governor, of Algiers; his historical title would have been *dey* instead of *bey*.

Taddeo [tah-DAY-oh] *baritone*
Older companion of Isabella; she identifies him as her uncle to prevent him from becoming a slave.

Elvira [el-VEER-ah] *soprano*
The wife of Mustafà; she is saddened because he no longer loves her.

Zulma [DZOOOL-mah] *mezzo-soprano*
Slave, confidante of Elvira.

Ali [ah-LEE] *bass/baritone*
(or Haly) The captain of the bey's corsairs (privateers).

Chorus of tenors and basses:
Eunuchs of the Harem
Algerian Corsairs
Italian Slaves
Pappataci (Italian for “Eat! Be Quiet!”)

Supernumeraries:
Women of the Harem
European Slaves
Sailors
Vlad the Impaler (unique to this production)

Other related pronunciations

Gioachino Rossini [joah-KEE-noh ros-SEE-nee]

Angelo Anelli [AHN-jell-oh ah-NELL-ee]

Genaux [zhéh-NOH]

Bey [bay-EE]

ACT II: Elvira and members of the court are discussing how easily the Italian woman has cowed Mustafà, giving Elvira hope of regaining his love. When Mustafà enters, however, he declares he will visit Isabella in her room for coffee. She comes out of her room, upset because Lindoro apparently broke faith with her by agreeing to escape with Elvira. Lindoro appears and reassures her of his loyalty; Isabella promises a scheme for their freedom. After Lindoro leaves too, Mustafà reappears, followed by attendants with the terrified Taddeo, who is to be honored as the bey's personal bodyguard, in exchange for helping secure Isabella's affections. Dressed in Turkish garb, he sees no choice but to accept the compulsory honor.

In her apartment, Isabella prepares for Mustafà's visit, telling Elvira that the way to keep her husband is to be more assertive. As she completes her toilette, Isabella keeps Mustafà waiting, as her “servant” Lindoro acts as a go-between. At last she presents herself to the bey, who introduces Taddeo as his bodyguard. Mustafà sneezes—a signal for Taddeo to leave—but Taddeo stays, and Isabella invites Elvira to stay for coffee, to Mustafà's displeasure. When Isabella insists that he treat his wife gently, Mustafà bursts out in annoyance, while the others wonder what to make of his fulminations.

Elsewhere in the palace, Ali predicts that his master is no match for an Italian woman. As Lindoro and Taddeo plan their escape, Taddeo says he is Isabella's true love. Lindoro is amused but realizes he needs Taddeo's help in dealing with Mustafà, who enters, still furious. Lindoro says Isabella actually cares very much for the bey and wants him to prove his worthiness by entering the Italian order of Pappataci. Believing this to be an honor, Mustafà agrees to the conditions: eat, drink, and sleep all you like, oblivious to anything around you. Aside, Ali and Zulma wonder what Isabella is up to.

In her apartment, Isabella prepares a feast of initiation for the bey. Mustafà arrives, and is pronounced a Pappataci. Food is brought in, and he is tested by Isabella and Lindoro, who pretend to make love while Taddeo reminds Mustafà to ignore them. The lovers prepare to embark, but Taddeo realizes that he too is being tricked, and tries to rally Mustafà, who persists in keeping his vow of paying no attention. When Mustafà finally responds, the situation is under control and the Italians bid a courteous farewell. Mustafà, his lesson learned, takes Elvira back, and everyone sings the praises of the resourceful Italian woman.

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