

Rossini: Barber of Seville Overture

Rossini is well known for his fast work at composition, and true to his style all the music for *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* was completed in under three weeks - though the famous overture was actually borrowed from two prior Rossini operas, *Aureliano in Palmira* and *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*.

Barbiere's first performance on February 20, 1816 was a disastrous failure: the audience hissed and jeered throughout, and several on-stage accidents occurred. However, many of the audience were supporters of one of Rossini's rivals, and they played on "mob mentality" to provoke the rest of the audience to dislike the opera. The second performance met with quite a different fate, being a roaring success.

The overture has been used in much popular culture ... it is played during the end credits of the Beatles film *Help!* ... it is parodied in animated cartoons starring Woody Woodpecker (*The Barber of Seville*), Bugs Bunny (*Rabbit of Seville*), and The Simpsons ("The Homer of Seville"), this final programme includes Placido Domingo as himself.

Saint Saens: Morceau de Concert for Harp

Saint Saens (NB you pronounce the final 's' ☺) possessed perfect pitch at two years of age and began piano lessons with his great-aunt at about the same time. He almost immediately began composing. His first composition, a little piece for the piano dated 22 March 1839, is now kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. His precociousness was not limited to music, however. He had learned to read and write by age three and mastered Latin by seven. His first public concert appearance occurred at age five, when he accompanied a Beethoven violin sonata. He went on to begin in-depth study of the full score of *Don Giovanni*. In 1842, Saint-Saëns began piano lessons with Camille-Marie Stamaty, a pupil of Friedrich Kalkbrenner, who had his students play the piano while resting their forearms on a bar situated in front of the keyboard, so that all the pianist's power came from the hand and fingers and not the arms. At ten years of age, Saint-Saëns gave his debut public recital at the Salle Pleyel, with a performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 15 in B-flat major (K. 450), and various pieces by Handel, Kalkbrenner, Hummel, and Bach. As an encore, Saint-Saëns offered to play any one of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas from memory. Word of this incredible concert spread across Europe, and as far as the United States with an article about him being published in a Boston newspaper.