

The Violin Solo from the opera *Ciro in Babilonia* by Gioachino Rossini: A Stylistic and Interpretive Analysis

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Abstract: *Gioachino Rossini is one of the most significant figures of Italian opera during the period known as the “bel canto era”. This article aims to present readers with lesser-known biographical details about the great composer from Pesaro, followed by an analysis of the aria “Deh! per me non v’affliggete”, which, throughout its length, is accompanied by a unique violin solo within Rossini’s body of work. The discovery and promotion of arias that include a violin solo, often partially or entirely unknown, represent one of the most important pragmatic aspects of my scientific research endeavours. The purpose of this article is to shed light on this fragment from *Ciro in Babilonia* and to promote the lesser-performed works of the renowned composer.*

Key-words: *Gioachino Rossini, bel canto, solo violin, aria.*

1. Introduction

Rossini is one of the globally renowned composers of the Italian *bel canto* opera period. Although some of his operas are integral parts of the repertoires of opera houses worldwide, quantitatively, fewer than half of them are regularly performed compared to his total body of work, which comprises approximately 40 operas written for the stage. Therefore, one of the objectives of this article is to spark the interest of readers in a more varied and complex listening experience of Rossini's works. Another objective is to share the knowledge accumulated during the research of Rossini's creations, focusing on the use of this almost unique technique in the *bel canto* era, namely violin solos. These appear far more frequently in works belonging to Romanticism and later in Verismo.

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2. Rossini – education and professional development

Born in Pesaro in 1792 to musician parents, Rossini's mother had a brief career as a soprano, while his father, a committed revolutionary, was a remarkable horn player. He had a childhood marked by many hardships, much of which was spent touring with a traveling troupe—the only viable way for his parents to earn a meager living. Despite lacking a comprehensive musical education, he managed to play the violin and, at the age of 12, completed his first compositions, the so-called *Sonate a quattro*, which testify to a precocious maturity. He acquired knowledge of counterpoint through studying the works of Mozart and Haydn, more than through formal training at the Bologna Music Lyceum. Speaking of his study and connection with Mozart's work, Rossini once said: „*Mozart was the inspiration of my youth, the despair of my maturity, and the consolation of my old age.*” (Osborne 2007). Near the end of his life, recalling his youth, he told his biographer Alexis Azevedo: „*Without the French invasion of Italy, I would probably have been a pharmacist or an olive oil merchant.*” (Azevedo 2007)

During his adolescence, out of the necessity to support himself, Rossini accepted positions as a singer or rehearsal accompanist for singers at the theatre. He learned to play the harpsichord, viola, horn, and cello, either self-taught or with the help of his father. He continued to experiment with composition through small instrumental works, but his fascination with the human voice directed him toward the operatic world from a young age. He composed cantatas, masses, and his first opera, *Demetrio e Polibio*, at the age of just 15. He quickly captured the attention of opera specialists thanks to his constant focus on harmony and orchestration, elements not widely developed in Italy at that time.

The successful premiere of the opera *La cambiale di matrimonio* at the Teatro San Mosè in Venice opened the doors to the most prestigious theatres in northern Italy for Rossini, quickly leading to six new opera commissions, including the sacred opera *Ciro in Babilonia*. This early composition in the genre demonstrated Rossini's deep understanding of the *opera seria* style, a form he seldom approached throughout his career, with *opera buffa* being predominant in his work. He was often, and somewhat unfairly, accused of being incapable of composing anything other than *opera buffa*.

The year 1813 brought Rossini glory at just 21 years old with three premieres in Venice, an important centre for opera, each differing in style: *Il signor Bruschino*, a *farsa giocosa*, *Tancredi*, an *opera seria*, and *L'italiana in Algeri*, a *dramma giocoso*.

In 1815, Rossini accepted an invitation from impresario Barbaja, director of the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, enticed by the exceptional conditions offered by the

company—an outstanding orchestra, singers unmatched by those of other theatres of the era, including tenors Davide, Nozzari, and García, as well as the great soprano Isabel Colbran, a renowned voice for whom he would compose some of his finest roles. His first premieres in Naples were *Elisabetta, regina d’Inghilterra*, a tragic opera (*dramma*), and a year later, *Otello*, two works that significantly expanded the typical structures of *opera seria* in a unique way.

Rossini's first notable success was the Roman premiere of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, which was soon followed by two other sparkling comedies, *La Cenerentola* (Rome) and *La gazza ladra* (Milan). Also worth mentioning from this period of success is the Neapolitan premiere of a *azione tragico-sacra*, *Mosè in Egitto*. The Naples stage also saw the premiere of the first Italian opera with a libretto based on the romantic writings of Sir Walter Scott, *La donna del lago*, a work that marked the beginning of Romanticism in Rossini's compositions. This opera also paved the way for future works, as Walter Scott had a significant influence on the development of Italian Romantic opera, with no fewer than 25 titles based on his writings, the most famous being *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Gaetano Donizetti.

After a brief period spent in Vienna for the Italian opera season led by impresario Barbaja, Rossini left his homeland, largely due to dissatisfaction with the operatic life in Italy. Paris, with its more advanced respect and appreciation for artists, became the stage for Rossini's future premieres. Shortly after arriving, he presented *Il viaggio à Reims* and reworked two of his earlier compositions, transforming *Maometto II* into *Le siège de Corinthe* and *Mosè in Egitto* into *Moïse et Pharaon*. His final major work for the operatic stage was *Guillaume Tell*, a four-act *opera seria* with a political theme, noted for its exceptional portrayal of nature.

The French Revolution of 1830 brought many changes, including the cancellation of Rossini's contract. He was forced to return to Italy, but thanks to the unconditional support of a close friend and patron of Rossini's art, the Spanish-born Marquis Alejandro María Aguado, Rossini successfully won a lawsuit against the royal court. The compensation he received was meant to ensure his glorious retirement from the world of opera.

Rossini's medical issues began to worsen, and an adequate treatment could not be found. His intense musical life was believed to be the main cause of these psychological crises, as he had composed 40 operas and numerous religious works over the span of less than 20 years. The necessary preparations for premieres—such as orchestral rehearsals, coaching sessions with soloists, and stage productions—further contributed to the strain on his health.

After parting from the operatic stage, Rossini composed *Stabat Mater*, often considered his requiem, as well as *Péchés de vieillesse*, a collection of approximately 200 pieces with various orchestrations and for different solo

instruments. He also created the *Petite messe solennelle*, written for voices, two pianos, and harmonium.

Rossini died on November 13, 1868, and was buried in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, near Cherubini, Chopin, and his friend Bellini. Shortly afterward, the city of Florence expressed its desire to repatriate his remains and place him in a place of honor at the Basilica of Santa Croce, alongside other great figures such as Galileo, Michelangelo, and Machiavelli.

3. Stylistic and interpretative analysis of the Violin Solo in the Aria „Deh! per me non v'affliggete” from *Ciro in Babilonia*

3.1 General Stylistic Features of Rossini's Work. The *bel canto* Style in *Ciro in Babilonia*

Rossini's compositions are centred around the *bel canto* style, whose foundational principles emphasize beautiful, expressive singing and technical virtuosity. This focus on vocal beauty and technical skill became a defining characteristic of his works. *Bel canto* operas, known for their long phrasing, clear melodic lines, and delicate ornamentation, require singers with exceptional technical abilities and remarkable agility. Rossini's works are particularly renowned for their demanding vocal parts, especially for sopranos and tenors. For Rossini, mastery of *bel canto* rested on the “instrument” itself—the performer's technical skill and their stylistic sensibility, taste, and expressiveness.

The beginning of Rossini's career coincided with the end of the “era” of the *castrati*—a historical „order” condemned to extinction but leaving behind a legacy of brilliance, tonal homogeneity, and stylistic refinement characteristic of the *bel canto* style. The new wave of female singer-actresses, whose coloratura techniques were highly developed, was considered a legacy left by the *castrati*. Always captivated by their artistry, Rossini recalled the impression they left on him: „I never forgot them. The purity, the miraculous flexibility of those voices, and, above all, their profoundly moving accents—all of this touched and fascinated me more than I can express. I should add that I myself wrote a role for one of them, one of the last, though by no means insignificant—Velluti. It was the castrato role in my opera *Aureliano in Palmira*.” (Michotte 1968)

One of the most distinctive elements of Rossini's style is the Rossinian *crescendo*, a technique involving the gradual increase of volume and intensity, creating a sense of excitement and anticipation, often culminating in a dramatic climax. The Rossinian *crescendo* is particularly prominent in overtures and ensemble numbers, enhancing the overall dynamism of the music.

Rossini's orchestration techniques were innovative and influential. He expanded the role of the orchestra, using it not merely as accompaniment but as an integral part of the drama. His use of woodwinds and brass added colour and character to the music. The orchestral introductions of his operas are particularly notable, often presenting memorable themes and motifs that set the tone for the entire work.

Rossini's body of work includes both *comic* and *serious* operas, each demonstrating his evolving style and mastery of the operatic form. Some of his most famous works, such as *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Cenerentola*, and *Guillaume Tell*, illustrate his versatility in tackling different subjects.

Among his numerous works, *Ciro in Babilonia* stands out as a fascinating example of Rossini's early *opera seria*, showcasing his developing talent and the stylistic elements that would come to define his career. Through its complex vocal lines, innovative orchestration, and captivating dramatic elements, the opera exhibits the distinctive characteristics of Rossini's style. The work not only reflects the traditions of its time but also pushes the boundaries of what opera could achieve, laying the groundwork for the composer's later masterpieces. Thus, *Ciro in Babilonia* remains a significant and compelling piece in the operatic repertoire, deserving of study and appreciation for its stylistic richness and historical importance. Composed in 1812, when Rossini was just 20 years old, *Ciro in Babilonia* reflects a transitional period in his career, bridging the influences of his predecessors with his emerging voice.

The narrative setting of the opera *Ciro in Babilonia* is in ancient Babylon and tells the story of Cyrus the Great (Ciro), the Persian king who besieges Babylon to rescue his wife, Amira, and overthrow the tyrant Baldassare. The plot unfolds with a mix of romance, heroism, and divine intervention, typical of *opera seria* conventions.

The overture of *Ciro in Babilonia* follows the traditional three-part structure: a slow introduction, an *Allegro* section, and a lively finale. The overture sets the tone for the opera with its energetic rhythms, dynamic contrasts, and memorable melodies. It serves as a microcosm of Rossini's compositional style, characterized by the use of *crescendos*, sudden dynamic shifts, and complex orchestration.

Although *Ciro in Babilonia* adheres to many conventions of *opera seria*, it also demonstrates Rossini's desire to experiment and innovate. His use of dynamic contrasts and dramatic timing was revolutionary for its time and influenced subsequent composers. Rossini's ability to blend traditional forms with his unique voice contributed significantly to the evolution of Italian opera.

The stylistic elements found in *Ciro in Babilonia* can be seen in Rossini's later and more famous operas, such as *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Cenerentola*. This

opera thus serves as an important milestone in Rossini's career and as a precursor to his later achievements.

Within the opera *Ciro in Babilonia*, a particularly remarkable moment that deserves special attention is the violin solo in Amira's aria, „*Deh! Per me non v'affliggete.*” This aria not only highlights Rossini's mastery of orchestration but also offers a unique opportunity for the violin to shine within an operatic context. In a genre dominated by human voices, such a prominent violin solo is a rarity and a testament to Rossini's innovation. The concertmaster plays a crucial role in the orchestra, not only leading the string section but also working closely with the conductor to ensure coherence and unity in the performance.

3.2. Technical and Emotional Aspects of the Violin Solo Interpretation

In *Ciro in Babilonia*, the violin solo represents a moment of instrumental brilliance within a vocal context, serving as an integral part of Amira's aria: „*Deh! Per me non v'affliggete.*” The aria features a classic structure of the time, with two contrasting sections preceded by a recitative. The first part is lyrical, building dramatic tension, which is released later in the second section, the *cabaletta*. This solo is significant not only for the technical virtuosity it demands but also for its extensive length, which was uncommon for that era, and for its expressive role within the opera's context. Through this solo, Rossini demonstrates how an instrument can add a supplementary voice, enriching the emotional and narrative depth of the opera. The concertmaster's solo serves as both a technical high point and an important narrative element. These passages not only showcase the violinist's technical prowess but also enhance the emotional intensity and the dramatic atmosphere of the opera. Rossini employs such solos to create moments of reflection and deep emotional connection, blending instrumental expressivity seamlessly into the operatic storytelling.

From a technical perspective, the violinist must master a wide range of dynamics and articulations to convincingly convey the dramatic tension. The phrases are long and demand excellent bow control, while frequent tempo changes and *rubatos* require a strong understanding of the vocal character of the piece. The use of vibrato in this solo is crucial, as it must maintain tension without becoming excessive. Additionally, delicate ornamentations need to be seamlessly integrated, ensuring that they do not disrupt the melodic flow.

Beyond the technical demands, interpreting the solo in this aria requires a significant depth of emotional expression. The violinist must capture Amira's sense of vulnerability and sacrifice and convey it through their sound. This involves striking a balance between expressive lyricism and technical precision, as the solo

complements the voice, becoming a narrative element in itself. Emphasis is placed on the delicacy with which the violinist must approach not only the phrasing but also the subtle transitions between moments of tension and resolution.

The violin solo in *Ciro in Babilonia* begins with an orchestral introduction characteristic of Rossini, often found in his later, more well-known works such as *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Cenerentola*. After the brief orchestral introduction, the violin takes over and introduces the main theme, characterized by a lyrical and flowing melody that allows the performer to showcase their expressiveness and control over the instrument. The theme is typically adorned with trills and mordents, typical of the *bel canto* style, adapted for the violin. (Figure 1)



Fig. 1. Violin Introduction of the Aria „Deh! per me non v'affligete”

As the solo progresses, Rossini develops the theme through variations and contrasting sections. These variations not only demonstrate the technical diversity of the violin but also enrich the opera's emotional palette. The composer employs changes in tempo, dynamics, and articulations to create a cohesive and captivating musical narrative. In the second theme presented by the solo violin, there are rapid descending scales in 32nd-note values and an extension to a lower ninth—a position that is rather challenging for the violinist. (Figure 2 and Figure 3, measures 5 and 2)



Fig. 2. The violin solo in the aria „Deh! per me non v'affligete” - measures 10-16



Fig. 3. The violin solo in the aria „Deh! per me non v'affligete” – measures 32-34

The violin solo demands exceptional agility and flawless technique. Rapid passages, intervallic leaps, and complex ornaments are all designed to showcase the performer's technical prowess. These technical demands reflect the influence of the *bel canto* vocal style on Rossini's instrumental writing, where beauty and virtuosity are paramount.

Despite the technical demands, the violin solo is also deeply lyrical in its first section. This duality between virtuosity and lyricism is one of the defining characteristics of Rossini's style and is fully present in this solo.

The violin solo is not an isolated entity but part of a continuous dialogue with the orchestra. Rossini uses the orchestra to support and respond to the violin, creating a dynamic musical exchange. Strings, wind instruments, and percussion are strategically employed to complement and contrast with the solo violin line. The solo violin alternates between serving a thematic-introductory role, acting as an equal partner to the soprano (Amira), providing transitions, and bringing sections to a close.

Another notable musical example is a motif from the *cabaletta*, the second section of the aria, which is much faster and filled with virtuosic passages. This involves a passage in broken octaves, a technique frequently employed by the remarkable virtuoso of the era, Niccolò Paganini, who often used it in his Caprices, Concertos, and other solo works. (Figure 4) This passage, which requires advanced virtuosity, demands a strong command of scales in octaves due to its considerable execution speed. On the 3rd and 4th beats, there are also third and fourth interval leaps, adding to the challenges that this passage poses for the performer.



Fig. 4. *The violin solo from the aria „Deh! per me non v'affliggete”, second part, cabaletta – measures 86-87*

The inclusion of such a prominent violin solo in an *opera seria* is a testament to Rossini's innovation. He successfully pushed the boundaries of the genre, demonstrating how solo instruments can play a significant role in the opera's dramaturgy. This approach influenced subsequent composers and opened up new possibilities for integrating instrumental virtuosity within operatic narratives.

The violin solo from *Ciro in Babilonia* is a moment of instrumental brilliance that adds an additional expressive dimension to the opera. Through this passage, Rossini demonstrates how an instrument can become a virtuosic and expressive

voice within an operatic context. His ability to blend technical violin mastery with deep lyricism is evident in this solo, which remains a remarkable example of his compositional prowess. This instrumental solo moment not only enriches the opera it belongs to but also contributes to Rossini's lasting legacy of innovation in the world of opera. It had also a lasting impact on opera composers and orchestrators. Rossini's ability to integrate solo instruments in a meaningful and expressive way inspired a generation of composers to explore new methods of using the orchestra within operatic narratives. This legacy is evident in the later works of Verdi, Puccini, and others, who continued to innovate within this genre.

4. Conclusion

The solo violin moment in the aria „*Deh! Per me non v'affligete*” is a true gem of the Rossinian operatic repertoire, posing challenges both technically and interpretively. The violinist becomes an equal partner to the character *Amira*, enriching the emotional depth of the scene and adding a dimension of lyricism that transcends mere accompaniment. Interpreting this solo requires a nuanced and delicate approach that highlights the beauty of the *bel canto* style and conveys the profound drama of the moment. The violinist must possess an impeccable technique, adaptable to the demands of each performance. For the lyrical sections, a well-controlled and adaptable vibrato, a carefully crafted phrasing with a keen understanding of climactic points and key moments, and the ability to adjust timbre and sound intensity to align with the soprano's vocal output are all essential to avoid overwhelming dynamics while providing valuable harmonic support. For the rapid section, precise articulation, accurate ornamentation, and excellent bow control to handle the various demanding passages are ideal aspects to focus on.

This analysis underscores the importance of technique and interpretative sensitivity in a work that, although less known, offers numerous opportunities for the violinist to contribute to the emotive atmosphere of a complex opera.

5. References

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5.2. Musical scores

Ciro in Babilonia – Vocal score – IMSLP

The solo violin part personally rewritten in the music editing program Sibelius.