

WILLIAM TELL OVERTURE

Truly one of the greatest overtures of all time, Rossini's William Tell, written for perhaps the longest opera of all time, doesn't fit the typical mold of his overtures. Italian Girl in Algiers, Cenerentola, Barber of Seville, Scala di Seta all start with a slow introduction, are followed by an allegro, and contain the famous Rossini crescendo, a long passage starting very softly and increasing gradually in intensity.

William Tell consists of four well defined and contrasting sections; some of this music is also heard in the opera. The prelude, for 5 cellos and basses, is a lovely depiction of dawn. This use of solo cellos, used later by Wagner in Die Walkurie, Verdi in Otello, and Puccini in Tosca, was perhaps an inspiration to those composers, showing the possibilities of the sonority of such an ensemble. The storm scene brings to mind the earlier depiction by Beethoven in his 6th symphony. The pastoral is a beautiful duet between the flute and the English horn, called a "*Ranz des vaches*", or literally a "Call to the Cows." The famous finale recalls the victory of the Swiss over their Austrian oppressors.

The William Tell Overture presents opportunities for several solo instrumentalists to shine. The cello solo in the opening allows the player the opportunity to demonstrate the expressive and singing nature of the instrument. Supported by four other solo cellists, with somewhat more importance for the second cello soloist, this opening section is a special place in the cello orchestral repertoire. The flute and English horn solos, later merging as a duet, bring out the lyrical qualities in both instruments. The passages in the storm scene for trombone are often used as audition excerpts. The 16th notes passage for the first violins at Letter L is noted for its awkward string crossings.

The excerpts used for auditions at times can cause difficulty when the players get to perform these passages in the context. An example which comes immediately to mind is the previously mentioned trombone passage, which is often practiced at a quicker tempo than when performed in the orchestra.

If possible, it would be helpful to work with the 5 cello soloists before the first rehearsal, so that issues can be worked on without the entire orchestra sitting for an extended period of time. If this arrangement is not possible, playing through this portion of the piece, and then working on it later, perhaps at the end of a rehearsal, during which time the rest of the orchestra can be released, is the kind of gesture that is always appreciated.

My experience has been to let the solo player play the 1st and 6th measures by him or herself, conducting only the other solo cellos in the 3rd and 8th measures. The pacing and direction of these measures would have been discussed earlier. The solo cello needs to be sure not to accent the eighth note in the 2nd and 7th measures, and play those notes with warmth. For the other solo cellos, both the 3rd and 8th measures start up bow, with the phrase naturally leading the next measures.

In measure 11, I use only 2 solo bass players. While the solo cello is surely the "star", the other solo cellists' parts are important, and they need to play equally expressively. The indications in

measures 12, 13, and 14 are indeed expression marks, and extra warmth in the sound for these notes is desirable.

In measure 15 and 16, I tie the slur into the first note of measure 16, with the solo cellist playing with a touch of rubato, pushing a tiny bit, and expanding a bit into the downbeat of measure 17. Measure 17 is the first true *a tempo*. I do quarter note = about 54. I like measure 17 to start up bow, so that the phrase leads naturally to measure 20 on a down bow, which is then rounded off and followed by a small breath before starting the next phrase. (In order to achieve this phrase, measure 19's first 2 triplets are down bow with the last 3 triplets up bow.) The other cellists follow suit, also leading to measure 20. At 2 measures before Letter A, perhaps a cautionary *mf* can be added to the end of the crescendo, so that the sound is not forced. The timpani can do the same. In measure 27, a sensitively played portamento can be added to the solo cello between the B and the A sharp. The phrase at measure 28 is similar to measure 17, starting up bow, and arriving downbow at measure 31, followed by a small breath. Measures 33, 34, and 35 have the same expressive markings as earlier. The traditional trill to G natural in measure 39 matches the tonality in that measure. Rounding of the phrases in measure 41 for cello 3 and 4, and in measure 42 and 43 is effective. Starting in measure 43, the tempo can be a little slower, with a poco allargando in measure 45. I prefer the 16th notes exactly in time in measure 46, with measure 47 in tempo.

The beginning of the storm scene must be played very quietly. Half note = about 88. I use minimum gesture, but with great clarity. The quarter notes in the winds, representing the first rain drops, are very short, and very soft. If the quarter notes are too loud, the doubling in the oboes, clarinets, and bassoons can be altered to one player per part. 16th notes in the strings are measured. At Letter B, the winds can play a little louder. At 3 measures before Letter C, a strong accent, especially in the timpani, is very effective. The biggest portion of the crescendo can be reserved for the last measure before Letter B. At the third measure of Letter C and in subsequent sequences where practical, first violins can play on the G string. I prefer that the trombones use more of a "da" rather than a "ta" articulation for a deeper, less edgy sound. Care must be taken that they don't push the tempo. At measure 116, a strong but not overly edgy accent works for me. Note that the trombones always are doubling the cellos and basses. A crescendo at measure 131 to measure 133 is effective, as are 2 measure crescendos at measure 133 and measure 137. Perhaps a very small crescendo at measure 141, followed by a small diminuendo at 2 measures before Letter E can be implemented. From measure 155 to measure 163, I encourage the cellos and violas to play quite expressively. The flute solo before the Andante must play the 16th notes in tempo, but can expand the tempo a bit toward the end, with a brief fermata on the last note.

The pastoral third section contains the famous flute and English horn solos, which give both instrumentalists a chance to shine. 8th note = about 60. I suggest a very small crescendo in the winds and horns to the fourth measure, the cadence, of the first 4 phrases. The fourth measure can also be slightly broadened, with the fifth measure having a brief fermata for the rests, before continuing. Note that in measure 186 to 190, the 3rd and 4th horns are doubled, and that in measure 187 to 190 and measure 192 to 195, the 1st and 2nd horns are doubled. If intonation or balance problems result, having just one horn for each of these parts may help. At Letter F, the triangle is added; the conductor should be sure the player uses a stick which produces a nice high

ringing sound. At 1 measure before Letter G, the English horn player can take a little bit of time; I would suggest staying in tempo until the last 2 beats of that measure. I have always heard the last note of the English horn solo in measure 208 as a concert A natural, although in other editions, a concert B natural is written. In measures 217 and 219, I stop conducting and listen to the flute, catching the trill in the next measure. In measure 221, I have the flute play a low B in place of the first G, which created continuity in the succeeding measures. I suggest staying exactly in tempo in the last measure so as to maximize the element of surprise at the beginning of the *Allegro vivace*.

For the Finale, I ask for a very full, but unforced sound in the brass, with tenuto quarter notes. Note that at 4 measures before Letter H, the second trombone plays a D sharp, which is the only note that which is different from the first trombone part in the entire overture; otherwise the two trombones play in unison throughout. Be sure that the tempo is fast enough to allow the string players to use a *jete*' bowing for the two 16th note pickup notes. A tempo of quarter note = 144-152 should facilitate this technique. Note the mordents in the timpani starting in measure 152. At measure 160, I ask the musicians playing 8th notes not to play too heavily, bringing out the three 8th notes in the fourth measure each time, especially in the cymbals. In the third and fourth measures after Letter I, a small crescendo to perhaps *mf* in the first violins, followed by a diminuendo can work well – the second violins can enter *mf*, and diminuendo from there. This same passage occurs at Letter N; however, note that the second violins have a page turn here, and need to be careful to enter correctly. At Letter K, despite the marking of *tutta forza*, the brass need to be careful not to overwhelm the violins. Light 8th notes in the brass helps maintain the balance.

At Letter L, the first violins have a notoriously awful page turn. Be sure that each stand has a photocopy of the last page, so that everyone plays. Also, adding a 16th rest on the downbeat helps the ensemble. The many string crossings, as noted earlier, adds to the difficulty of keeping everyone together. At Letter O, the coda, I move the tempo slightly. At measure 406, I have the violins play one less 16th note, which allows them to start measure 407 on an up bow, enabling measure 411 to arrive as a down bow. The same passage occurs at measures 430 and 431. At 4 measures before Letter P, I have the players with held notes drop their dynamic, and crescendo to Letter P. The same dynamic adjustments take place at measure 443 to measure 447. At 3 measures after Letter Q, I have the entire orchestra start softer, and crescendo to measure 461. The last note can have a short fermata, rather than just a half note.

At the conclusion, I give a solo bow to the flute, then the English horn, then the 5 solo cellos, shaking hands with the principal cellist.

If the *Allegro vivace* appears by itself as sort of a gag, adding a horse laugh in the trumpet at two measures before Letter H is pretty funny.

Although one of the most familiar pieces of music in the symphonic repertoire, it is truly a phenomenal and original overture. Despite the familiarity, there are several issues which need to be addressed, and I hope that the reader finds some practical assistance in preparing and rehearsing this masterpiece.

