ROSSINI - OVERTURE TO THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

It is said that Beethoven wrote four overtures for his one opera, Fidelio, and that Rossini wrote one overture for four operas.  In fact, Rossini’s Overture to the Barber of Seville was also used for his opera Queen Elizabeth.

In any case, this sparkling overture seems to complement the Barber of Seville very well, serving as a perfect prelude to his immortal comedy.

For our purposes, I am using the Italian edition called Sinfonia, and will refer to rehearsal numbers. See below for rehearsal numbers with corresponding measure numbers.

The 16th note which starts the overture may be played either measured, or as a “ta-da!”, namely as a quick note.  Be sure that the orchestra holds the quarter note for its full value.  I suggest conducting in 4, with quarter note = about 50.  Note that the first two phrases are 2 1/2 measures in length.

At measure 6, the Sinfonia edition indicates that the strings are to play *a punta d’arco*; I would recommend using a slightly off the string brush stroke instead.

In measure 9, the horn can play detached, but expressively.  Note that the trills in measure 10 are for the first players only.  At #1, the 32nd notes are slurred in on an up bow, with the phrase leading to the appoggiatura.  At 3 and 4 measures after #1, the 16th notes are also slurred in on an up bow, with the first two beats of the following measures played as down bows.

The conductor may want to consider using cymbals along with the bass drum at various points.  In some editions, the violas and bassoons play G natural in the 3rd and 4th measures after #2.  The diminuendo and morendo markings allow the subito forte to be even more effective.  The 16th notes are played as “ta-da”, as in the beginning, if the conductor chooses this interpretation.

At the Allegro con brio, I’d suggest half note = about 88.  Note that the strings are marked to play battuto, or “beaten”.  I suggest to the players to use what I call a vertical bow stroke, which produces a very short note.  At 4 measures before #4, I prefer the winds to play the 8th notes detached.  At 4 measures after #3, and 4 measures after #4, the 1st violins and violas can play an echo for this measure.   At 2 measures before #5, the 2nd violins, cellos, and basses can play their 8th notes  normally for the crescendo to be more effective.

At 2 and 3 measures after #6, the violins can play two down bows, not retaking the bow, to more effectively clip the second 8th note.  The cellos and basses can do the same 6 and 7 measures after #6.  At 4 measures before #7, each of these crescendos can start softer to maximize the affect.

At 7 measures before #8, if you have a virtuoso 1st violin section, it might be fun to play all up bows for the descending 8th notes.  Instead of the printed crescendo to #8, an alternative might be to play a crescendo for 2 measures, with one bow per bar, followed by a diminuendo for 2 measures, slurring the 2 measures before #8 on one bow.

For the phrases in the woodwinds and horn starting at the second measure of #8, an interpretation of the last note must be decided, clipped or not clipped.  Either is fine, but the pattern needs to be established.  The phrase then naturally leads to the appoggiatura in the 5th measure.

At #9, I do the following bowing for the violins, the first two measures each played on a separate up bow, followed by 2 measures slurred down bow.  #10 begins the famous Rossini crescendo, found in virtually every Rossini overture with the exception of William Tell.  To maximize the effect, I start with fewer players in the strings, and add players every 4 measures.  For example, with a chamber orchestra of 66442 strings, string quintet at #10, 33221 in the 5th measure, 44331 in the 9th measure, and everyone in the 13th measure, continuing the crescendo all the way to #11, not peaking at the forte at the 13th measure.  At #10, I eliminate the bassoons, adding 1 bassoon in the 5th measure and both in the 9th measure.  Flutes and horns must be almost inaudible, and if cymbals are used in places with bass drum, they are not to play here.  I have found the effect to be stunning!

At the recapitulation, at 5 measures after #12, I find that the tempo usually needs a little boost, since the tempo invariably has slowed down a bit.  The same comments hold true for the recapitulation as the exposition.  However, at 2 measures before #14, crescendo for 1 measure followed by a diminuendo for 1 measure is an option.

The coda at #17 can be quite brisk, half note = 116, since the smallest note value is an 8th note.  At #19, in order to hear the upper woodwinds and violas more clearly, the rest of the orchestra might be asked to play softer.  At 5 measures after #19, piano crescendo for 4 measures is an option.

I hope that some of these ideas might be food for thought for future performances of this masterpiece!

#1 = measure 11

#2 = measure 19

#3 = measure 25 (Allegro con brio)

#4 = measure 38

#5 = measure 48

#6 = measure 64

#7 = measure 76

#8 = measure 91

#9 = measure 115

#10 = measure 123

#11 = measure 139

#12 = measure 150

#13 = measure 167

#14 = measure 177

#15 = measure 201

#16 = measure 209

#17 = measure 225 (Piu’ mosso)

#18 = measure 238

#19 = measure 251