

Giovanni Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the court of Catherine the Great in Russia.

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Giovanni Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the court of Catherine the Great in Russia



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1997

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Title Giovanni Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the court of Catherine the Great in Russia

Creator [Nisio, Mariko](#)

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Description

Giovanni Paisiello's *Barber of Seville*, although no longer an opera that is frequently performed, was very popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Based on a play by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *Le barbier de Seville* (1775), was translated into many different languages, and performed by companies all over Europe and America. Paisiello's work was so successful that Mozart, inspired by the idea, wrote a sequel in 1786, *The Marriage of Figaro* in collaboration with Da Ponte. When Rossini presented his own version of *Barber of Seville* in Rome in 1816, the public hissed with indignation and outrage to demonstrate a predilection for Paisiello. Giovanni Paisiello (1740 - 1816) was a Neapolitan composer who worked at St. Petersburg, Russia from 1776 - 1784 in the court of Catherine II where he was appointed Kapelmeister of Italian opera. The composer chose the French play by Beaumarchais as his point of departure, having it adjusted and rewritten in Italian verse in order to please his patroness. Due to the restrictions set upon the duration of the spectacle and the subject matter, the comedy was shortened and its socio-political critique eliminated. Thus *Le barbier de Seville*, which the Empress essentially considered democratizing and harmful to the absolute monarchy, was transformed into an opera buffa, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, that involved harmless clowning. *Il barbiere* is significant because its creation demonstrates how Italian opera buffa became a vehicle to distract the public from considering the issues that were in the air prior to the French Revolution. This thesis examines the many contradictory factors involved in allowing this sort of entertainment at the Imperial Court. The study explores Catherine the Great and her character, as well as her clever ability to maintain a successful image as an Enlightened

Despot. The differences and similarities between the French play and the Italian libretto are surveyed in order to demonstrate the simplifications that had to be made. A discussion treating the shift of focus that resulted by moving attention away from Figaro toward Dr. Bartholo, will indicate how the play was transformed into a libretto which proved to be emasculated and irregular. The music and how the composer dealt with the text will be discussed. Paisiello's buffo characterization of the old miserly doctor will be considered through use of musical examples. Additionally, the composer's setting of ensembles will be examined given their particular prominence in this work. The use of unifying elements will also be surveyed. The ideas of the era of Enlightenment affected both the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. However, each group interpreted education and rationalism in its own way. While the members of the middle class attempted to change the structure of society (ancien regime), the authorities needed to maintain it. Through Italian opera buffa, however, both seemed to find the middle ground for compromise. It was acceptable because it was musical theatre that was made to appear harmless.

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