

THE OPERA OTELLO (by Rossini)

First, I will start with a quiz, asking for your answers.

Quiz No. 1

Who was the composer of the opera Otello? (Possible answer: Verdi)

Quiz No. 2

Was Verdi the only one who composed an opera by this name? (Possible answer: No, he wasn't, or yes). Correct answer: No.

Quiz No. 3

Let me give you a hint: the other was the composer of Barber of Seville? Who was he? (Correct answer: Rossini)

Quiz No. 4

Both these operas are based on what story? (Correct answer: Shakespeare's play Otello, of 1603)

Quiz No. 5

Did Shakespeare invent by himself the story of his play? (Answer: no, it was based on the story *Un Capitano Moro* ("A Moorish Captain") by Girardo Cinthio, a disciple of Boccaccio, dated in 1565. Cinthio's tale was based on an actual incident occurring in Venice about 1508. The plot Shakespeare ended up with, is a fairy tale compared with the original of Cinthio, in which Desdemona is beaten to death with a stocking filled with sand, whereupon Otello pulls the ceiling down on top of her to make it look like an accident.

So then, ladies and gentlemen, our opera today it will be Gioachino Rossini's Otello, a more humane presentation of the story, an opera in three acts, premiered with great success in 1816, and only much later, after 71 years, it was overshadowed by Verdi's version of Otello in 1887. Rossini's Otello deviates heavily from Shakespeare's version not only in that it takes place in Venice and not on Cyprus, but also in that the dramatic conflict develops in a different manner. The role of Iago is reduced

to some degree, and it is much less diabolical than in the original play or in Verdi's *Otello*. While Rossini's *Otello* may stray a bit from Shakespeare at the start, by the time the opera's last act begins, the composer and the bard seem joined at the hip in a hair-raising finale that rivals even Verdi's masterful tragedy. Rossini's *Otello* is an important milestone in the development of opera as musical drama.

The subject matter was considered very daring. Early 19th-century operas almost always had happy endings, even if they had to be engineered using preposterous plot twists. It was almost unthinkable that an opera should have an unhappy ending. Rossini's *Otello* marked a turning point. For one thing, it was unambiguously and unfashionably tragic. *Otello*'s climax is one of the first Romantic tragic endings, and helped set a trend for Italian opera that was to last throughout the century. And, as in Shakespeare's play, the end of Rossini's opera is both tragic and disturbing, even today.

Synopsis

As **ACT ONE** begins, the Doge of Venice honors Otello, a Moorish general returning from a victorious battle. Otello accepts the accolades, but all he really wants is to be with the woman he loves, Desdemona. The two have pledged themselves to one another, but they did it secretly, knowing her father would disapprove.

Other characters are also standing in Otello's way. His lieutenant, Iago, and the Doge's son, Rodrigo, are both jealous of Otello's popularity and power. And Rodrigo is also in love with Desdemona.

Even Desdemona herself is uncertain about the future. She had written a letter to Otello, renewing her pledge to him. But it was intercepted by her father, Elmiro, who wants her to marry Rodrigo. Now, Desdemona thinks Otello may be having second thoughts — though Emilia, her lady-in-waiting, says that if Otello truly loves her, nothing else matters.

Iago has other ideas. He now has possession of Desdemona's letter to Otello, and decides he can use it to turn Otello against her. And there are more plots underway. Elmiro, her father, also has a grudge against Otello. He tells Rodrigo, the Doge's son, that he's free to marry Desdemona — and in return, asks Rodrigo to tell the Doge that Otello is a traitor.

Elmiro, her father, then goes to Desdemona, and says he has chosen a husband for her, but won't say who it is. People gather to celebrate the betrothal. But when Desdemona discovers that she's been given to Rodrigo, the Doge's son, she resists, and her father threatens to punish her if she doesn't agree to his wishes.

The situation worsens when Otello arrives and sees Desdemona with Rodrigo. He announces to everyone that he and Desdemona have already pledged their love, and Desdemona stands by him. This enrages Elmiro. He drags Desdemona away, while Rodrigo and Otello exchange threats as the first act ends.

In **ACT TWO**, Desdemona is still resisting Rodrigo's love, but she's worried that Otello might be having second thoughts. And Otello does have some concerns. Alone, he wonders if it was wise to risk his fame and popularity by angering Rodrigo and Elmiro.

Iago then joins Otello, who makes the mistake of trusting him. Iago has already hinted that Desdemona may have been unfaithful. Otello wants proof, and Iago produces Desdemona's passionate letter. Because they declared their love secretly, the letter never mentions Otello's name. So Otello, not knowing it was intended for him, believes that he's been betrayed, and vows to get even.

When Rodrigo appears, he and Otello argue. When Desdemona enters, both men accuse her of infidelity, and Otello says he can prove it.

Desdemona collapses in anguish as the two men go off to fight it out.

Later, Desdemona is joined by some friends, who tell her that Otello has survived the duel with Rodrigo. But she's then confronted by her father.

Elmiro says that she has betrayed his honor. Desdemona asks for his pity, but instead he denounces her.

As **ACT THREE** opens, Desdemona is in her bedroom. Otello has been banished and Emilia, Desdemona's lady-in-waiting, tries to comfort her. After hearing a gondolier singing a lonely song in the distance, Desdemona responds with a ballad of her own, the beautiful "*Willow Song*" aria.

Emilia leaves her alone. Desdemona prays that Otello will return to her, and falls asleep. Otello does return, entering through a secret door. But he is still

convinced that Desdemona has betrayed him. As he approaches her bed, he draws a dagger to kill her.

At first he hesitates — struck by her beauty. But then, as she dreams about Otello, Desdemona whispers some words of passion in her sleep. Otello assumes she's dreaming of Rodrigo. As he's about to stab her, Desdemona wakes up. Seeing Otello with the knife, she tells him she's innocent, and still loves him. Otello refuses to believe it, saying that Iago is about to kill her lover, Rodrigo.

Hearing Iago's name, Desdemona realizes that he has been the cause of all her trouble, and cries out in anguish. Otello thinks she's reacting to his news about Rodrigo, and stabs Desdemona to death.

Otello then hears knocking at the front door and leaves the room to investigate. Otello asks if Iago has succeeded in killing Rodrigo. But the answer is no, Rodrigo survived. Instead, Iago was mortally wounded, and confessed everything before he died, revealing Desdemona's innocence. Before Otello can react, the Doge arrives with Elmiro. The Doge pardons Otello, and then Elmiro — not knowing what has just happened — grants Otello Desdemona's hand in marriage. Realizing his mistake, Otello says yes, he'll be happy to join Desdemona. Then he draws his dagger again, and kills himself as the opera ends.

This production of Otello is by the Zurich Opera in Switzerland and the recording dates from 2014. In the cast, Otello is the American tenor **John Osborn** born in Sioux City, Iowa, Desdemona is the much admired Italian coloratura mezzo-soprano **Cecilia Bartoli**, and in the role of Iago is the Uruguayan tenor **Edgardo Rocha**.

The duration of the entire DVD is 2:36.

Today we will see the first part of the opera, namely Act 1, lasting 1:09.

Next Sunday, will be Act 2 and 3, lasting 1:27.



**Cecilia Bartoli in 2008
(Desdemona)**



**John Osborn
(Otello)**



**Edgardo Rocha
(Iago)**