

NAXOS

ROSSINI

2 CDs

**Péchés de vieillesse
(Sins of Old Age)**

**Album de Chaumière
(The Cottage Album)**

Alessandro Marangoni, Piano



CD 1	57:58	CD 2	64:59
Péchés de vieillesse, Volume VII: Album de chaumière (complete)	1:39:20	1 No. 8. Plein chant chinois	6:02
1 No. 1. Gymnastique d'écartement	7:18	2 No. 9. Un cauchemar	12:01
2 No. 2. Prélude fugassé	5:17	3 No. 10. Valse boiteuse	6:01
3 No. 3. Petite polka chinoise	5:44	4 No. 11. Une pensée à Florence	10:25
4 No. 4. Petite valse de boudoir	4:57	5 No. 12. Marche	6:53
5 No. 5. Prélude inoffensif	10:18	Péchés de vieillesse, Volume IX: Album pour piano, violon, violoncelle, harmonium et cor (excerpts)	23:37
6 No. 6. Petite valse, "L'huile de Ricin"	10:22	6 No. 1. Mélodie candide	4:50
7 No. 7. (i) Un profond sommeil	6:20	7 No. 3. La savoie aimante	7:49
8 No. 7. (ii) Un réveil en sursaut	7:41	8 No. 2. Chansonette	4:36
		9 No. 5. Impromptu tarantellisé	6:20

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Péchés de vieillesse: Volume VII, Album de chaumière · Volume IX (Excerpts)

The extraordinary course of Gioachino Rossini's creative career, and the possible reasons for the way in which it developed, have become a common *topos* in musical biography and historiography. Researchers return to the theme again and again, and at times it becomes an interpretative crux, a kind of musical equivalent of the last-minute rescue or long-awaited first kiss in the film world. And make no mistake about it, his career path was extraordinary, despite all attempts to make allowances for it. He had, one might say, a split musical personality, but the two sides of his nature did not co-exist: at a certain point, one replaced the other, and, significantly, the second had a disproportionately longer life than the first. Rossini was born in Pesaro on Wednesday 29th February 1792 and ever after delighted in having come into the world on that most unusual of dates. On 29th February 1852 he celebrated his fifteenth birthday, and in 1860 declared himself to have reached the ripe old age of seventeen. Joking aside, he was twenty when his dazzling operatic career officially began: the first opera he wrote, *Demetrio e Polibio*, had its première at Rome's Teatro Valle on Monday 18th May 1812. For years afterwards Rossini cast a long shadow over the stage: the overwhelming majority of audiences were captivated by his music, while of the great composers of the day, some (like Schubert) fell under his spell, while others (like Weber), despised him — indifference was out of the question. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, Rossini's works, with two or three exceptions, fell into neglect, eclipsed by Wagner, by Verdi's later operas and by those of French and Russian composers. A century later, the "Rossini Renaissance" saw him re-emerge in all his former splendour, and today he is more popular than ever. And yet, as an example of *Kunstwollen* (the artistic urge), Rossini's controversial opera career was short-lived. His last opera, *Guillaume Tell*, had its première at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris, on Monday 3rd August 1829, only seventeen years after *Demetrio e Polibio*. Carl Maria von Weber died before his fortieth birthday, yet his theatrical activities spanned a period of

28 years, from 1798 to 1826. Verdi's stage career lasted 54 years, Wagner's 47. Even Bellini, who died very young, and had only been composing for the stage for a decade, was writing up to the eve of his death, while Rossini...

Precisely, Rossini... He drew a line under his own hugely successful operatic career at the age of 37. (At the same age, incidentally, Richard Strauss had barely begun to write for the stage.) After *Guillaume Tell*, Rossini withdrew almost entirely into his own private sphere for the remaining 39 years of his life. He died at his beautiful villa in the Parisian suburb of Passy on Friday 13th November 1868 at the age of 76 (or nineteen, counting only the leap years...). The asymmetry is obvious: a seventeen-year period spent as the darling of opera audiences, very much in the public eye, then 39 years of so-called "silence" — or rather, of creativity cultivated within the bounds of a private circle which included a number of very public figures. His "silence" was only relative, therefore, and in truth, was not silence at all, given that he frequently appeared in public, presenting such masterpieces as the sacred *Petite messe solennelle* and *Stabat Mater*, or unusual extemporaneous works such as the *Tema originale di Rossini variato per violino da Giovacchino Giovacchini*, for violin and piano (Bologna, 1845), "dedicated to Giovacchini", or the *March (pas redoublé)* for Abdülmeçid, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire (1852), which earned him the Order of Nisam-İftihar, something so typically *buffo* and Rossinian it could have come straight out of *L'italiana in Algeri* or *Il turco in Italia*. Most importantly, however, it was during these years of relative withdrawal from public life that Rossini created his secret gems: little trifles, breaths of musical air encased in a delicate shell of voice and keyboard, or keyboard alone. Each of the *Péchés de vieillesse* (Sins of Old Age) is a miniature *monstrum*, in the original sense of the word: a prodigy or marvel, a mythical beast, "something rich and strange" arousing a combination of admiration and curiosity, joy and stupor, delight like that produced by an exquisite taste or perfume and the

shivers one gets on seeing a freak of nature. An elegant, innocuous cynicism flows through these tiny creatures, which sometimes appear unnatural: not in order to frighten their listeners, but to entertain them. They include, for example, a *Polka chinoise* and a *Boléro tartare*, taking us into the realms of squared circles, pentagonal hexagons, chimeras, sorceresses with bats' wings and dragonflies' antennae: a world of marvellous monsters.

Although Rossini's operas can be dated with great precision, thanks to his own notations and to references in his correspondence, a thick fog surrounds the *Péchés*, making it very difficult to be sure of the chronological order of composition. The publication dates of those pieces issued during his lifetime give us an approximate timeline, the rest is guesswork. The prefaces to the *Quaderni Rossiniani* are, however, indispensable in this area, and over recent decades invaluable studies have been undertaken by, among others, Bruno Cagli, Philip Gossett, Alberto Zedda, Azio Corghi and Alfredo Bonaccorsi.

This is evidence, therefore, of another dichotomy between pre- and post-1829 Rossini. One of the reasons behind it could well be concealed within the lines that Richard Wagner, a fierce if not arch-enemy of Rossini, wrote in his obituary of Spontini, published in the *Zürich Eidgenössische Zeitung* on 25th January 1851. Wagner's view was that at that point in time, opera composers could choose to take one of three paths, whose respective standard-bearers were Rossini, Spontini and Meyerbeer. Rossini, original and highly talented, had, according to Wagner, cynically chosen the degrading, profitable option of encouraging audiences' taste for frivolity, sensuality, and hedonism. Spontini, a noble artist in the service of high drama, had taken on the mantle of Gluck and Mozart, with all the weighty legacy that entailed. Meyerbeer, meanwhile, had no originality at all, but was a skilful manipulator who had exploited the talents of the other two, remodelling them to form a contaminated hybrid. Wagner's conclusion was clear: his choice was Spontini. Could Rossini have sensed a grain of truth in this hostile and prejudiced judgement? What Wagner defined as a "taste for frivolity, sensuality and

hedonism" is nothing more than the primacy of aesthetics over ethics, that is the primacy of the "symbolic form" and dramatic archetypes over practical objectives, be they ethical or didactic in nature (as was certainly true in Spontini's case, albeit with wonderful dramatic results), or utilitarian and financial, in the case of the professional musician trying to make a living and climb up the rungs of high society – or at least of the dominant caste (this was the malicious and unfounded accusation levelled at Meyerbeer by Wagner). I believe Rossini felt that history and the "future" had no bearing on a prevailing aesthetic, formal, archetypal concept of musical theatre and that he considered his own work as done, having offered audiences something different from anything he had produced before. The cutting, sometimes chilling irony to be found in the *Péchés de vieillesse* strikes the death blow to that historicist idea *par excellence*: "progress". The three wonderful and memorable *Spécimens* in the *Album de château*, Volume VIII of the *Péchés*, are three quite legitimate musical models, none of which makes any progress with respect to the other two. They are champions of, respectively, the *ancien régime*, the future, and the "present", understood as a psychological rather than historical point in time, and as a place capriciously free of any *Zeitgeist*. And yet, paradoxically, Rossini displays an incredible ability to establish a historical context and to capture with unerring precision the petty, ridiculous and hypocritical aspects of society, taste and culture, translating them into a musical idiom to form almost weightless microstructures, tiny harmonic scribbblings, microscopic rhythmical liberties.

The *Péchés de vieillesse* are arranged in fourteen volumes. The first three (*Album italiano*, *Album français*, *Morceaux réservés*) are for voice and piano, and bring new, complementary nuances to Rossini's operatic vocal writing. They include romances, ariettes and well-known parodies, some of which were later orchestrated by composers such as Respighi and Britten. Volume IV, *Quatre Mendians et Quatre Hors-d'œuvre*, acts as an intermezzo and a link into the remaining ten volumes: ten gatherings of disembodied little spirits, like Shakespeare's Puck and Ariel.

This recording by Alessandro Marangoni includes the whole of Volume VII, the first of the albums for piano solo. Some of its numbers were published by Heugel & Fils in Paris from 1880 onwards, with a re-issue in 1954; by Ricordi in Milan in 1878/79; and by Signorelli in Rome in 1937 (the first part only). Eleven of its twelve pieces are currently available in Volume XIV of the *Quaderni Rossiniani* (issued by the Fondazione Rossini di Pesaro), while the remaining piece, No. 5, *Prélude inoffensif*, appears in Volume II.

Rossini called this volume *Album de chaumière*, usually rendered as “The Cottage Album” in English. The very title is ironic, with its hints of Romantic oleography (detested by Rossini) and sugary-sweet books for children. The album consists of twelve numbers in whose titles irony verges on Prokofievian sarcasm and caricature reaches virtuosic heights. *Gymnastique d'écartement* (Exercises for opening [the legs, the arms, one, two, etc....]) features a disquieting mechanical onomatopoeia (a frequent trait of Rossini's opera writing as well: think of the Act I finale of *L'italiana*). The *Prélude fugassé* (Fugal/fleeting Prelude) is another *monstrum*, since a composition can either be a prelude or a fugue, there is no third way... unless a less-than-skilled composer starts off with the intention of writing a prelude, without really knowing the formal rules, and then keeps slipping into the temptation to try his hand at fugal style instead. No. 3, the *Petite polka chinoise* (Little Chinese Polka) is an utterly delightful little hybrid, while the *Petite valse de boudoir* (Little Bedroom Waltz) is intimate and touching. It is hard to know how or why a prelude might be offensive, but the *Prélude inoffensif* is certainly very reassuring (at least, it seems that way...), as if it wants to comfort the listener with calming exercise-like figures, suitable for training the fingers, and with a harmony based principally on diatonicism (again, so it seems...). Could No. 6's little rhythmic hops and jumps be behind its title, *Petite valse: "L'huile de ricin"* (Little Waltz: Castor Oil)? The next piece sets itself up as a real dramatic *scena*, in which a deep sleep is followed by a sudden awakening. In this recording the two sections are

divided between two separate tracks: *Un profond sommeil...* and *...Un réveil en sursaut*. Rossini was fond of this kind of sequence, a chorale-like, funeral-march or meditative episode followed by livelier music. A similar example can be found in Volume VI of the *Péchés* (*Album pour les enfants dégoûdés*), where *Memento homo!* is amusingly succeeded by *Assez de "Memento": dansons!* (Remember, O Man! ... Enough remembering: let's dance!). Plainsong is a long-established element of the Western Judeo-Christian liturgical tradition: here is another *monstrum*, the *Plein-chant chinois* (Chinese Plainsong), in which Rossini employs a pentatonic scale, with a little artistic licence... Nos. 9 and 10 are more troubled: *Un cauchemar* (A Nightmare), with its crescendo of uneven harmonies and rhythms, and, even more sinister, the *Valse boîteuse* (Limping Waltz). The cloudless serenity of *Une pensée à Florence* (A Memory of Florence) and the vigour of the *Marche* bring the *Album de chaumière* to an end.

To round off this recording we have four solo piano pieces from Volume IX of the *Péchés* (the *Album for piano, violin, cello, harmonium and horn*), partially published by Heugel and by Ricordi many years ago, although after Rossini's death. The four numbers included here are available in Volume XVI of the *Quaderni Rossiniani*.

Like the other works on this recording, the titles here are playfully deceptive. The *Mélodie candide* (Innocent Melody) may be ostentatiously demure, but deep-down it is shameless, the *Chansonnette* (Little Song) has a nostalgia-tinged irony, and *Savoie aimante* (Loving Savoy) is a witty blend of chivalry, rusticity, folklore and caricature. The final piece, *Impromptu tarantellisé*, is another chimera, a hybrid created from marrying the lively Italian tarantella and a noble pianistic form beloved of the Romantics, giving us one final marvellous monster.

Quirino Principe

English translation: Susannah Howe

Alessandro Marangoni

Born in Italy in 1979, Alessandro Marangoni studied the piano with Marco Vincenzi, obtaining the diploma with honours (*summa cum laude*), and continued his studies at the Scuola di Musica di Fiesole with Maria Tipo and Pietro De Maria. Besides his musical studies he also graduated with honours in philosophy at the Università di Pavia with a thesis on Fernando Liuzzi's philosophy of music. He was also a *merit student* of the Almo Collegio Borromeo, one of the oldest and most important European colleges. After winning several national and international awards, he has appeared in many important musical events in Europe, both as a soloist and as a chamber musician, with performances in Rome at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, in Florence for the Accademia della Crusca, in Lucca for the Associazione Musicale Lucchese, for the Walton Foundation on Ischia, the Cittadella in Assisi, and the Teatro Verdi in Trieste, as well as at the Engadiner Internationale Kammermusik-Festspiele, Sagra Musicale Umbra, the Italian Cultural Institute in London, the Teatro Dal Verme, Milan, and St John's College, Cambridge. As a chamber musician he has collaborated with some of the most important Italian musical personalities and groups, including Mario Ancillotti, Vittorio Ceccanti, Fanny Clamagirand, Daria Masiero, Stefano Parrino, Quirino Principe, Carlo Zardo and the Nuovo Quartetto Italiano. He won great success in Spain with the Malaga Philharmonic Orchestra and in Bratislava with the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by the great Italian conductor Aldo Ceccato. He has recently started artistic cooperation with the Italian actress Valentina Cortese. He is the pianist of the Trio Albatros Ensemble, with which he has won international acclaim. In 2007 he made a recording for la *Bottega Discantica* of the piano works of Victor de Sabata, for the fortieth anniversary of the great Italian conductor's death. In December of that year Maragoni played in a recital at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, with Daniel Barenboim, in further tribute to De Sabata. In 2007 he won the prestigious *Amici di Milano* International Prize for Music.

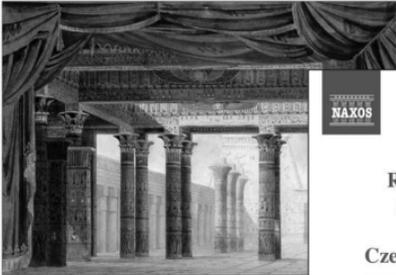
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Alessandro Marangoni
Photo: Walter Meregalli

When Rossini drew a line under his own hugely successful operatic career at the age of 37, he spent his final years in Paris where he wrote numerous short piano pieces arranged in 14 volumes, which he jokingly called *Peches de vieillesse* (*Sins of Old Age*): experimental trifles which blur the boundaries between the irreverent and the serious. Volume VII, '*Album de chaumière*' (*The Cottage Album*) includes gems such as the delightful *Petite polka chinoise*, the intimate and touching *Petite valse de boudoir* and the decidedly reassuring *Prelude inoffensif*. The recording is rounded off with four solo piano pieces from Volume IX of the *Peches*, whose titles, like those of the other works on this disc, are playfully deceptive. The *Melodie candide* may be ostentatiously demure, but deep-down it is shameless.

Gioachino
ROSSINI
(1792-1868)

Complete Piano Music • 1

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Alessandro Marangoni, Piano
Piano: Steinway & Sons (Angelo Fabbrini collection)

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