

Last of the Great Opera Buffas

*Gaetano Donizetti's
Don Pasquale is one of
the exemplars of the
Italian comic opera tradition*



*The Act III serenade "Com' e gentil" as seen in
Laurent Pelly's 2014 production of Don Pasquale at Santa Fe Opera.*

SANTA FE OPERA / KEN HOWARD

Don Pasquale may be the last great Italian opera buffa, but it is not the last great Italian operatic comedy. Both Verdi's *Falstaff* and Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* came later, but cannot be described as opera buffas since neither conforms to the traditional structure or employs the old conventions of the genre. *Don Pasquale* dates from 1843, and there were composers who wrote perfectly traditional opera buffas after that time, but none of them could be put in the same class. Who today even knows the names of composers like Serafino De Ferrari, Nicola De Giosa or Emilio Usiglio, let alone the titles of their comedies?

We can appreciate *Don Pasquale* more fully if we approach it both in terms of the tradition from which it springs and of Donizetti's earlier comedies. Opera buffa emerged from the comic intermezzi of the 1730s, short works played between the acts of longer, serious ones. Opera buffa was the great success story of 18th-century operatic history. Starting out as a decidedly more humble form, it gradually gained ground against opera seria, with its mythological or historical subjects, virtuoso-voiced castrati, and formal balanced structure as a sort of stage-equivalent of court etiquette. In contrast to that pomp, opera buffa was unpretentious, human in scale, and intended only to make an audience laugh. Since comedy depends much more on interaction between characters than does a heroic plot, opera buffa developed ensembles and finales earlier than did opera seria. Thus, where opera seria seemed all too frequently like a slow-moving concert in elaborate costumes, opera buffa was rapid, more densely plot-

completed 65 operas, and of those roughly a third were comedies. Not all of these were true opera buffas. Some were Neapolitan farces: works with spoken dialogue and a principal comic character whose role was entirely in the local dialect and who treated the score as a point of departure for his improvisations. Today these works are irreproducible as the tradition they upheld no longer exists. Donizetti also wrote two French opera-comiques, *La Fille du Régiment* and *Rita*, but these have spoken dialogue, use typical French forms, and have a decidedly Gallic cachet, creating a very different effect than that of a typical opera buffa.

Donizetti composed ten operas before he produced one that was given very widely. In 1824 he brought out an opera buffa, *L'Ajo nell'imbarazzo* (*The Tutor in Difficulty*), that was revived with frequency over the next decades. It has all the characteristics of opera buffa: the sparkling overture, keyboard-accompanied recitatives, patter passages, and ensemble finales. It has an excellent libretto by Ferretti, who wrote the text for Rossini's *Cenerentola*. In *L'Ajo* we find the first traces of typical Donizettian opera buffa effects. Instead of the onrushing tide of wit and brilliance that is typical of Rossini and makes his comedies well-nigh irresistible, *L'Ajo* has a constant thread of true sentiment (rarely met in Rossini) that rises to moments of pathos. If *L'Ajo* gives us our first glimpse of an essentially Donizettian turn to opera buffa, his next notable work in that genre, *Alina, Regina di Golconda* (1828), strengthens our impression. *Alina* has an amusing and touching text by Felice Romani, famous for the tragic librettos for Bellini

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ted, and musically more venturesome. By 1800 opera buffa had far outstripped its serious rival, in Italy at least, and would maintain its dominance for about two decades. During this time opera serias were still being written, but, in a period of crisis and change, they were rarely able to exercise their old influence on audiences who thought of opera houses as social areas rather than as places to concentrate on what was happening on stage.

It is not surprising that opera buffa had its heyday in the Napoleonic period. In those topsy-turvy times, Napoleon's relatives occupied, none too securely, a number of hastily vacated thrones. The status quo, which opera seria tended to reinforce, did not make much sense when many of the old dynasties had been sent into the wings. Comedy, with its emphasis on improvisation, disguise, and impersonation, perfectly suited the temper of those times. This is the world in which Donizetti, born in 1797, grew up. His first musical impressions were primarily of opera buffa, and his first teacher, the composer Mayr, was actively engaged in writing comedies as well as serious works. Mayr's music school staged a comic pastiche at the end of every term, and Donizetti performed in several and contributed music to them.

In an active career that stretched from 1818 until 1845, Donizetti

and Donizetti. Surprisingly enough, with all the other out-of-the-way Donizetti scores that have been revived, *Alina* has so far been overlooked.

The great vogue of opera buffa went into sudden eclipse with the emergence of tragic Romantic melodramas. Works with such plots came into fashion about 1830 and would go on to dominate Italian stages until almost the end of the century. Donizetti showed a great aptitude for opera in this vein, and with scores like *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, he did much to establish its enduring popularity. He did not desert opera buffa entirely, but in the second half of his career he turned less frequently to that genre. *L'Elisir d'Amore* of 1832 is the earliest of Donizetti's comedies that has continuously held the stage.

Don Pasquale comes practically at the end of Donizetti's career. It is one of his last three operas, and its rich comic surface is untroubled by any hint of the tragic disintegration that in a couple of years would confine him to a sanatorium, his mind gone and his body par-

The late William Ashbrook was the author of Donizetti and his Operas and The Operas of Puccini. This essay was published in a previous edition of San Francisco Opera Magazine.

alyzed. In deciding on the subject of *Don Pasquale*, Donizetti chose the scenario of Pavesi's *Ser Marcantonio* of 1810, a now forgotten comedy from the golden age of opera buffa that occurred in his youth. He updated the old plot and turned it into a contemporary comedy of manners. As a composer Donizetti had refined and enriched his art throughout his long years of working in the theater. Through its surety of effect and solidity, with all of its old charm and tenderness and tell-tale moments of pathos, *Don Pasquale* is his funniest and warmest comedy.

While there is pathos in Ernesto's aria at the beginning of Act II, when he sings of his dejection at being disinherited by his uncle and having to renounce his beloved Norina, there is even more near the beginning of Act III at the moment Norina slaps Pasquale. In a flash of terrible insight the old man realizes he has made a fool of himself and is forced to confront the impotence of his old age. "È finite, Don Pasquale," he mutters to himself against a pathetic tune in the orchestra that a little later is transformed and expanded as Norina's "È duretta la lezione," when, as an aside, she expresses her genuine sympathy for his plight.

If there is an underlying dramatic and musical motif to this comedy, it is the pungent contrast between the old-fashioned and the modern. The contrast between marriage by arrangement and falling in love through natural attraction, an old notion versus a modern idea,

undergirds the plot. Comedies end in reconciliation, acceptance, and tolerance, and Donizetti italicizes the point by bringing together the two contrasting tendencies of his opera at its close. In the traditional opera buffa finale one or more characters point up the moral of the plot; he has Norina do so here, setting her words to a buoyant dance tune.

Don Pasquale's moral is: An old man is foolish and asking for trouble when he contemplates marriage. In one way, and not necessarily a conscious one, *Don Pasquale* is somewhat autobiographical. At the time, Donizetti was a widower in his late 40s. His hair was almost completely gray and he was feeling his years (people aged psychologically far earlier a century ago than they do today). Because he was a successful and prosperous public figure, he was continually evading well-meaning efforts to marry him off. In *Don Pasquale* he manages, like the expert writer of comedy, to get the last laugh, even if it is tinged with more than a little irony. 🌸



Left: A featured artist with San Francisco Opera for over 24 seasons, Italian bass Salvatore Baccaloni starred as the Company's Don Pasquale in 1938.

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Below: A circa 19th-century English engraving of the final scene from *Don Pasquale*. BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

