

The Elixir of Love:



MATTHEW STAVER, COURTESY OPERA COLORADO

Donizetti's Altered States

Whenever someone introduces *The Elixir of Love* (*L'Elisir d'Amore*), you can be sure the discussion will include mention of the jaw-dropping speed of its composition. I find myself slightly bemused by the skepticism with which scholars approach Donizetti's boast that he completed the work in about two weeks; some suggest that the more accurate figure might have been closer to... a whole month (as if that in itself were not impressive enough!)

All this parsing and hedging seems to indulge in an unintentionally ironic echo of the composer's own joke at the expense of Rossini. Donizetti once famously quipped about the similar rapidity with which the slightly older master had claimed to pro-

duce his score for *The Barber of Seville*: "Well, of course, I always knew that Rossini was a lazy fellow."

Even in a milieu that demanded rapid, assembly-line creative habits, Donizetti's workaholic hyper-productivity astonished his contemporaries (and aroused their jealousy). A well-known caricature of the composer from his Paris period in the early 1840s shows a manic figure scoring two different operas simultaneously, one with each hand (not a bad image, in a way, for the ambidextrous emotional pull of *Elixir's* signature tune, "Una furtiva lagrima"). But years of intense work and struggle to make it to the top would also exact a terrible toll. In a letter from 1839 to the composer Johann Simon Mayr, the generous mentor of his impoverished youth in Bergamo (who arguably invented what is familiarly known as "the Rossini crescendo"), Donizetti—only forty-two at the time—bluntly calls attention to his frazzled con-

Thomas May writes frequently for San Francisco Opera. He is the author of *Decoding Wagner* and *The John Adams Reader*.

One of the true miracles behind Elixir is how Donizetti, together with his librettist Felice Romani, distills his own artistic elixir, transforming an innocuously predictable romantic comedy and a pattern of operatic expectations into a work of freshly stirring beauty.

dition: “How delighted I am to know you are always in good spirits. Then you don’t feel your age. But I—who am always sad—feel mine very much. I am grey and wearied of working.” That painful confession makes the celebration of unjaded youthfulness and love’s blossoming which Donizetti immortalized in *The Elixir of Love* all the more touching.

As it turns out, there was an additional motivation behind the hasty genesis of *Elixir*. Donizetti had recently enjoyed his first tantalizing taste of success with his lyric tragedy *Anna Bolena* in 1830—after investing over a decade of constant toil in the highly competitive opera world of the era. But the public and critics were fickle, and sustaining their favor was an ongoing struggle. Donizetti faced a humiliating situation when another tragic opera, *Ugo, Conte di Parigi*, failed upon its premiere at Milan’s La Scala. It closed after an embarrassingly scant four performances in March 1832. The production actually boasted no less a cast than the same principals who had given the *prima* of Bellini’s *Norma*, also at La Scala, only a few months previously (including the legendary first Norma, Giuditta Pasta). But that was precisely part of the problem: the singers were apparently exhausted from the effort expended in Bellini’s opera and thus not in a condition to present Donizetti’s music in the best light.

It was during the same spring of 1832 that the manager of a rival Milanese opera company, the Teatro alla Canobbiana, found himself in desperate straits when he was left with a hole in his planned season (another composer had bailed on delivering his promised score). The relentless demand for “new product” allowed no wiggle room for hesitation. Donizetti was approached with the prospect that he might simply retool one of his earlier works to help save the day. To which the composer, displaying an attitude of bravado, proudly countered that he planned to furnish an entirely new score within the limited time available. No doubt Donizetti was intent on vindicating his image and blotting out the all-too-recent memory of his fiasco with *Ugo*. (Not that he was averse to recycling prior material; when he did so for his French opera of 1840, *La Favorite*, the result was a work that is nevertheless astonishing for what Donizetti expert William Ashbrook terms “the innate coherence of its style.”)

And vindicate himself he did—with a vengeance. *Elixir* opened on May 12, 1832 at the Canobbiana (which reigned in the nineteenth century as the second opera house in Milan to La Scala and is due to re-open next year in a renovated guise). It was an immediate smash. One critic observed that “to lavish greater praise on the Maestro would be unfair to the opera; his work does not need exaggerated compliments.” How immensely gratifying this triumph must have been for Donizetti, who had put up with years of harsh attacks from Milan’s critics.

Beyond the initial success, *Elixir*—along with such works as *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, composed within the next

few years—helped shore up and expand Donizetti’s reputation so that by the end of the decade he had achieved international stardom and ruled Europe’s (and America’s) opera stages. Even after the vast majority of his prolific legacy had fallen out of fashion (hibernating in operatic limbo until the twentieth-century bel canto revival reclaimed these hidden treasures), *Elixir* retained its special appeal. Interestingly, unlike Rossini, with whose *Barber of Seville* this opera is often, if somewhat misleadingly, compared, Donizetti’s image was not essentially overshadowed by his comic achievement thanks to the similarly enduring popularity of the tragic *Lucia*.

The lightning-flash speed of *Elixir*’s composition would be a good deal less impressive were the result simply another application of the formulas and conventions dominating Italian opera at the time—much of which did in fact involve the musical equivalent of painting by numbers. Yet by the time he came to *Elixir*, we should recall, Donizetti had accrued the substantial musical and theatrical experience that came with writing more than thirty previous operas. In this comic masterpiece, he clearly draws on every skill he has learned about musical characterization and dramatically effective pacing. One of the true miracles behind *Elixir* is how Donizetti, together with his librettist Felice Romani, distills his own artistic elixir, transforming an innocuously predictable romantic comedy and a pattern of operatic expectations into a work of freshly stirring beauty.

Even his orchestration is filled with delightful inventions and details: the racing, helter-skelter jollity of the Act One finale, the trumpeter who accompanies Dulcamara, the bassoon plaintively imitating the human voice in “Una furtiva lagrima” (yet another twist on the bel canto convention of introducing an aria with an instrumental phrasing of the melody). It is all a far cry from Wagner’s notorious complaint that Italian opera was prone to using the orchestra as little more than a “giant guitar” strumming away simple accompaniments. Curiously enough, when Wagner was a down-and-out composer in his early years in Paris, barely able to get by on hackwork, he took on a number of assignments that involved making motley arrangements of popular opera scores, including those of Donizetti (for *La Favorite*, he prepared versions including for four hands, string quartet, and even cornet).

And let’s not forget the crucial contribution of Romani. Far too often the hugely significant role this poet and librettist played in paving some of the most lasting successes of the bel canto era is overlooked. He wrote the majority of Bellini’s librettos as well as nine for Donizetti (including those for *Anna Bolena* and *Lucrezia Borgia*). Romani was nearly a decade older than Donizetti and could be a prickly piece of work to deal with—hardly surprising, considering the tensions between creative egos inherent in opera’s collaborative process. But the composer insisted on securing Romani’s services as librettist for the new opera to be whipped up on short notice, even though they had just partnered

Right: Rod Gilfry at Belcore in the 2000–01 production.

Top center: Reri Grist as Adina and Luciano Pavarotti as Nemorino in the 1969 production.

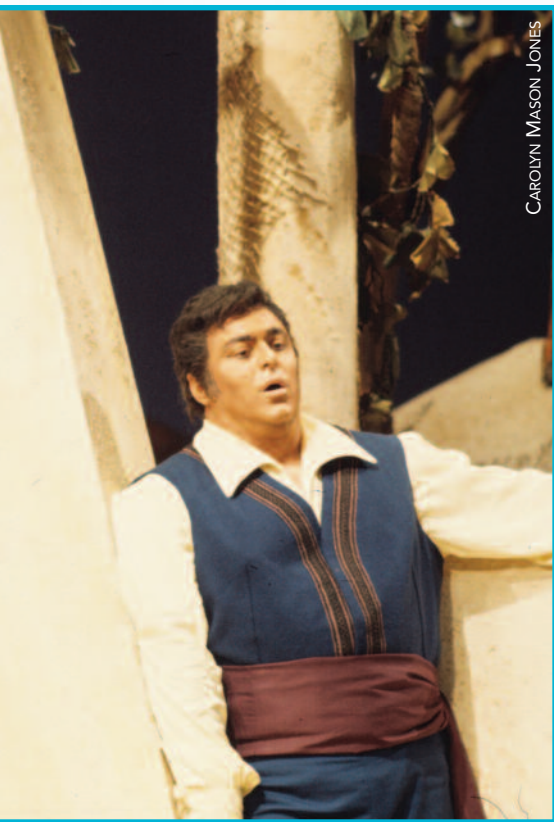


in the *Ugo* fiasco. Clearly Donizetti appreciated not only his poetic touch but Romani's flair for dramatic mood and character and consequent gift for providing the ideal vehicle to stimulate his musical imagination.

These strengths are especially evident in *Elixir*. The fact that Romani adapted a pre-existing libretto (as he did for a number of Donizetti operas) only highlights these, since the changes he made to his source can be readily discerned. That source was written by an even more legendary librettist and playwright of the era, the appropriately named, enormously influential Eugène Scribe (his stage works were also adapted for such a variety of operas as *La Sonnambula* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*). It was titled *Le Philtre*, with a score by frequent partner Daniel Auber; their best-known effort today is the *opéra comique* *Frau Diavolo*. *Le Philtre* had itself only recently received its premiere to great success on the Paris stage. Indeed, the original Belcore—baritone Henri-Bernard Dabadie, a celebrated Rossinian who also created two roles in Rossini's French operas—had earlier played his counterpart in *Le Philtre* (named Jolicoeur in the Auber-Scribe opera).

William Ashbrook points out that Romani added some of the most pivotal and memorable scenes to his reworking of Scribe, including Nemorino's parallel pleas near the ends of each act ("Adina, credimi" and "Una furtiva lagrima") and Adina's admission of love ("Prendi") in Act Two. As Ashbrook aptly points out, "It is precisely these three passages that add a balance of human poignancy to the comic spirit of the work." It should also be noted that Donizetti himself planted the idea for Nemorino's most-celebrated aria despite Romani's reluctance, who nevertheless produced some of his finest lyrics to satisfy the composer.

These alterations are hardly merely passing ornaments. They form the emotional core that sets *Elixir* apart in a world of its own, transcending the clichés of *opera buffa* to present a touching musical and dramatic story of the simultaneous vulnerability and strength that come with being in love. The opera of course contains *buffa* elements galore—the sparkling vivacity of the crowd scenes, the head-spinning patter of "Doctor" Dulcamara, the sudden twist of fate that makes a peasant a millionaire—but these lack the sniping mockery that you can find



Left: Ruth Ann Swenson as Adina and Jerry Hadley as Nemorino in the 1992 production. Swenson also performed the role of Giannetta in the 1984 Company production.

Bottom center: Paolo Montarsolo (left) as Dulcamara and José Carreras (right) as Nemorino in the 1975 production.

in Rossini. Donizetti shows his own characters having cruel fun at the expense of each other, but he ensures that *we* know what Adina and Nemorino are feeling from within.

Much of the opera's enjoyment comes from the tension between artifice and honesty, between role-playing and revelation—a result of *Elixir's* romantic preoccupation with emotional sincerity. In the wedding party at the top of Act Two, for example, Adina and Dulcamara (somewhat inexplicably having stayed around to enjoy the celebration) enact a Venetian gondola song/charade about a dirty old man (the stereotype behind “Senator Three Teeth”) courting a beautiful woman: a story framed within the story of Adina's own intentional deception aimed at Nemorino. One of the striking paradoxes *Elixir* dramatizes is that bel canto style, so often perceived as the epitome of surface beauty and high artifice, comes to the aid of plain truth-telling as Donizetti's lovers disarm and unmask their real feelings at different stages in the opera.

How fitting that one of the threads running through the opera—the basis for its title in fact—is a parody of the “*bizzarra avventura*” of the Tristan and Isolde legend. This legend serves in fact as another illusion to cast in relief *Elixir's* Arcadian depiction of love as

guileless innocence. Early in Act One Adina reads the story to her workers, with Nemorino hovering about her. The scene underlines the education that separates Adina, in her relative privilege, from Nemorino and the illiterate peasants as a whole (Nemorino's unlettered state is also brought home when Belcore assumes he can sign his conscription papers only by jotting an “X”; in contrast, Belcore comes wooing with flowery references to Homer's Paris and Aphrodite). But the version Adina gives out is a blatant “misreading”—refitted with a happy ending—of what had long been known as a tragic tale in which love and death are intertwined. She might be literate, but Adina shares with Nemorino a similar gullibility in believing what she wants to. The opera itself likewise acts out the distortedly happy version of the love potion, in which the only loser is Belcore—and even his loss is a nominal one, painlessly shrugged away.

The joke of the fictional elixir turns out to be that it is, as far as matters turn out, true—in *vino veritas*. While Nemorino gets drunk and



KEN FRIEDMAN

Nmon Ford as Belcore and Anna Netrebko as Adina in the 2000–01 production.

thus plucks up his nerve to play indifferent to Adina, he goads her into a sequence that leads from injured vanity to honest recognition that she loves him. The unornamented directness of “Una furtiva lagrima” is answered by Adina’s confession “Tu me sei caro.” The moment forms an exquisitely mirrored counterpart to their first duet, in Act One, when both were also addressing each other with frankness: Nemorino asking what to do about his love and Adina telling him (a la Cher in *Moonstruck*) simply to “snap out of it.” By the opera’s finale, there is no more need for posing and counterposing, and role-playing can be set aside.

Much of *Elixir* (and opera for that matter) is about giving and getting advice—all with ulterior motives that are apparent to us if not the characters on the receiving end. Adina first tells Nemorino to move on (the very fact that he is asking for advice instead of demanding her attention as Belcore does is the clue Nemorino is missing as to what she finds lacking); Dulcamara offers his “remedy” for the young man’s problem; Belcore has a suggestion about where to get some fast cash. Donizetti’s talent goes beyond merely delineating characters to portray their interactions with theatrical acumen. When he first appears, for example, Dulcamara is given a show-stopper aria, sputtering on as incessantly as a late-night infomercial about his wide range of gifts (we even find out, at the wedding party, that he’s a composer and are treated to “his” music). But in his duet with Adina near the climax of Act Two

(“Quanto amore”—again, a scene of advice seeking), Dulcamara is forced to give up his con-artistry for a moment and finds himself amazed by the force of Adina’s personality.

That duet immediately precedes Nemorino’s “Una furtiva lagrima,” Donizetti’s celebrated *romanza* which seems to encapsulate the humanity of *Elixir*, with its bittersweet chiaroscuro of emotions from melancholy into hopefulness. Not by coincidence, “Dulcamara”—Romani renamed all of the characters from Scribe’s original text—means “sweet and bitter.” In real life, sweet and then bitter is closer to the actual order of experience, of innocence lost, but the world of *Elixir* reverses this. (Incidentally, a decade later Donizetti revisited this aria and recast it for baritone, down from B-flat minor to G minor, giving it a slightly brighter, less lugubrious demeanor.)

At the end of his career, Donizetti makes a similar gambit by enlisting the tragic pathos of Ernesto’s two arias before he’s let in on the secret and knows he will win his love in *Don Pasquale*, that swan song of the *opera buffa* tradition. The composer, almost anticipating the experiment of Strauss and Hofmannstahl in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, seems to show the tenor straying from an *opera seria* into the world of *buffa*. Both in *Don Pasquale* and *Elixir*, Donizetti tweaks the formulas of his time to give profile and humanity to what are essentially cut-out caricatures. The alterations retain their alluring freshness.