



THE ATLANTA OPERA



*the* **ELIXIR** *of*  
**LOVE**

OCTOBER 3, 6, 9, 11 (M), 2009

Opera Guide



# Synopsis: *The Elixir of Love*



Photos from *The Elixir of Love* by Tim Wilkerson

## ACT I

A comedic opera intertwined with the hardships of a love that seems impossible, *The Elixir of Love* opens with **Adina**, a wealthy landowner, resting at her estate with a group of peasants and her friend **Giannetta**. Adina tells the peasants the tale of Tristan and Isolde, a classic story of how a magic love potion helped Tristan to win the heart of Isolde. Listening from a distance, **Nemorino**, a young villager in love with Adina, is depressed that she is not interested in his affections. At that moment, **Sergeant Belcore** appears on scene, determined to gain Adina's love and proposes to her. Promising to think about the offer, Adina orders refreshments for Belcore's comrades. Belcore eventually leaves, allowing Nemorino and Adina to be alone. Nemorino professes his love to her, but she does not accept him either, claiming to be as fickle as a breeze.

Back in town, **Dr. Dulcamara** arrives in a magnificent carriage, bringing his collection of quack potions to unsuspecting villagers. He shows one particular potion to the gathering crowd, declaring its capabilities of curing nearly everything. The villagers immediately hand over their money for this inexpensive "miracle." Remembering the story of Tristan and Isolde, Nemorino casually mentions the love potion to Dulcamara after the villagers have left. Seeing the opportunity for yet another unsuspecting customer, Dulcamara produces a potion guaranteed to win her heart. However, it is simply a bottle of red wine. Spending his last cent on the so-called "magic potion," Nemorino eagerly drinks it and awaits Adina's love. Immediately after drinking the potion, Adina finds him in a tipsy state. But for the first time, he is indifferent to her, believing that the potion will undoubtedly succeed. This attitude inspires Adina to flirt with Belcore, who just learned that he must return to his garrison. Proposing once more, the two agree to marry the next day. Hearing this news, Nemorino believes he is ruined and rushes away.

## ACT II

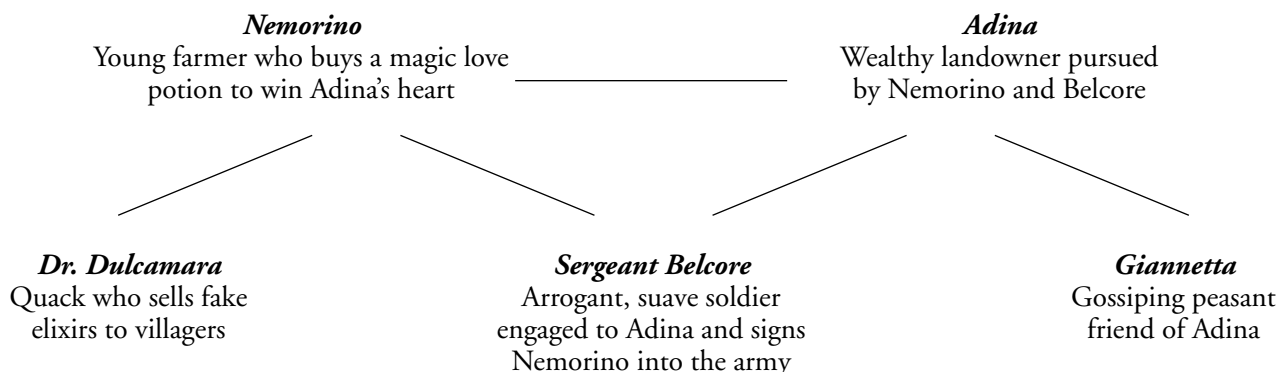
At a local tavern, Adina and Belcore are enjoying their pre-wedding dinner with friends from the village and the mysterious new doctor in town. Dulcamara appoints himself as the master of ceremonies and suggests that he and Adina sing a duet together about a gondoliera and her wealthy suitor. This takes her mind

off of Nemorino for a while and when the duet ends, Adina and Belcore leave to go sign the marriage contract. Dulcamara stays behind and is soon joined by Nemorino, who begs him for more of the elixir. The doctor refuses his request, for Nemorino has no more money left after the last bottle he bought. Belcore soon returns, annoyed that Adina once more postponed the wedding until nightfall, and asks Nemorino what the trouble is. He explains his situation and lack of money, to which Belcore presents a solution. He persuades Nemorino to join the army so he can receive the signing bonus available to all volunteers. The two leave to go sign him up, making it possible for Nemorino to once more afford the elixir.

Nemorino finally obtains a second bottle of elixir and staggers into town, ready for Adina to fall at his feet. Hearing of Nemorino's recent wealth from his rich uncle's death, the peasant girls pay more attention to him than ever, leaving him to believe the potion is finally working. Seeing this new fascination with Nemorino, Adina is frustrated and heartbroken, shedding one meaningful tear when he pays no attention to her. She returns to tell him she bought back his army papers because she loves him.

Belcore returns to find the two engaged and soon leaves, claiming he can easily find more women, while Dulcamara sells as many potions as possible before escaping the village and the truth.

## Character Map



# Meet the Composer: *Gaetano Donizetti*



Gaetano Donizetti

Gaetano Donizetti was born on November 29, 1797 in Bergamo, Italy, a medium-sized city not too far from Milan. Donizetti's family was not affluent, his father was a janitor in a pawnshop and his oldest brother was a military bandmaster.

Donizetti began studying music in Bergamo at the age of nine under the tutelage of Johann Simon Mayr. He was one of the first students enrolled at the Lezioni Caritatevoli school (founded by Mayr) under scholarship. His teachers at the school observed that he had a poor voice, "defective and throaty," for which they tried to expel him. Fortunately, one of his professors recognized his talent and contrived to keep him on studying keyboard and composition.

When he was 17, Donizetti went to the university town of Bologna for further study. It was there where he wrote his first opera, *Il Pigmaliione*. He spent two weeks on it, pulling an all-nighter to get it finished, although it wasn't premiered until 1960, more than a century after his death. The first performance of one of his operas, *Enrico di Borgogna*, took place in Venice in 1818, just before his 21st birthday.

When Donizetti was 23, he was drafted, but before he had to serve in the army a local patroness of the arts bought him out of his commission – a foreshadowing of *L'Elisir D'Amore*.

Following that, the composer succeeded both by commissions and by currying favor with local and regional nobility. The total number of his operas has been estimated to be as high as seventy, and it is said that Donizetti habitually over-worked himself in an attempt to keep pace with the demands from various opera houses. Much of his work was written under less than favorable conditions, although the 21st century listener would not perceive that from the melodic and lyrical bel canto compositions. While he is most well-known for his operatic works, Donizetti also composed music in a number of other forms including church music, string quartets, and some orchestral works.

Like his colleagues Rossini and Bellini, Donizetti was primarily a melodist in the bel canto style. The bel canto style was a distinctive artistic movement – a way of emphasizing the voice as the most important expressive element in opera. Donizetti's operas are all about the singing, although he did have a sharp ear for orchestration and for the dramatic shaping of concerted pieces along symphonic lines. Unlike his fellow composers Rossini and Bellini, Donizetti wrote more simply for the male voices and began the development of the baritone voice that led to its prominence in Verdi's operas.

opera is the tragedy, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. He is also well-known for the comedies *Don Pasquale* and *The Daughter of the Regiment*, which came after *L'Elisir d'Amore*, and his three operas on Tudor Queens, *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda*, and *Roberto Devereux*.

In 1842, Donizetti became Hofkapellmeister, or Court Music Director, to the Habsburgs in Vienna. This would have set him up very nicely and been a very lucrative culmination to his career. However, shortly thereafter on a trip to Paris he contracted syphilis, which was fairly common at that time. Its effects were not immediately apparent, and he was able to continue composing for a while. By the end of 1843, however, he was no longer capable of concentrating well enough to compose. After a little more than two years of steady deterioration into madness, he was institutionalized against his will in February 1846. A year and a half later his family succeeded in bringing him back to Bergamo. There he was alive but completely unresponsive, not recognizing family, friends, or any music. Donizetti died at the age of 51 on April 8, 1848.

*Noted contemporaries of Donizetti include:* fellow composer Franz Schubert, author Mary Shelley, poet Heinrich Heine, and artist Eugène Delacroix.



Perhaps Donizetti's most well-known



# L'elisir d'amore



First Libretto for *L'elisir d'amore*

Donizetti's historical drama, *Ugo, conte di Parigi*, was not well received in 1832 at La Scala. As it is now, Milan was also the epicenter of musical life in Italy at that time. The failure of this work for the young composer was not a good sign. Fortunately, another theater in the city, the Teatro alla Canobbiana, approached Donizetti at that time for a commission that was needed in a hurry.

Eager for a success, Donizetti accepted, and *L'elisir d'Amore* was premiered there in the same year.

Donizetti worked on the opera somewhere between two and ten weeks. A year earlier, the French composer Daniel Auber had written an opera for Paris based on the same libretto. Donizetti's librettist, Felice Romani, worked up an Italian revision of the original libretto, adding three of the most important moments in the score – “Adina credimi”, “Una furtiva lagrima”, “Prendi per me”. Dress rehearsal was held for the censors first. They approved the story without change, and the premiere was held the following day.

In today's modern operatic world, the repertoire is largely settled and theaters around the world return again and again to the same 30-70 works. However, in the early 19TH century, things were quite different. At that time, an operatic season would consist mostly of novelties, and there was great demand for new composition. With his facility for writing quickly, Donizetti was ideally suited to flourish in the world of Italian opera in the early 19TH century.

The Teatro Lirico in Milan was known as the Teatro alla Canobbiana until 1894. It was the site of several operatic premiers, including Francesco Cliea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* and Umberto Giordano's *Fedora*. (It was also the site of Benito Mussolini's last public speech.) The theater was used to host the 1943 season of La Scala after its own theatre had been largely destroyed by the American aerial bombardment of Milan during World War II. The theater was closed in 1998 due to absence of funding. Renovations began in 2007, and the theater is scheduled to reopen this year.



Teatro alla Canobbiana, Italy

## Interesting Facts About: *Donizetti and The Elixir of Love*

- Born in Bergamo, Italy in 1797, Donizetti was born into a poor family but was encouraged to pursue his musical talents. His older brother Giuseppe was also a musician, playing in Napoleon's band and eventually landing at the court of the Sultan of Turkey.
- Known for the famous “mad scene” in his 1835 opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Donizetti ironically went a little mad too and spent the last few years of his life in an insane asylum before his death in 1848.
- When Donizetti was once asked which of his operas was the best, he replied, “How can I say which? A father always has a preference for a crippled child, and I have so many.”
- During his autopsy, the top portion of Donizetti's skull was removed (simply because the doctor wanted it as a souvenir...) and displayed at the Donizetti museum in Bergamo, Italy for 75 years. It was finally returned to him in 1951 and is currently holding on with only three pieces of adhesive tape.
- *L'Elisir d'Amore* is ranked number twenty on Opera America's list of the most frequently performed operas in North America.
- At 35 years old, Donizetti had already completed 40 operas and would only write the dots of notes on the staff when composing, filling in the stems and flags later to save time. This was apparently a good plan because he

was able to complete the last act of *La Favorite* in only four hours.

- “Una furtiva lagrima” from *L'Elisir d'Amore* is one of Donizetti's most famous arias and was often performed by the great Luciano Pavarotti.



Donizetti's Tomb