

The Elixir of Love

Music by Gaetano Donizetti • Libretto by Felice Romani
Based on Eugène Scribe's *Le Philtre*

Study Guide to the Opera

L'elisir d'amore production photo by Robert Workman for Opera North
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Donizetti: A Prolific Composer, A Man of Good Cheer

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), born in Bergamo, Italy, displayed musical talents at an early age, and was admitted to the Lezioni Caritatevoli school on full scholarship when he was nine years old. Simon Mayr influenced his musical development in Bergamo, Domenico Barbaia in Rome and Milan. By 1830, with successful performances of his *Anna Bolena*, Donizetti achieved international fame.

Donizetti was a prolific *bel canto* composer, writing both comic and serious operas as well as solo vocal music. Throughout his career he battled with the powerful Italian censors to put his works on stage. Two of his best-known comedies, *L'elisir d'amore* (1832) and *Don Pasquale* (1843), are considered masterpieces of comic opera and continue to hold their places in the standard opera repertoire. Perhaps his most famous serious opera is *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), although *Anna Bolena* has enjoyed considerable success in this century through the efforts of such artists as Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland. Donizetti was well acquainted with the greatest singers of his day, and he created many of the roles in his operas for their specific vocal talents. As Donizetti's fame grew, he wrote operas in Paris (*La fille du régiment*), Vienna, Milan, and Naples.

Donizetti composed about 75 operas, 16 symphonies, 19 string quartets, 193 songs, 45 duets, 3 oratorios, 28 cantatas, instrumental concertos, sonatas, and other chamber pieces.

Donizetti was a friendly, loyal, and sincere man, supportive of fellow composers and other artists. Unfortunately, he endured great tragedy in his personal life. He lost his wife, their three children, and his parents within a decade, and Donizetti himself suffered from a severe illness. His friends arranged to have the composer moved to Paris where he could be cared for and receive visitors. Verdi came to see him there and was deeply saddened by his colleague's condition. Friends in Bergamo finally arranged for Donizetti to be brought back to his home town at the end of his life.

The Elixir of Love Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1. Nemorino, whose name accurately describes him as a “little nobody,” is smitten with the wealthy Adina, but can’t inspire love in her heart. (**Quanto è bella, quanto è cara**) Nemorino sees Adina reading a book in the square and wonders how a fool like him could possibly win her love. Everyone begs Adina to tell the story, so she reads the tale of Tristan, who bought a love potion from a magician in order to win the hard-hearted Isolde. If only they knew how to get the recipe!

A drum roll signals the arrival of a platoon of soldiers headed by handsome Sergeant Belcore. Arrogantly likening himself to Paris wooing a goddess, Belcore immediately proposes to Adina, much to Nemorino’s dismay. But when Adina says she needs time to think it over, Nemorino seizes the moment and declares his undying love for her. Irritated, Adina declares that she is capricious and fickle—he should look for love elsewhere.

Scene 2. Dr. Dulcamara, a fast-talking quack, arrives and sings the praises of his amazing elixir, guaranteed to cure all diseases—and even chase away mice and bugs! (**Udite, udite, o rustici**) Nemorino, who falls for the con like everybody else, asks if Dulcamara carries Isolde’s love potion. Dulcamara gives Nemorino a bottle of Bordeaux, warning him that it will only take effect after twenty-four hours (giving Dulcamara time to get away) and that it must be kept secret. Nemorino drinks enough to get tipsy, so when Adina comes by he is so full of confidence that he pretends to ignore her. (**Lallarallaa la la la la la**) Aggravated to find her swain so impervious to her charms, she promises to marry Belcore in six days. Nemorino isn’t worried because the elixir will be in effect the next day. But Belcore receives orders to leave the village in the morning, so Adina agrees to marry him immediately. Now that Nemorino is really desperate, Adina enjoys his torment. She invites everyone to the marriage feast, and Nemorino rushes away, moaning that the elixir has ruined him.



A typical elixir bottle from the sarsaparilla craze—compounds that were the “wonder and blessing of the age.”

Intermission

ACT II

Scene 1. While they’re waiting for the notary to arrive at the wedding, Dr. Dulcamara entertains everyone with a comic song. Adina, however, hesitates to continue because Nemorino isn’t there—she wants to complete her revenge. After the company goes off for the wedding toast, Nemorino sneaks in and begs Dulcamara for help. Always obliging, he prescribes another dose, but Nemorino is broke. Belcore finds Nemorino alone and talks him into signing up—what a victory to enlist your own rival! (**La donna è un animale stravagante**) Nemorino accepts, hoping the elixir will work before he leaves with the soldiers.

Scene 2. Rumor has it that Nemorino’s uncle has died, leaving him as heir to a fortune. All the girls flirt with Nemorino, who doesn’t know about the inheritance and thinks the potion is finally working. Adina is astonished at his popularity and realizes that she is jealous. When Dulcamara brags that it was his elixir that worked the miracle, Adina also learns that Nemorino has sold his freedom for her. She realizes that she is in love with him, and Nemorino is delighted to see her shed a tear on his behalf. (**Una furtiva lagrima**) Adina takes action, buying back the enlistment papers from Belcore and admitting to Nemorino that she loves him. When Dulcamara tells everyone about Nemorino’s inheritance, Dulcamara claims the credit—his elixir is so powerful, it can make rich men out of poor ones! As he leaves town in triumph, everyone wishes him well, except Belcore.



Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)
Portrait by Giuseppe Rillo

Characters

Adina [ah-DEE-nah] *soprano*

Rich, young, and capricious landowner; one of the few people in town who knows how to read! Her name means "little Ada."

Nemorino [neh-moh-REE-noh] *tenor*

Young and simple, in love with Adina. Nemorino is a diminutive of the Latin *Nemo*; he's "Mister Nobody."

Doctor Dulcamara

[dool-kah-MAH-rah] *bass*

Traveling salesman and medical quack. The name Dulcamara means "sweet and sour."

Belcore [bell-COH-reh] *baritone*

Sergeant of the village garrison who thinks he is irresistible to all women. Belcore means "good heart"—a pun and a play on words.

Giannetta [jah-NET-tah] *soprano*

A village girl who is Adina's friend.

- Harvesters
- Village Girls
- Soldiers

Bel Canto: Beautiful Music, Beautiful Singing

In the first half of the 19th century, a school of vocal writing known as *bel canto* flourished, with Donizetti, Bellini, and Rossini the best-known composers. The *bel canto* style is characterized by a flowing melodic line that is enhanced by complicated vocal acrobatics such as frequent scales, difficult trills, and other technical feats. *Bel canto* composers often wrote for the best available singers who could fully exploit the opportunities for vocal display in their roles, who could sing the long melodic phrases with great vocal flexibility and control. Fortunately, in the last century, a renewed interest in *bel canto* has cemented Donizetti's operas in the standard repertoire.

The music itself is very appealing because of the lively rhythms and "hummable" tunes with beautiful orchestral accompaniments. Here and there, for comic effect, a character will squeeze in as many words as possible in the shortest amount of time in a **patter song**. When Doctor Dulcamara hawks his elixir to the villagers, listen for the list of maladies that he claims it will cure.

Features of the *bel canto* style:

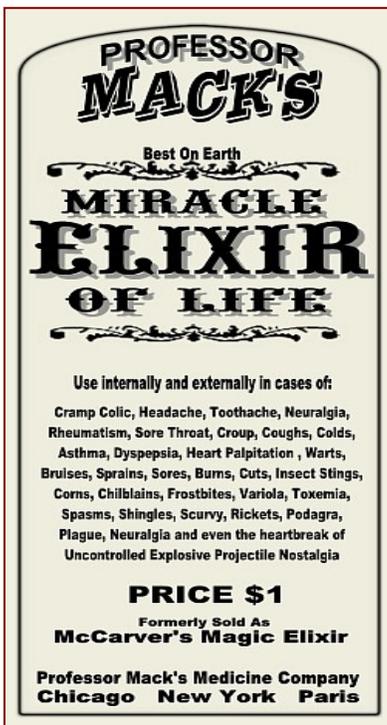
- singing that includes accents and emphasis
- matching tonal quality to emotional content of the words
- highly articulated manner of phrasing
- delivery varied by several types of *legato* and *staccato*
- liberal application of *portamento*
- frequent alteration of tempo through *rubato*
- *vibrato* used for heightening expression of certain words

The most famous aria from *The Elixir of Love* is the tenor aria ***Una furtiva lagrima***, one of the most beautiful tunes in all of Italian opera and the essence of what represents the *bel canto* style. Listen for the melody, played in the orchestra by the bassoon, before Nemorino sings it.

STEP RIGHT UP! This elixir is guaranteed to cure!

Since ancient times, there have been traveling medicine men with promises about wonderful potions, balsams, wizard oils, and tonics, guaranteed to cure what ails you. In *The Elixir of Love*, the quack Doctor Dulcamara lists extraordinary cures in his patter song, including old age, wrinkles, paralysis, apoplexy, asthmas, hysteria, diabetes, deafness, and tuberculosis. His love potions work in 24 hours; his elixirs even chase away mice and bugs!

Like Dulcamara's bravado, entertaining medicine shows that rolled into American towns drew people's attention with their cheerful music and bright colors. As expert in acting as much as in salesmanship, nostrum peddlers depended on their



smooth patter to convince an audience of the efficacy of their wares. They capitalized on people's ignorance and fear of illness, and certainly provided novelty and entertainment in rural areas. Similar to the fabled gypsy bands of Europe, medicine shows peddled miracle medications, or elixirs, reported to cure diseases, smooth facial wrinkles, prolong life, or cure a number of ailments. In addition to sales of "snake oil", entertainments often included a freak show, a flea circus, musical acts, magic tricks, jokes, and storytelling.

Secret remedies, called *patent medicine*, were deeply rooted in history. The monarchs of England have, for centuries, granted "patents of royal favor" to the tailor, bootmaker, and mediciner who served the royal family. The "patent" term has nothing to do with the United States Patent Office. A patent medicine could be a medical compound with a trademark, but whose efficacy is questionable and whose ingredients are kept secret.

The promotion of patent medicines was one of the first major products of the advertising industry, and many advertising and sales techniques were pioneered by traveling medicine promoters. The next time someone says a product is *guaranteed to work*, recall the medicine men of old who offered a universal panacea, a liniment containing snake oil. It's a sure bet that the "doctor" is a charlatan.

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