

Don Pasquale

Music by Gaetano Donizetti
Libretto by Giovanni Ruffini



A delightfully zany “Hollywood” production of *Don Pasquale* by Stage Director Chuck Hudson for Minnesota Opera, 2017

Donizetti: Rags to Rich Repertoire

Born in a windowless cellar to a poor family in Bergamo, Italy in 1797, Donizetti now is counted in the acclaimed trio of *bel canto* (beautiful singing) composers. If Rossini was the innovator, and Bellini the lyrical poet of the style, Donizetti was the workman, cranking out opera after opera at dizzying speed. By the time of Donizetti's death, more than 20 of his 65 completed operas were firmly planted in the popular repertoire on stages across Europe. Though a handful of his works enjoyed uninterrupted popularity—*L'elisir d'amore*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La fille du régiment*, *La favorite*, and *Don Pasquale*—most *bel canto* operas fell out of the repertoire for almost a century. In the 1950s, star sopranos with the voices to carry the fluid melodies, like Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, and Beverly Sills, stimulated a revival of *bel canto* operas.

Donizetti benefitted from the tutelage of Simon Mayr, who mentored the composer from the age of nine. When Mayr cast the 14-year-old Donizetti in the title role of his school's year-end production, the musical and mental skills that he displayed were indicative of his facility throughout his career. The role required the character to improvise a waltz at the piano while singing in recitative ‘*I have a vast mind, a quick talent, and ready imagination—I am a thunderbolt at composing.*’ Donizetti was a prolific composer, not only of operas, but also religious music, instrumental music, piano music, and vocal compositions. When today's opera audiences listen to molten rivers of sound in a Donizetti opera, we hear a hint of the rich legacy of a composer whose style is synonymous with the *bel canto* style, but also an important precursor of Verdi.



Domenico Gaetano
Maria Donizetti

Don Pasquale Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1 – Don Pasquale’s mansion

Don Pasquale is an old film star from the silent movie era as famous as the great Norma Desmond. He lives in an old mansion on Sunset Boulevard that is as devoid of color as his old black-and-white films. His ward and nephew, Ernesto, has refused an arranged marriage, proclaiming his love for Norina, a popular Hollywood starlet. Don Pasquale, outraged, decides to disinherit the boy and beget his own heirs. To do this he needs a wife, and he has called on a family friend, Dr. Malatesta, to help him find one. Malatesta, siding with Ernesto and Norina, crafts a plan to teach the headstrong Pasquale a lesson. He glowingly describes to him his beautiful and completely imaginary sister and tells him that the girl is in love with him. Before long, the old bachelor is convinced he loves the girl and expresses his desire to marry her with Technicolor enthusiasm. Furthermore, he is prepared to cut Ernesto out of his will. Unaware that Dr. Malatesta has a plot afoot; Ernesto grows bitter at the apparent betrayal by his good friend, Malatesta.

Scene 2 – A Hollywood Soundstage

Shooting a scene from her next Hollywood movie, Norina’s screen persona boasts about knowing all the tricks to win a man’s love. Malatesta arrives and reveals to Norina his plans for fooling Don Pasquale: Norina is to enact the role of Malatesta’s sister, wed the old bachelor in a fake ceremony, and then drive him so crazy with her whims and demands that he will be eager to find a way out of the unpleasant staged marriage. Malatesta hires local stage hands to help out, but there is no time to tell Ernesto.

ACT II

Don Pasquale’s mansion

Realizing that he will never be able to marry Norina without his inheritance, Ernesto laments his situation as passionately as any of his uncle’s silent films. When he leaves, Malatesta arrives with Don Pasquale’s “bride” and introduces her to Pasquale who is outlandishly dressed in an old costume worthy of Rudolph Valentino. Without further delay, a ceremony takes place, during which Ernesto returns and is forced to witness the contract, and he is finally told what is afoot. As soon as the mock ceremony ends, Norina turns into a fiery shrew who torments Don Pasquale with her nasty short temper and extravagant ways.

Intermission

ACT III

Scene 1 – Don Pasquale’s mansion

Having turned Don Pasquale’s mansion into a kind of Hearst Castle, Norina invites the elite of the Hollywood film world to cavort at Don Pasquale’s expense. Exquisitely gowned, Norina brazenly leaves the house to attend a late-night concert, and as part of the plan, she drops a letter where Don Pasquale will find it. It is a love letter from Ernesto, inviting her to a rendezvous in the garden of the Hollywood Bowl. Don Pasquale realizes that he cannot endure the situation any longer. Furious, he calls Malatesta, who promises to fix everything.

Scene 2 – The garden of the Hollywood Bowl

Disguised as a Hollywood crooner, Ernesto sings a love song to Norina, who responds fervently for Don Pasquale’s eaves-dropping ears. Don Pasquale springs upon the conspirators, who then happily reveal their plot. Immensely relieved to discover that his marriage has been like scenes from a popular Hollywood comedy, Don Pasquale forgives everyone involved and happily gives Norina to Ernesto.

Courtesy of Chuck Hudson



Artist Dominique Lintricroire depicts baritone Luigi Lablache as a full-figured Don Pasquale in an 1843 production at Regina Opera.

Traditionally, Don Pasquale is depicted as fat because, in the Act II Finale, Norina sings to Don Pasquale:

"Un uom qual voi decrepito, qual voi pesante e grasso, condur non può una giovane decentemente a spasso."

[When I go out to promenade I'll need a man to guide me, And you're too old and slow and fat to walk along beside me.]

Characters

Don Pasquale *bass*

[dohn pahs-KWA-leh]

An old bachelor who is the caretaker of his nephew, Ernesto

Dr. Malatesta *baritone*

[mah-lah-TESS-tah]

Friend of the Don and his nephew

Ernesto *tenor*

[air-NES-toh]

Don Pasquale's nephew, who is in love with Norina and refuses to marry Pasquale's suggested bride

Norina/Sofronia *soprano*

[noh-REE-nah/soh-FROH-nya]

A young widow, in love with Ernesto, who pretends to be the Don's wife

Notary *tenor (or bass)*

Servants, Maids

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Composer and Librettist

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)

[guy-TAH-noh dohn-nee-DZET-tee]

Giovanni Ruffini (1807-1881)

[djo-VAHN-nee roo-FEE-nee]



Ruffini, originally from Genoa, was living in exile in Paris in 1842 when Donizetti approached him to rewrite Anelli's libretto for *Ser Marcantonio*.

Though Donizetti paid Ruffini a competitive sum, the composer altered Ruffini's text so much to fit the pre-existing music that Ruffini refused to publish it under his own name.

CHUCK HUDSON'S "HOLLYWOOD" DON PASQUALE

Excerpted from www.chdirector.com



In the 1920s, Don Pasquale was a silent movie star who made his career playing Exotic Latin Lover roles like Rudolph Valentino did. Drawing on the movie *Sunset Boulevard*, our production takes place in the 1950s—long past the advent of “talkies” and entering the Golden Years of Hollywood Technicolor. Pasquale's career dwindled over time because he had not moved forward successfully with the technology of the times. He does not want to give up the past or pass the torch to the younger generation, and so surrounds himself with movie memorabilia from his past.

With *Don Pasquale*, Donizetti gives us champagne for music and so the comic style of the acting must match this excellence or it would be like mixing bubbles with beer! I had the privilege of working with a master of comedy, Marcel Marceau. At his school in Paris, Marceau had us study the various styles of comedy from the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* to his own comic inspirations: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and other actors of *Le Cinéma Muet*. It was their virtuosity, their “musicality” in style that struck Marceau. Their comic dignity represented the champagne of Comedy as opposed to the stylistic beer of Slapstick or Vaudeville. Marceau also drilled us in the details of his own comic masterpieces, working the specificity, style, and that elusive skill, Comic Timing.

I love honoring Marceau's influence by “inserting flowers from his bouquet” into a show now and then, so we have inserted a few into this production—riffing on *Bip Commits Suicide*, *The Mask Maker*, and *The Pickpocket's Nightmare*. We created an environment that would allow the virtuosity of comedy to work hand in hand with the virtuoso vocal work of Opera.



Marcel Marceau (1923 – 2007), French actor and mime artist most famous for his stage persona as “Bip the Clown”.

Should we expect comedy, beautiful melody, and formulaic writing in a *bel canto* opera?

Bel canto refers to the art and science of vocal technique that originated in Italy during the late 16th century. The singing style reached its pinnacle during the early part of the 19th century, and is now known as the bel canto era of opera.

Dramma buffo

In the original printed libretto, *Don Pasquale* is described in French as *opéra bouffe* and in Italian as **dramma buffo**. Though those terms imply comedy, the usage varied and included simple comic operas as well as more complex, sentimental works. Donizetti created more than one-dimensional characters; his *Don Pasquale* is not purely a comic character, but one with human foibles and emotions. The bass is featured in some remarkable **patter** arias, similar to **basso buffo** roles, but he also tugs at our heart-strings when he is tricked.

Beautiful singing

Bel canto singing characteristically focuses on **vocal mobility**, perfect evenness throughout the voice, skillful legato, and a certain lyric "sweet" timbre. Operas of the style feature extensive ornamentation, requiring much in the way of fast scales and cadenzas. The **long phrases** sung with a pure tone are the essence of "beautiful singing;" the melody is in the voice, not the simple accompaniment.

Formulaic writing

Bel canto composers were a prolific lot because they relied on **formulaic** plots, borrowed tunes, and repetitive accompaniment figures. Audiences of the period were content to enjoy opera as pure entertainment without a great deal of complication. Donizetti read his audiences well and turned out successful operas with amazing speed, though critics contend that the operas contain wildly varying results. When listening to a *bel canto* opera, listeners can expect arias followed by cabalettas that give singers the chance to show off, simple **arpeggiated** ("um-chuck") accompaniments, and rousing finale ensembles.

I shall never forget the impression made upon me by an opera of Bellini at a period when I was completely exhausted with the everlastingly abstract complication used in our orchestras, when a simple and noble melody was revealed anew to me.

Richard Wagner, responding to *bel canto* melodies

To Italians, music is like a bowl of macaroni, to be consumed and enjoyed on the spot, like a sensual pleasure, not a worthy expression of the mind.

Hector Berlioz, criticizing Italian audiences

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