

Synopsis – The Elixir of Love

Music: Gaetano Donizetti

Libretto: Felice Romani

First performed: May 12, 1832, Teatro della Canobbiana, Milan, Italy

Based on French comic opera *Le Philtre* by Daniel Auber

Act I

Adina, a wealthy landowner, reclines in the shade with her friend Giannetta and a group of peasants, who are taking a break from the harvest. Nemorino, a young villager, watches from the distance, heartbroken that he has nothing to offer Adina but love. The peasants urge Adina to read them a story - how Tristan won Isolde's heart by drinking a magic love potion. As she finishes the tale, Sergeant Belcore swaggers in at the head of a platoon. Immediately attracted to Adina, he launches into a conceited seduction which she skillfully manages to evade. She orders refreshments for his soldiers, and as they file away, Nemorino approaches and awkwardly proclaims his love. Adina tells him that he would be better occupied caring for his sick uncle than pining for her, as she is fickle as a breeze.

Later, the villagers gather around Dr. Dulcamara, a traveling salesman hawking an inexpensive yet marvelous cure-all. As the villagers snap up the magic potent, Nemorino shyly approaches and asks the salesman if he sells the same love potion described in the story of Tristan and Isolde. Brandishing a bottle of Bordeaux, Dulcamara declares it that very draught and sells it to Nemorino for every cent the young man possesses. Nemorino hastily downs the wine and is tipsy yet supremely confident of winning Adina when the elixir takes effect in the prescribed 24 hours. When Adina arrives on the scene, he feigns indifference and to spite him, she flirts with Sergeant Belcore, and is soon persuaded to marry him at once. Appalled, Nemorino begs Adina to wait one more day, but she ignores him, inviting the whole village to her wedding feast that very evening. Nemorino rushes off, bemoaning his fate.

Act II

A rowdy pre-wedding celebration progresses at the local tavern, as Dr. Dulcamara and Adina sing a lusty song about an old Venetian Senator and the gondolier girl he's after. The notary arrives with the wedding contract, but Adina stalls, since Nemorino hasn't arrived yet and she's only marrying to torment him. Eventually, Adina goes off with Sergeant Belcore to sign the contract and the guests disperse. Dulcamara remains behind to enjoy the last of the feast, but is soon accosted by Nemorino, who has arrived late and is desperate for more of the elixir. Without money, his case is hopeless, but a solution soon presents itself: he decides to enlist in Belcore's platoon to raise the money for another bottle.

A group of peasant girls discover that Nemorino's uncle has died and left him a fortune. When he reels in, giddy from the second bottle of Bordeaux, they lavish him with attention because of his new found wealth. Unaware of his inheritance,

Nemorino thinks the second dose has done the trick. Adina and Dulcamara arrive in time to see him stagger off with a mob of young lovelies, and Adina, already angry that Nemorino sold his freedom to Sergeant Belcore, grows doubly furious. Hoping for another sale, Dulcamara claims that the youth's popularity is due to the elixir, and Adina realizes the extent of Nemorino's love and knows her own heart. Returning alone and pensive, Nemorino takes heart when he sees a tear on Adina's cheek, but remains aloof until she confesses that she bought back his enlistment papers because she loves him. Everyone in the village celebrates their happiness and the power of Dulcamara's elixir.

Composer: Gaetano Donizetti

Gaetano Donizetti was born November 29, 1797 in Bergamo, Italy. He, Bellini and Rossini were the three great masters of the opera style known as bel canto. Bel canto operas had separate arias and ensembles that featured particularly florid vocal writing designed to show off the human voice to maximum effect. These works demanded great virtuosity from the singers and served as star vehicles for leading operatic performers. Donizetti dominated the Italian opera scene during the years between Bellini's death and Verdi's rise to fame after Nabucco. Donizetti's musical talents were apparent at an early age, and he was admitted to the Lezioni Caritatevoli School on full scholarship when he was nine years old. The school was founded by Simon Mayr, who had a significant influence upon Donizetti's musical development and helped the young composer launch his professional career. Mayr sent Donizetti to Padre Stanislao Mattei, the teacher of Rossini, for further compositional instruction. Mayr also partially paid for the lessons with Mattei and arranged for Bartolomeo Merelli to write the librettos for Donizetti's early stage works.

Between 1817 and 1821, Donizetti received several commissions from Paolo Zanca. His first staged opera was *Enrico di Borgogna* in 1818. He wrote several other works during this period, including chamber and church music as well as opera. It was the success of his fourth opera, *Zoraide di Grenata* that caught the attention of Domenico Barbaia, the most important theater manager of his time. Barbaia offered Donizetti a contract. The young composer accepted it and moved to Naples, which was Barbaia's primary business location. For the next eight years Donizetti wrote works for Rome and Milan as well as Naples, with mixed success. It was not until 1830, with the performances of *Anna Bolena* in Milan, that Donizetti achieved international fame. Donizetti was a prolific 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 performing 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 was able to accept a variety of engagements, writing operas for Paris as well as the famous opera houses of Italy. He relocated to Paris in 1838. It was there that he composed *La fille du régiment* in 1840, which is still frequently performed. Donizetti was also appointed music director for the Italian opera season at the Kärntnertheater in Vienna, a position secured for him by Mirelli, the librettist for his early works.

Donizetti was a friendly and sincere man, supportive of fellow composers and other artists, and loyal to his long-time mentor Mayr. Unfortunately, he endured great tragedy in his personal life. Donizetti had met his wife Virginia Vasselli while he was in Rome in the 1820's and married her in 1828. They had three children, none of whom survived. His parents died in the mid 1830s. A year after his parents' death, his wife succumbed to a cholera epidemic. Donizetti himself suffered from cerebro-spinal syphilis. Symptoms of his illness became evident as early as 1843; by 1845 his condition deteriorated to the point that he was institutionalized for almost a year and a half. His friend from Vienna, Baron Lannoy, interceded with Donizetti's nephew to have the composer moved to a Paris apartment 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, where he stayed at Baroness Scotti's palace until his death in 1848.

Donizetti was reputed to have great facility and could compose very quickly. His favorite librettist was Salvatore Cammarano, with whom he first collaborated on *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Donizetti often assisted in writing the librettos for his operas. He completed 65 operas during his career; *L'elisir d'amore*, *Don Pasquale*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor* are generally considered the outstanding examples of his work. His compositional style proved influential for future Italian opera composers, most notably Verdi.

Felice Romani

Librettist

Born in Genoa, Italy, in 1788, Felice Romani was a very famous librettist in his day. Although he studied law to make his family happy, his passion was literature and he became friends with important literary figures in Italy in the early 19th century. Romani was offered the position of court poet in Vienna, but he chose to concentrate on writing librettos. He wrote the librettos for many composers and became the librettist for La Scala, the famous opera house in Milan.

Among the many composers with whom he worked were Vincenzo Bellini, Gioacchino Rossini, and Giuseppe Verdi.

Romani's libretto for *The Elixir of Love* was adapted from the work of another libretto for the opera *Le philtre*. He renamed the characters but his original libretto did not suggest a change of the setting from Spain. Many productions, however, locate the opera in an Italian village. Romani often adapted other works, keeping up to date with French drama in particular. Despite this 'borrowing' from others, Romani set himself high standards, insisting on making the words as important as the music. Romani died in 1865.

The Golden Age in Opera Composition

Bel canto literally means "beautiful singing." It is a term quite popularly used by vocal music lovers worldwide to refer to the beautiful, florid style of singing used by Italian singers in opera. Bel canto singing emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but its origins go all the way back through the Middle Ages. This technique began in Italy about four centuries ago and is based on the ideas of ease, purity and evenness of tone production and agile precise and virtuosic use of the voice.

It was the search for "divine vocal beauty" in the late 1500's that led to the development and innovations of this technique. The search began around 1580 in the movement of the Count Giovanni Bardi of Florence, Italy to organize a group of intellectuals who would meet at his palace and informally discuss literature, science and arts, and perform new music to revive the practices of ancient Greek music and drama. Among these intellectuals were Vincenzo Galilei, the father of Galileo, and the composers Giulio Caccini, Jacop Peri, who were instrumental in creating what is known to be the first opera, *Euridice*.

The 1800's ushered in a new movement where the bel canto technique reached its zenith. The Romantic Period beginning in the late 1700's to the mid-1800's emphasized emotionalism in the arts as well as in opera. The typical romantic opera had a setting in a nature, a theme based on folklore or the supernatural, and colorful music. It emphasized the imagination, subjectivity of approach, and creative freedom. Operatic music became more grandiose and lush. In grand operas composers typically used larger orchestras, gigantic choruses, and innovative harmonies. Changes in subject matter were also evident, with an abundance of faraway settings; intense, tempestuous romances; unstable or melancholic characters, or characters who were outcasts; nationalistic themes; and supernatural or magical elements. Along with this heavily emotional content, composers began to show a concern for realism and examine contemporary social issues.

Although tales of royalty, mythological figures, or stereotypical comical personalities remained popular, operas soon featured characters with unfortunate and deplorable fates. The bel canto style reached its peak under the auspices of the composer Gioacchino Rossini, and later on Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini. This triumvirate ruled the destiny of Italian Opera.

The Bel Canto Technique

Characteristics of the singing technique

Bel canto is often characterized as a technique whose secret lies in the continuity of tone. Singers educated under this technique are known for their ability to pass from one musical phrase to the next with little to no interruption. It is also known for its naturally contoured sense of vocal line, its brilliant florid passages, and other technically demanding aspects. The singers strive for a pure legato sound (the clean, steady, stable passing from one note to the other without any vocal irregularity or interruption between tones) is one of the most treasured aspects of this technique. Another main aspect of this technique is the emphasis on the agility of the voice --a mastery of vocal control rarely found in other types of singing.

The proper employment of the bel canto is very much dependent on the teaching style upon which it is instructed. Teaching this technique is very tricky, since the principles of this technique are to be mastered internally. The old Italian masters relied on a system of teaching and listening to their pupils. When the student created a tone or sound that was of admirable quality (according to the principles of bel canto), the master would urge his pupil to repeat the sound until it was memorized. This is not to say that the technique is one that just employs a trial-and-error system since there are major technical elements that are taught to the students of this technique. The techniques however follow the same pattern all throughout the life of the student, from his/her very first lesson until he/she becomes a professional.

Comparison with mainstream popular singing in the 20th century

The main difference between bel canto singing and pop singing lies on the vocal resonator being used. While pop singers use the chest cavity as their main vocal "amplifier" (which is the same resonator used in speaking) bel canto singers use the upper head cavities (nasopharyngeal) as vocal resonators. As a result, bel canto singers are able to project their voices in a very large concert hall without microphones. In fact, well-trained bel canto singers are able to sing over a 50-piece orchestra with little difficulty.

The most probable reason for the development of this technique was the need for vocal projection in theaters of this time without the benefit of amplification. There were no microphones during the renaissance era, much less during its early development, and the performers had to be able to project their voices to the very last row in a hall.

Another lesser-noticed difference is the training process of the two types of singing. While pop singers usually start performing at a relatively young age compared to bel canto singers owing to the lack of attention paid to training, bel canto singers usually start performing in their mid twenties (for females) and in their late twenties (for males). So much time is devoted and invested in training

for the bel canto technique because of its stringent requirements, they start their careers when they are older and have studied for quite awhile. Pop singers can start performing whenever they like (or whenever they are discovered). The greater consequence is however seen in the lesser-known difference between the two styles, and that is the greater "life span" of bel canto singers as compared to pop singers when it comes to their vocal health. The bel canto technique's principles protect the vocal system because of its high regard for the proper use of the vocal apparatus. In comparison, pop singers sing in a very speech-like level using a limited range and a great deal of vocal pressure which often contributes to a short career as a singer.

Do Elixirs Really Exist?

From the world's very first lovers, Adam and Eve, to modern day couples, nature has provided us with some highly potent temptations. Certain foods, beverages, spices, plants, herbs and scents can be used as tantalizing seduction tools. Individually or collectively, these are believed to elevate love's own chemistry level. By definition, aphrodisiacs are "agents that arouse or increase attraction to the opposite sex. Simply put, they are *love potions* which supposedly hold the power to stir our senses.

The foundation of sexual attraction among much of nature is based on the internal molecules known as "pheromones." Derived from the Greek language, this means "to transfer excitement." One of the least-known forms of aphrodisiacs can be found among the category of produce. According to Cynthia Mervis, M.D., "Plant foods, especially leafy vegetables and fruits, contain certain essential oils and vitamins that stimulate hormone production and increase circulation." Similarly, certain herbs can trigger a heightened hormone level.

~some other consumable aphrodisiacs include:

- seafood — lobster, oysters, sole, and clams
- fruits — grapes, strawberries, quince, and *coco-de-mer
- vegetables — mushrooms, radishes, vadalia onions, peas, asparagus, *truffles, black beans, fennel, celery, and leek
- nuts — *pine nut, ginkgo, betel nut, and walnut
- spices — asafoetida, cardamon, cloves, garlic, ginger, nutmeg, pepper, salt, saffron, vanilla, rosemary, salvia, and thyme

Problem Solving

There is a strong bullying theme in *The Elixir of Love*; see if students can identify any bullying situations in the opera. Nemorino is clearly less privileged than Adina and Belcore, and therefore, he is excluded and mocked. Although Adina has feelings for Nemorino, she ignores and teases him. Belcore almost completely disregards Nemorino, and even tries to put him in a situation where he can get set way or killed.

Similar situations occur in school when students may make assumptions about each other because of appearance, grades, ages, class, race etc. Learning to let go of judgments and work together is a sign of maturity. Conflict resolution is a life skill that is essential, whether you're in school or in the work force. Explain to your students that this activity examines ways of resolving conflict without sacrificing anyone's needs.

General Guidelines

- Explain to your class that role-plays are improvisations involving two or more characters in an invented conversation.
- Be clear about your role-play: define characters, situations, objectives.
- Be a facilitator: be sure that actors and audience are clear about what is going on. If coaching is necessary, interrupt so everyone knows what is happening.
- Assign fictitious names to the characters so students understand that actors are not playing themselves.
- When the role-play situation has developed, freeze the action and ask the audience open-ended questions such as: what did you see? How did it make you feel? Who said what to whom?
- Ask your students for suggestions on how the actors could have played the scene differently, replay the situation using these suggestions. Afterwards, you can ask the class: How did this go? How did you feel about it?