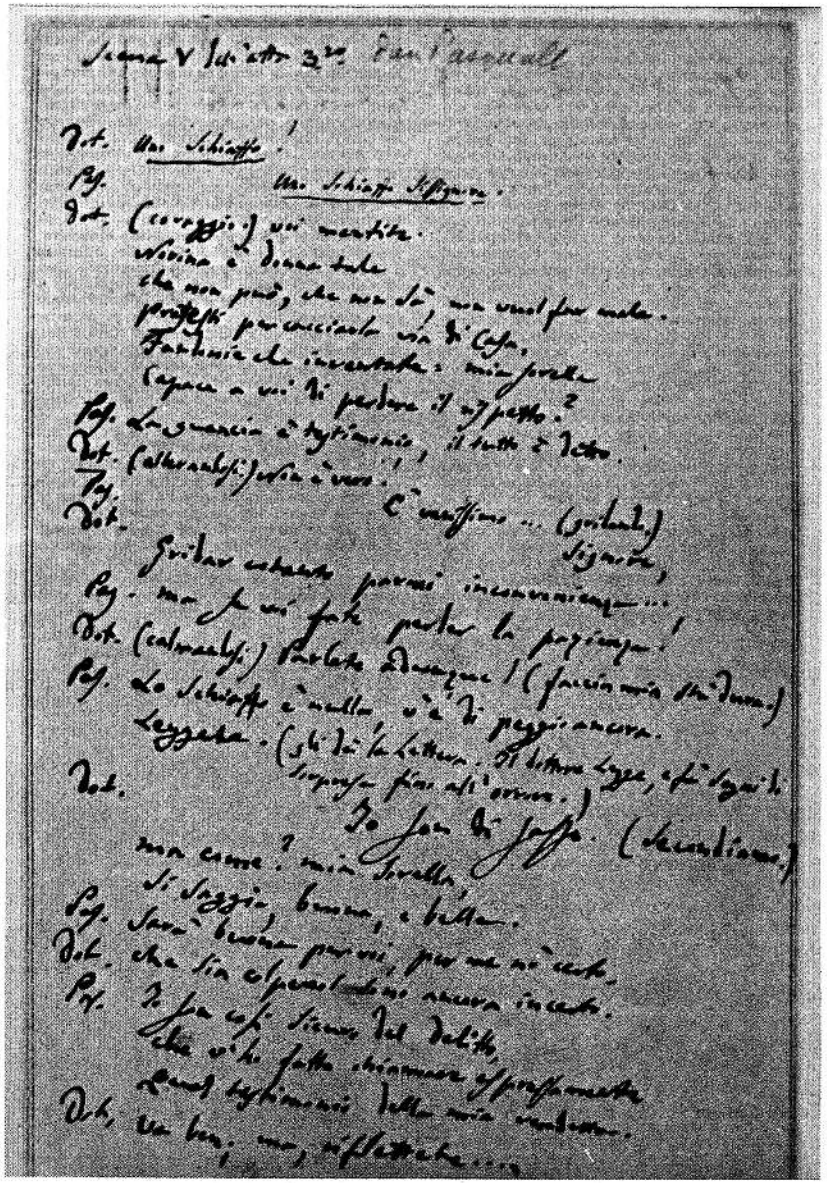


Don Pasquale, Act 3 Scene 5, Donizetti's autograph in the letter written in Vienna on the 26 March 1843 to Michel Accursi, Paris. (Z.482[a]).

DON PASQUALE

By JOHN ALLITT

'Impertinenza non, non posso soffrir'

Il piccolo compositore - Mayr

'È duretta la lezione
Ma ci vuole a far l'effetto'

Don Pasquale - Donizetti[1]

Don Pasquale is a masterpiece. For once, popular approval supports this supposition. The work is the last fruit of that rare tree called 'opera buffa', on which grew such beautiful things as La serva padrona (Pergolesi), Il filosofo di campagna (Galuppi), Il matrimonio segreto (Cimarosa), Il barbiere di Siviglia (Paisiello and Rossini), etc. The tree died, but its seeds fell into the ground to produce a Falstaff (Verdi) and a Gianni Schicchi (Puccini). The seeds drifted far and wide, for even works like Albert Herring (Britten) come from the tree called 'opera buffa'.

'Opera buffa' is possibly more easily accessible than the wailings of prima donnas and the troubles of forlorn tenors. Perhaps this is the reason why Don Pasquale has held the repertoire for so long. It has the immediate appeal of 'La commedia dell'arte' and its masks are universal and immediately recognizable.

Don Pasquale was composed in about a fortnight, much to the librettist Ruffini's despair. Ruffini was a patriot of the risorgimento and appears in Donizetti's life as a sign of the times. It is not surprising that Ruffini failed to satisfy the composer. Their centres of inspiration were poles apart. Ruffini refused to give his name to the libretto, simply because Donizetti had written most of it himself. It does not take much time to compare the libretto's style to other libretti of the composer to recognize whole arias which would seem to come from his pen. A fortnight's intense work, together with certain adjustments made at rehearsals, all undertaken in a state of virtual mental and physical collapse, gave western music one of its particular masterpieces. The opera is not, as recently suggested,

the equivalent of a 'hit' musical of the day; it is the fruit of a long tradition and a musical genius. The ethos of Don Pasquale is nothing less than that of classical comedy - ridendo castigat mores - chastize your audience's moeurs in its very act of laughing. The libretto follows age-old patterns, and never moves the audience's psyche outside an enclosure of emotional response which Donizetti would have described as 'taste'. The story never assaults or distorts, it simply presents and sympathizes. The 1843 performance surprised the audience by being staged in contemporary costume, underlining Mayr's dictum that the past may appear new when properly understood and represented.

Many essays have been written on the story[2], and it is not meaningful to repeat what has been better said elsewhere, rather, our purpose is to suggest where Don Pasquale belongs in the composer's soul and work.

Mayr's tomb in Santa Maria Maggiore shows a relief of the composer's head encircled by a serpent biting its own tail. It is the symbol of healing through wisdom and a pictorial representation of the proverb: 'In my end is my beginning'. Don Pasquale is closely related to Mayr. The work echoes something very deep in Donizetti's soul. It is a creation concerned with healing the bitterness of the self. The words of Don Pasquale's first aria echo the first words Donizetti had to sing in Mayr's Il piccolo compositore at the beginning of his career. Here he is virtually repeating them at the end of his creative life - 'Un foco insolito/Mi sento addosso', that well-known deceptive flame which so easily may lead to disaster! As Mayr taught his disciple in Il piccolo compositore, so Donizetti teaches in Don Pasquale; the abyss of disaster, through compassion and forgiveness, may be turned into victory.

The theme is life as initiation and the realization of life as love. Donizetti changed the name of Pavesi's Ser Marc'Antonio for good reason. Pasquale is the name derived from the feast of Easter. Don Pasquale is the story of one who dies to his self-hood through the act of forgiveness and who is thus reborn - resurrected. At the opera's conclusion one feels far more concerned for the scoundrels and their

game, than for Don Pasquale, who stands free from illusions. Ernesto must live with Norina for the rest of his life - horrors! Malatesta remains isolated in the lies and schemes which he so loves to hatch. There is a parallel here with Goldini's Il bugiardo, in which the dishonest Lelio becomes the prisoner of his own lies. The opera's hero on the other hand, has regained the still Centre. He will now watch the others in their whirl, for they are about to commence in earnest their dance of life!

The opera has two basic ideas, around which the theme of initiation is developed. There is Don Pasquale's fortune on which all wish to lay their grasping hands. There is also Don Pasquale, an old dusty bachelor, who wishes to marry a young spouse. Both ideas are age-old. It should be remembered that besides drawing inspiration from the Venetian comic stage, Donizetti made full use, through his years in Naples, of Neapolitan 'farsa'. Recent revivals of Il giovedì grasso (1828) have displayed Donizetti's genius in the use of 'farsa', with its exposition of the 'games' society plays. Much of Naples and its theatre is blended into Don Pasquale along with more obvious sources. The scene between Norina and Malatesta in Act I, in which the Doctor prepares 'Sofronia' for her role, is a fine example of Neapolitan farce.

Malatesta finds his origin in the masks of Bergamo, famous for their scheming jokes at another's expense. The joke always has a wider implication than that of which the originator is aware. Don Pasquale has something of the pre-Goldoni and unreformed Pantaloon, yet he has great dignity and may not be buffooned on the stage. Ernesto, the spineless lover, engulfed in the contemplation of his own narcissistic love, is the typical Lindoro of 'La commedia dell'arte'. Donizetti, however, makes him leave the admiration of his own pallid reflections[3] and become actively involved in the vortex of events. He is a far more convincing lover at the end of the opera than at the beginning. Norina is a Neapolitan spiced with Parisienne manners. She owes a lot also to Goldoni's Marandolina, but is more of a hussy than the Locandiera[4]. Norina does not mind getting her hands dirty. In fact, she enjoys every moment

thoroughly, and acts her role out to the last gesture. Norina is a modern woman who has totally denied the virgin within her. Marandolina, on the other hand, admits her errors and remains faithful to her spouse to be.

Don Pasquale is dedicated to Mme. Zélie de Coussy, one of the more infamous women in Donizetti's life, though one of his last notes was dedicated to her. Mme. Zélie was the astute wife of a wealthy Paris banker who used her in order to lay his hands on Donizetti's fortune. How much of Zélie there is in Norina, and to what extent Malatesta reflects de Coussy, will never be known. The opera indicates that Donizetti finally saw through their game and recognized that he had been 'taken for a ride'. It must be remembered that Donizetti was a sick man at the time. Critics have suggested that Zélie became the composer's mistress during the 'game'. The opera seems to suggest otherwise. It is more likely that she drove him to distraction, rather than satisfying his senses. Be that as it may, all four characters are within Donizetti's soul. The better side of Malatesta is to be found in the letters to 'Toto', that is, the fun-loving adolescent who destroyed himself. Ernesto is the idealistic, yet bitterly wounded lover, and is closely related to Donizetti's intimate life. Norina is woman as he knew her outside the ideal he found fulfilled in Virginia. Don Pasquale, on the other hand, is the pilgrim self, foolish in its ways, but somehow arriving home regardless of its blunders.

Traditional thought has often taken money as a profane, outward symbol representing the acquisition of grace. Indeed, if Don Pasquale's riches are understood from such a viewpoint, they say a lot in favour of the old man's inner life, for he can pay for Norina's follies and remain solvent at the end! Only those who are potentially rich in spirit are permitted to embark on the path of Pasquale's squandering follies in order to realize a simple truth, the answer to which was on his doorstep all the time. All around him grasp at his fortune, misusing the little they lay hold of; no doubt in time destroying themselves through the desire for the acquisition of more money. Don Pasquale, on the other

hand, has awakened from his bachelor slumbers. At the start he does not know what riches he has. Like Old Adam he has fallen into a deep sleep, and dust has settled on his out-moded environment and his servants have grown old and weary. Through falling asleep the soul becomes decrepit and prone to think that its spouse exists outside its own paradise, which it can no longer recognize through the dust, indeed the weeds, which have possessed it. Don Pasquale believes that he can find beatitude in the possession of a 'wife'. The tragedy is that his true 'wife' has simply been alienated through his laziness. Don Pasquale, during the course of the opera has to learn that he can no longer possess, only share, forgive and love:

'Tutto dimentico, siate felici;/Com'io v'unisco, v'unisca il ciel'. ('I will forget everything, be happy; As I unite you, so may Heaven unite you').

* * * * *

The opera moves at a tremendous pace. From the words 'Son nov'ore'[5] ('It's nine o'clock') to the last bars when the Don has promised to learn from his lesson, only four (not counting the notary's brief appearance) voices have held our attention, except for three brief appearances of the chorus of servants[6]. The melodic and rhythmic invention never fails for one moment. The orchestration is brilliant, recalling Schumann's image taken from the game of chess: Melody, the Queen, has moved at will, but Harmony, the King, has remained in control throughout. There is nothing 'progressive' in Don Pasquale, the opera is simply the brilliant quintessence of an age and its tradition.

The libretto's economy is amazing. It is as if Donizetti at last forced his maxim on Ruffini: 'Good consists in doing little and doing it well, and not in singing a lot and being bored'. Within the scope of the first three short scenes Donizetti has had enunciated and brought into play the opera's themes of marriage and family fortunes. The fourth scene introduces Norina. Words and music portray the net

she has woven around her femininity with the intuitive naturalness of a spider spinning its web. Like Adina, she is reading a book, not about Tristan and love potions this time, but simply about a knight who is conquered, vanquished by his love. This Venus wants Mars stripped of his armour and lying exhausted at her feet, as may be seen in Botticelli's famous painting in the National Gallery. Norina knows the mysteries of physical love, and whoever will become her lover will be vanquished like Mars, be it Don Pasquale, Ernesto, or even Malatesta. A simple aside relating that Norina is a young widow tells all we want to know. At least one fly has died in this web so far! Are they not all caught in it? The only truly free man will be Don Pasquale!

The conspiracy scene between Norina and Malatesta to cast Don Pasquale in the stormy winds of passion cannot fail on the stage, for it is pure theatre.

'Urla e fischia la bufera/Vegg'il lampo, il tuono ascolta'. ('The storm whistles and whines/I see the lightning and hear the thunder').

These are lines inspired through Donizetti's love of Dante. The imagery is taken from Canto V of the Inferno, the canto concerned with carnality, lust and adultery, part of which he set to music. Don Pasquale is to be caught in that 'bufera'

> '.... infernal, che mai non resta,
> Mena gli spirti con la sua rapina
> Voltando, e percotendo gli molesta'.
>
> ('The hellish whirlwind which may never sleep,
> Catches the spirits in its wild embrace,
> Torments and lashes in its driving sweep').[7]

Malatesta is the originator of the scheming plot. His name, for an Italian, has the evil overtones we might associate with the Borgias. Sigismondo Malatesta of Rimini was renowned in the Quattrocento for his open apostasy and merciless rule.

Act II is the stirring up of the storm. The first scene finds Don Pasquale's nephew, Ernesto (the chorus calls him a 'guasta - mestiere', ('a good-for-nothing'), who has decided to become an exile for love's sake. The solo trumpet prelude and obbligato line serve to underline his narcissism. He vacates the scene when the Don enters dressed up for the marriage contract ('si pavoneggia'), strutting like a peacock. He is to receive Doctor Malatesta's young sister 'Sofronia' (from Sophia) who, according to the Doctor, has been brought up in a convent: 'Fresca, uscita di convento' ('Innocent, just out of a convent'). 'Sofronia' is no other than Norina. The plot is to draw up a bogus marriage contract with the aid of Malatesta's cousin, Carlotto, and to teach Don Pasquale a lesson, the main object being his money and his permission for Ernest to marry Norina.

The veiled 'Sofronia' enters. Pasquale is speechless. The episode when Malatesta commands 'Sofronia' to raise her veil is magnificent. Through comedy, Donizetti is teaching a great truth. Don Pasquale believes that he is about to possess his spouse (Sophia) unveiled. The lesson will be a hard one. Wisdom is never to be possessed, only shared in.

As the ceremoney continues, Ernesto breaks his way in, just to say 'good-bye' before going into voluntary exile. He recognizes Norina. Malatesta, in a flow of notes and words, tells him to keep his head and makes him a witness to the bogus marriage contract. Don Pasquale is quite overcome and remakes his will leaving virtually his whole fortune to 'Sofronia'. Once documents are signed, the fun begins. With music of extraordinary dexterity we are made witnesses to Don Pasquale's humiliation. The convent girl transforms into a shrew. Pasquale appeals to his Doctor, after all, he is her 'brother'! However, nothing can stop Norina. Like a bacchante she tears to pieces the furnishings of an out-moded house, doubles the servants pay and demands extra maids to wait on her. Worst of all, she insists on having a 'cavaliere servente' to fuss over her whims and wishes. Her husband is too 'decrepit' to be seen with. The ever-eager Ernesto is elected as her 'cicisbeo' at Pasquale's expense, for whom the whole experience is akin to drowning:

'È vicino ad affogar'/('He is on the verge of sinking or drowning').

Act III opens with a brief chorus in which ser-

vants and maids mill around the stage, all following instructions of the mistress of the house. Her ladyship is about to leave for the opera (such a decadent form of entertainment!) with her 'cavaliere servente'. The noise deafens Don Pasquale who is left to pay the bills .... diamonds, hats, fans, veils, horses, carriage .... the whole business is a joke, even he can see that! 'Al demonio' ('to the devil') with the lot! Norina swishes past on her way to the waiting carriage. Pasquale intercepts and asserts his matrimonial rights, only to receive a slap in the face. It is a wound which goes very deep. He is a broken man: 'Ah! È finita, Don Pasquale' ('It is all finished Don Pasquale') 'Nothing remains but to drown yourself in earnest', for only one course of action remains - divorce!

Donizetti here throws back all the eager enthusiasm of the audience for the old man's humiliation. The comedy has tipped over into tragedy. We recognize, as Baudelaire so aptly wrote, that the laughter on our face is often at another's expense. Our enjoyment has been satanic.

'Sofronia' leaves for an evening's entertainment. She carefully drops a letter for Don Pasquale to pick up. To his horror he reads that 'Sofronia' has a lover and that he will meet her that very night in the garden. A lover! That is one step too far, it is as if she had willed him to die in a fit of anger, and thus die in mortal sin. As the Don rushes off to find the Doctor, the famous chitter-chatter chorus bursts onto the stage in which the audience is informed of all the scandal and public comment. It is Act III scene 3, the traditional moment for such matters.[8] They have appeared just at the right time, enabling the audience to have a moment's respite from the onslaught. Their charming waltz is a moment's comfort.

The famous duet between Malatesta and Don Pasquale with its garbled flow of words hovering between melody and patter, has its origin in similar scenes in 'La commedia dell'arte'. The old man's pride desires vengeance, but like the Pharaoh in Lotto's intarsia in Santa Maria Maggiore, in reality he is in a cage and cannot escape, 'È chiuso in gabbia/Non può scappar'.

The scene changes. We are in the garden (consider how profound the symbol of the garden is at this point, for we are to witness Don Pasquale's resurrection to new life). Ernesto's serenade (so rarely sung with taste) undoubtedly proves that he has made some progress as a lover since the first act. The duet for the lovers is equally seductive. The melodic lines follow the traditional pattern of intertwining sixths and thirds. The desire for revenge reveals eventually the wretched plot. Doctor Malatesta assures Don Pasquale that it was all for his edification and to save him from becoming married in earnest. Under the circumstances a divorce is the easiest matter in the world. Don Pasquale forgives, admits his folly, and marks well the moral of Norina's final rondo - that an old man should not contemplate marriage. The opera is a study in the old German proverb which Mayr taught his pupil and which Donizetti quoted back to his master after receiving adverse criticism and having to put up with a third class operatic company. 'Die Vergebung ist die beste Rache', ('Forgiveness is the best revenge').

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NOTES

1. Many will argue that these words are Ruffini's. The author suggests that these, along with other key phrases and scenes, are the composer's. A comparison between score and libretto shows that Donizetti left out whole phrases or changed them at will in order to keep the sense of urgency and dramatic flow.

2. See especially Ernest Newman in More Stories from the Great Operas.

3. For example: 'Sogno soave e casto' ('A dream pure and chaste') and 'Cerchero lontana terra' ('I will seek some far off country').

4. The title of Goldoni's play is La Locandiera; a locandiera is a hostess at an inn.

5. The symbolism of Nine denotes that Pasquale is about to be initiated into the path of Intelligence. He has to learn wisdom, virtue, experience, to rule his own house, human love through love, to be content with obscurity, and the silence of true knowledge.

6. 1) 'Presto, presto il diamanti' ('The diamonds, quickly, quickly').

2) 'Che interminabile andirivieni' ('What a ceaseless coming and going').

3) The chorus aids Ernesto with his aria in the last Act and fills in a few bars at the end. The opera is sometimes performed without the chorus.

7. Translated by L.E. Wheeler. The role of Don Pasquale was written for Luigi Lablache, for whom Donizetti had set to music in earlier days Canto XXXII of the Inferno.

8. See, for example, Act III, scene 3 of Machiavelli's La Mandragola.

* * * * *

The Intellect is a rough stone, which when worked upon becomes bright.

Donizetti

'Ah! That old Gombito tower* is a great comfort you know .... without it there is no forgivesness of sins, no appetite, no good humour, no joys, no specialities, just nothing, nothing! Tell me, what are maccheroni, vongole and calamari in comparison to that tower? Nothing! One cannot live away from that beloved building; it has the love of one's country caught within its masonry - only the sparrows gave me some idea of its true lightness.'

Donizetti to Dolci from Naples

(*The old medieval tower in la città alta of Bergamo, the like of which is to be seen in many Italian cities and towns - for example, Bologna and San Gimignano. Donizetti had possibly psalm 84 in his mind when he wrote these thoughts - see especially verse 3)