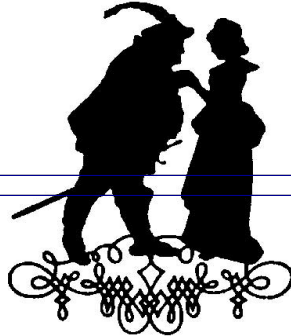


# Opera con Brio

Summer 2012  
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## Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* Delights Boston Midsummer Opera July 2012

Donizetti's comic masterpiece, *Don Pasquale*, scored a tremendous success at its premier on January 3, 1843, in Paris, one day after the premiere of Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* in Dresden and roughly one year after Verdi's first great success, *Nabucco*, in Milan. Wagner and Verdi, who would so dominate nineteenth century opera, were then in the early phases of their illustrious careers; Donizetti, age 46, near the end of his, was at the height of his fame and creative powers. The following year, 1844, Verdi wrote to Donizetti: "To you I have no need to sing paeans; you are one of that little band who are geniuses in the highest sense and need no praise for themselves."

As the most familiar and most frequently performed of Donizetti's some seventy operas, *Don Pasquale* serves as ready testament to Verdi's enthusiasm. Happily this summer's charming performance by Boston Midsummer Opera showed why the opera that was essentially Donizetti's swan song has a lasting appeal for both neophyte and aficionado. Faced with the daunting task of bringing to life a work of such familiar and popular appeal, director Austin Pendleton reinforced the notion that "less is more" with an austere production emphasizing the humanity of the stock comic characters, while BMO artistic director/conductor Susan Davenny Wyner led the reduced orchestra with precision and affection. It was all a delight.

That is to say, just as Donizetti so humanized the long Italian *buffa* tradition, once completely dominated by Rossini, so this production gave scant emphasis to the opera's deeper roots in the *commedia dell'arte*, the old Italian improvisatory theater that had its birth in Donizetti's hometown of Bergamo. This time honored tradition included such familiar archetypes as are indeed found in the opera:



Leslie Ann Bradley as Norina, Ricardo Lugo as Don Pasquale, and Alex Richardson as Ernesto Photo: Christopher McKenzie

Pantalone (the foolish and jealous old bachelor), the *Dottore* (the true manipulator of the plot, a Harlequino or Figaro of sorts), and the sentimental young lovers, the *Innamorato* and *Innamorata*, whose romance always faced numerous obstacles.

Rather than stress these archetypes, however, the production seemed to mirror one of the many humanized variants of this *commedia* tradition, Ben Jonson's *The Silent Woman*. The sonorous bass Ricardo Lugo became a rather likeable old bachelor who suddenly takes it into his head to marry and raise a family, partly in order to disinherit a



Ricardo Lugo as Don Pasquale

Photo: Christopher McKenzie

nephew who has refused the bride his uncle had chosen for him. Only infrequently did he engage in *commedia dell'arte* antics. The bleak set of the opening stressed his isolation and loneliness, as did his poignant clutching of a small stuffed animal. This might seem a bit much, but it vividly and simply made the point not only of the old man's ridiculousness, but also of his belated romantic yearning. Later in the opera, the distraught nephew Ernesto clutches the same stuffed toy, sitting dejectedly at the same desk and chair - a touching parallel, inviting a gentle parody of the romantic longing permeating the plot.

David Kravitz, alias the crafty *Dottore* Malatesta, effectively humanized his role with his usual incisive characterization, gulling the old man into undergoing a mock marriage with the very girl with whom Pasquale's nephew (Ernesto) is in love. Per usual, one always felt with Mr. Kravitz that he quite simply was the character he took on. His particularly acute pronunciation of the sometimes cumbersome English translation helped. In a nice directorial touch, the girl herself (Norina), who usually doesn't appear until the next scene, appeared standing at the side of the stage as Malatesta described Pasquale's fantasy ideal (pretty as an angel, fresh as a lily, domestic, shy, submissive, etc.). Later, in another vivid and humanizing moment, Ernesto himself appears on stage to read his farewell letter to Norina (written presuming he has been disinherited), whereas the libretto calls for Malatesta to read out loud this letter from the distraught lover.

Eventually of course, after the mock ceremony, Norina becomes Pasquale's nemesis (a gregarious, promiscuous spendthrift), creating such havoc that her mock spouse (Pasquale) is only too glad to be rid of her - and in time-honored *commedia* fashion - to bless the union of the young lovers. Productions of the opera often over do this dramatic shift, but Mr. Pendleton had the good sense to keep it all in bounds. The bleak set of the first act became a colorful array of parasols in the second. Nor were Norina's post-marriage antics overdone; simply a pile of her extravagant purchases, but mostly the nimble coloratura of soprano Leslie Ann Bradley communicated the playful shift.

Both she and the fine young tenor Alex Richardson also captured the sense of gentle romantic longing, he especially with subtle shading of color in both his final *romanza* and in the succeeding gentler *notturmo* (duet) that heightens the romantic atmosphere. The legendary Nicola Gedda called this duet "one of the loveliest pieces Donizetti ever wrote." To some in the audience it seemed strange that the two lovers, finally united, would just sit on two chairs facing the audience while singing this glorious number; but amidst the radiant glow of both the music and the stage picture, it all made an effective contrast to the starkness in the first act.

Of all the other wonderful musical numbers in the opera, two especially stood out. One was the incomparably brilliant buffo duet of Pasquale and Malatesta just preceding the final scene. Here the two plot and scheme with all the glee they can muster, in the words of William Ashbrook, "like naughty little boys getting carried away by their own ingenuity." David Kravitz, with wonderful bravado and textual articulation, seemed to take

special delight as, with radiant bounce and verve, he drew in the gullible, but game buffo bass Ricardo Lugo. The other number, Donizetti's most humanizing moment in the opera, became as it should a poignant highlight. Norina, determined to have her way in the second act, creates such conflict that she slaps Pasquale's face. Both bass and soprano brought special expressive nuance to this critical moment; the detached phrases of Mr. Lugo juxtaposed against the melting cantabile of Ms. Bradley were especially moving as the two touched again briefly, this time in a fleeting gesture of genuine compassion.



Leslie Ann Bradley as Norina; Ricardo Lugo as Don Pasquale Photo: Christopher McKenzie

The comedy of this work results basically from the characters being intensely themselves. As Donizetti scholar William Ashbrook has pointed out, *Don Pasquale* is remarkably free of the exaggerated and numerous stratagems and coincidences that are the stable fare of a

typical opera buffa (for example, *The Barber of Seville*). The traditional comic types of the old *commedia* become real people. This emphasis on character, or in Ashbrook's own words, "the triumph of character over artifice" - is precisely what makes this great opera so "Donizettian." This aptly humanizing approach was also what made this summer's offering of the opera by Boston Midsummer Opera such a success - and such a delight.

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