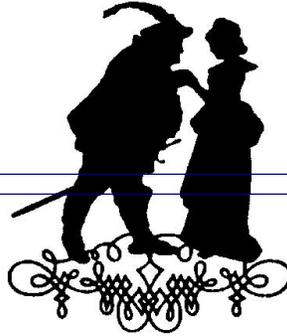


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



An American Premier Amore Opera's Captivating *Olivo e Pasquale*

This fall, the young and enterprising New York based company Amore Opera continued its exploration of little known bel canto treasures. Having last year presented the American premiere of Mercadante's recently rediscovered *I Due Figaro* of 1826, they opened their fourth season this year with an equally pleasing and tuneful jewel of the early Donizetti canon, written also, it turns out, in 1826, *Olivo e Pasquale*. This too was an American premiere and an equally successful venture, well worth the wait.

The production moved the archetypal *commedia dell' arte* plot, in which a stubborn father has his own ideas of how a young daughter should marry, from Lisbon to Palermo in the 1830's. Portuguese merchants in the original, the cranky father and his more easy-going brother Don Pasquale, also a bass, own an Olive Oil Export business in Palermo. Quoting Nathan Hull, the director:

The early 1830's is a time of transition in Sicily, and with the recent end of feudalism, law enforcement has broken down leaving powerful rival families to enforce their own laws. The fierce Olivo is such a man, supplementing his family's legitimate business with smuggling and a nascent version of the "protection racket." In fact, there seem to be a curious number of people in the town who consider Olivo to be their "Godfather."



Program Illustration by Richard Cerullo for *Olivo and Pasquale*

On the other hand, while Olivo may be "fire" his brother Pasquale is "ice" and just wants everybody to love him and live together harmoniously. As sometimes happens with such an authoritative man, Olivo's household is not as easy to control as his "business" is. He has a very spoiled daughter, Isabella, whom he wishes to marry to his powerful business associate, Malatesta, a smuggler who is nicknamed "Le Bross." Not surprisingly, his willful daughter has her own ideas.



Sheena Ramirez as Isabella; Duncan Hartman as Olivo Photo: Alea Vorillas

Indeed she loves Camillo, the “shop clerk.” Like Slook in Rossini’s early farce *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*, Le Bross, realizing the situation, eventually helps out the young lovers. Naturally, all ends well - the father chastened and the young lovers happily united.

On the afternoon of October 28, just hours before hurricane Sandy immobilized New York, a fine young cast brought the fun and glitter of this entertaining *buffa* work to life in a simple and effectively updated production. Bass Duncan Hartman as Olivo (the only singer not double cast) led the way firmly, complemented by the other bass of this cast, Jacopo Buora, as his softhearted brother. Their vibrant, playful “fire” and “ice” buffo duet of Act II, “Siete un asino calzato,” (“You are an ass dressed in trousers”) was a great hit, as such duets usually are in Donizetti.

In Rossini’s *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*, the benevolent Slook is the opera’s second bass; in Donizetti’s *Olivo* however, his counterpart Malatesta (known as “Le Bross”) is a tenor, and was performed as such in the alternate cast; in the performance I attended, however, a delightful mezzo (Hayden De Witt) transformed Le Bross into a trouser role. In the alternate cast, Ms. De Witt performed Camillo, the bookkeeper and secret admirer of Isabella, which was written as a trouser role before Donizetti turned him/her into a tenor for Naples. With the role cast as a mezzo, the lovely, sympathizing duet between Le Bross and the soprano heroine, Isabella, in the second act (“Voi veniste”) took on an especially appealing and appropriate bel canto tinge.

All three lead female singers in fact contributed to the success of the evening: not only the two mezzos, De Witt and the more smooth-toned Erika Hennings as Camillo, but especially the spritely soprano, Sheena Ramirez (who stood out for me in her days at the New England Conservatory). She was especially adept in the coloratura of the traditional Rondo Finale.

All in all, what a delight this opera was on stage, not just because of the charming production and performance, but also because of the opera itself. There are shades of Rossini of course (to say the least), but for the most part the opera is simply the young comic Donizetti at

his best, which came through even with the rough-edged orchestra, albeit led ably and with brio by conductor Gregory Buchalter. Much anticipated the more mature *L’Elisir d’Amore* and *Don Pasquale*, which Amore Opera was also presenting in the same period as a kind of sequel. One could argue that in Mercadante’s *I Due Figaro*, for all his Rossinian style, there were sections where the artisan ruled over the artist. Not with Donizetti, however; the work highlighted all the ingredients of genuine comic flair: lyrical invention, sparkling vitality, and both musical and dramatic artistry.

It’s hard to imagine that this engaging work had never been performed in this country before, especially being so tuneful and funny – as it was in this tasteful and idiomatic performance. One writer, David Wright, once commented: “to think of Donizetti as the composer of half a dozen staple works of the opera repertoire would be like thinking of Beethoven as the author of five piano sonatas instead of thirty-two.” Our thanks indeed to Amore Opera for unearthing this comic gem, keeping us alert to the wealth of Donizetti’s extraordinary output.

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Historical Notes on *Olivo e Pasquale* by Charles Jernigan

At the end of August, 1826, Donizetti left Naples for Rome, where he signed a contract for a new opera buffa to be presented in the upcoming Carnival season. A month later he wrote to Mayr that he had finished the unorchestrated score up through the middle of Act Two. The work was *Olivo e Pasquale* on a libretto by Jacopo Ferretti, who based his work on a comedy of the same name by Antonio Sografi (Venice, 1794). The idea probably goes all the way back to Terence’s ancient Roman comedy *The Brothers* (160 BCE), itself based on earlier Greek comedies. Like the ancient comedies, Sografi/Ferretti’s works are concerned with two brothers, one strict and grumpy and the other mild and kind. There is romantic intrigue in

all of these works, but the main argument of Terence's play revolved around whether a strict or a lenient education is best for sons. The nineteenth century comedies stick with the romantic intrigue, and background the philosophical argument.

Jacopo Ferretti was, of course, a well-known Roman librettist who had already written two libretti for Donizetti (*L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* and *Zoraide di Granata*) and would write two more (*Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo* and *Torquato Tasso*). Rossini's *Cenerentola* and *Matilde di Shabran* are his work as were libretti for Mercadante, Pacini, Luigi Ricci and Zingarelli). Ferretti's libretti for Donizetti are among the better ones for the composer's pre-*Anna Bolena* operas. Sografi was a noted librettist himself, active mostly in the last decade of the eighteenth and the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Donizettians will recognize his name as the author of the two comedies (of 1794 and 1800) on which Domenico Gilardoni based his amusing libretto for *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali*.

Olivo e Pasquale met a lukewarm reception at its Roman premiere on January 7, 1827, at the Teatro Valle, probably because of the company. The prima donna, Emilia Bonini, was not so good, and Donizetti had to write the role of Camillo, the prima donna's love interest, for a *musico* or contralto *in travesti*, a tradition that by 1827 seemed old fashioned. Nonetheless, the opera ran up several performances and the following September Donizetti revised the score for Naples (at the Teatro Nuovo), and Camillo became a tenor. The opera went on to have a respectable career during the next several decades, including a production in London in 1832.

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Duncan Hartman as Olivo; David Tillstrand as Pasquale
Photo: Alea Vorillas