Synopsis

Rome, mid-19th century

Act I
SCENE 1 Don Pasquale's house
SCENE 2 Norina's terrace

Act II
Don Pasquale's house

Act III
SCENE 1 Don Pasquale's house
SCENE 2 Don Pasquale's garden

Act I
The old bachelor Don Pasquale plans to marry in order to punish his rebellious nephew, Ernesto, who is in love with the young widow Norina. Pasquale wants an heir so he can cut the young man off without a penny. He consults Dr. Malatesta, who suggests as a bride his own beautiful younger sister. Feeling rejuvenated, the delighted Pasquale asks Malatesta to arrange a meeting at once. When Ernesto arrives and again refuses to marry a woman of his uncle's choice, Pasquale not only tells him that he will have to leave the house, but also informs his nephew of his own marriage plans. With no inheritance, Ernesto sees his dreams evaporating. To make matters worse, he learns that his friend Malatesta has arranged Pasquale's marriage.

On her terrace, Norina laughs over a silly romantic story she's reading. She is certain of her own ability to charm a man. Malatesta arrives. He is in fact plotting on her and Ernesto's behalf and explains his plan: Norina is to impersonate his (nonexistent) sister, marry Pasquale in a mock ceremony, and drive him to such desperation that he will be at their mercy. Norina is eager to play the role if it will help her and Ernesto be together.

Act II
Ernesto, who knows nothing of Malatesta's scheme, is desperate about the apparent loss of Norina and imagines his future as an exile. Pasquale, on the other hand, is impatient to meet his bride-to-be, and is enchanted when Malatesta introduces the timid "Sofronia." Pasquale decides to get married at once. During the wedding ceremony, Ernesto bursts in and accuses Norina of being unfaithful. Malatesta quickly and quietly explains to him what is going on, and Ernesto serves as witness to the wedding contract. As soon as the document

is sealed and Pasquale has signed over his fortune to his bride, Norina changes her act from demure girl to willful shrew. The shocked Pasquale protests, to the delight of Norina, Ernesto, and Malatesta.

Act III

Pasquale's new "wife" has continued her extravagant ways and amassed a stack of bills. When servants arrive carrying more purchases, Pasquale furiously resolves to assert his rights as husband. Norina, dressed elegantly for the theater, slaps him when he tries to bar her way. He threatens her with divorce, and she realizes she feels sympathy for the old man's pain. As she leaves, she drops a letter implying that she has a rendezvous with an unknown suitor in the garden that night. The desperate Pasquale sends for Malatesta, who assures him they will trap "Sofronia" in a compromising situation. Pasquale is happy to leave everything to Malatesta.

In the garden, Ernesto serenades Norina, and the two declare their love. Pasquale and Malatesta arrive—too late to catch the young man, who slips into the house, while "Sofronia" plays the innocent wife. Malatesta then announces that Ernesto is about to introduce his own bride, Norina, into the house. "Sofronia" protests, saying she will never share the roof with another woman and threatening to leave. Pasquale is overjoyed and grants permission for Ernesto to marry Norina, with his inheritance. When Sofronia's identity is finally revealed, Pasquale accepts the situation with good humor, gives the couple his blessing, and joins in observing that marriage is not for an old man.

Gaetano Donizetti

Don Pasquale

Premiere: Paris, Théâtre Italien, 1843

Don Pasquale is the final comic opera by the prolific Donizetti and one of the last works he wrote. The story revolves around a classic comedic premise: a young couple in love schemes to thwart the inappropriate plans of a pompous old man, who wants to marry the girl himself. To accomplish their goal, they have help from a smart tactician. Needless to say, young love will triumph in the end over senescent foolishness and hypocrisy: all will be reconciled and live happily ever after. The tension lies in the means to the presupposed end. The same format has served comedy from the Romans to the sitcoms of our own time and was especially useful in opera (in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, among many others). What makes *Don Pasquale* notable within this genre is its emphasis on genuine human emotion. The cathartic moment in *Don Pasquale*—when the players stop to wonder if they have gone too far, even if their original plan was to expose folly and sanctimony—is as "real" and as startling as anything in opera. It is also strikingly democratic: the familiar model of the good young people arrayed against the mean old man is subverted. Even the good guys have the capacity to be cruel if they do not control themselves. Donizetti tells this story with a score that is graceful and effervescent, as one would expect from this master of melody, with an additional level of sophistication to match the comic (yet insightful) proceedings.

The Creators

Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) composed more than 60 operas, plus orchestral and chamber music, in a career abbreviated by mental illness and premature death. Apart from this opera, the ever-popular *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and the comic gem *L'Elisir d'Amore*, most of his works disappeared from public view after his death. But critical and popular opinion of his huge opus has grown considerably over the past 50 years. The libretto for *Don Pasquale* was originally written by Giovanni Ruffini (1807–1881), a Genoese poet and patriot who was living in exile in Paris, but Donizetti altered his text to such an extent that Ruffini refused to have it published under his own name. There is no evidence of him working in the theater again.

The Setting

The action unfolds in Rome. Donizetti had originally wanted the opera set in his contemporary era, but conventions of the time required it to be set in the past. The Met's production returns the action to Donizetti's time, the early 19th century.

The Music

The orchestration in *Don Pasquale* is generally light by modern standards, with a clear emphasis on the vocalism. At the time of the premiere, however, audiences would not have regarded it as light by comic opera standards: the recitatives, for example, are all accompanied by the orchestra rather than by a harpsichord (which was the more common practice). The effect is a subtler distinction between "dialogue" and arias and other set pieces. In general, the solos in *Don Pasquale* are not as familiar as their counterparts in some of Donizetti's other operas, but they are excellent communicators of character and motivation. The aria with which the heroine introduces herself to the audience, "Quel guardo il cavaliere," is highly demanding vocally but makes a more nuanced impression than the typical showstopper of the bel canto genre: its point is to showcase the character's high spirits and quick wit. The tenor's Act III folk-influenced serenade perfectly expresses the forthright innocence suggested by his name, Ernesto. The duet for baritone and bass in Act III also makes extreme demands on the singers: there are few instances in Italian opera where the device of using rhythm and accelerating tempo to make a comic impression is more expertly handled.

Met History

Not much is known about the circumstances of the company premiere of *Don Pasquale*: it occurred outside of the Met, apparently in concert, in 1899. Diva Marcella Sembrich was matched with stars Antonio Pini-Corsi and Antonio Scotti. The same artists were featured in the 1900 house premiere, a production whose sets and costumes were lost in the San Francisco earthquake six years later when the Met toured there. The opera continued to be regularly performed with other shorter operas (*Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Pagliacci*, *Hansel and Gretel*) and even ballets. A new production in 1935, performed in tandem with Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, featured Ezio Pinza, Lucrezia Bori, Tito Schipa, and Giuseppe De Luca. The opera was given by itself in 1940, with Salvatore Baccaloni in the title role and Bidú Sayão as Norina. By 1946 *Don Pasquale* was once again sharing the bill, this time with Puccini's *Il Tabarro*. A new production in 1955—again paired with a ballet—featured Fernando Corena, Roberta Peters, Frank Guarrera, and Cesare Valletti, with Thomas Schippers conducting in his Met debut. Tenor Luigi Alva sang 13 performances in the 1960s and '70s. This production was replaced by John Dexter's 1978 staging, which marked the farewell performances of Beverly Sills (she sang Norina 18 times through 1979) and also starred Gabriel Bacquier and Nicolai Gedda. Later performances included tenor Alfredo Kraus. The current production, directed by Otto Schenk, opened in 2006 with Anna Netrebko, Juan Diego Flórez, Simone Alaimo, and Mariusz Kwiecien in the leading roles and Maurizio Benini conducting.

Program Note

In the musical-theatrical center of Paris, several streets are fittingly named after famous composers and librettists: the Rue Favart, Rue Scribe, Rue Auber, and Rue Méhul, among others. The Opéra, or Palais Garnier, is the district's crown jewel, and in the Rue Favart stands the splendid Opéra Comique, or Salle Favart. In the Rue Méhul stood the elegant, domed Salle Ventadour that was opened in 1829 by the troupe of the Opéra Comique, but just three years later, with the theater a million francs in debt, the company moved elsewhere. The Ventadour became the Théâtre Nautique, which was devoted to watery pantomimes and naval reenactments. They were soon supplanted by a combination of acting companies and Italian opera, including the Paris premieres of major works by Donizetti, Rossini, and Verdi. This operatic glory came to an end in 1878 when the theater was transformed into a bank.

One of the great creations of the Ventadour's period as the Théâtre Italien was the first production in 1843 of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, opera buffa par excellence. Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848), son of a poor pawnshop manager from Bergamo, had risen to the pinnacle of European operatic success. He created a number of stage works early in his composing career, such as *Le Nozze in Villa* (1820), but his reputation was made a decade later by *Anna Bolena*, his 31st opera, and the flood of successes—dramatic, historical, and comic—that followed at Italy's principal houses: *L'Elisir d'Amore* (1832), *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833), *Maria Stuarda* (1835), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), *Il Campanello di Notte* (1836), and *Roberto Devereux* (1837).

Donizetti's center of activity had been Naples, where he was also the director of the royal theaters, but in 1838, he moved to Paris. The French capital was already Rossini's base, and both he and Donizetti would compose to French and Italian libretti. For the Opéra Comique, Donizetti wrote *La Fille du Régiment* in 1840. It was an enormous hit, amassing more than 1,000 performances before World War I. *Don Pasquale* was his final success, but with fewer performances at the Italien; early Parisian audiences could also hear the work in French. Just three operas followed in 1843, after which the composer suffered a tragic decline in health due to syphilis. He died in Bergamo, in 1848, at the age of 51.

Several of the composer's 65 completed operas, including *Don Pasquale*, remained tremendously popular through the 19th and 20th centuries as part of the standard Italian repertoire worldwide. Their vitality as vocal extravaganzas for outstanding singers preceded the bel canto renaissance that began in the 1950s, but this period would produce performances and recordings of many of the more obscure Donizetti titles for grateful singers and audiences.

If *La Fille du Régiment* was specifically tailored to the requirements of the French opéra-comique style, *Don Pasquale*'s roots were thoroughly Italian. Its modernized commedia dell'arte characters—the fat, pompous guardian, the scheming young ward and her sentimental lover, the incompetent notary, all cherished by the French—ultimately go back to the Roman comedies of Plautus.

The immediate source was a successful Italian opera buffa, with music by Stefano Pavesi and a libretto by Angelo Anelli, entitled *Ser Marcantonio*. First produced at La Scala in 1810, it was later heard in Paris. Commissioned by the Théâtre Italien for a new comic opera, Donizetti turned to Giovanni Ruffini, an Italian nationalist writer exiled in Paris, to adapt the earlier libretto. This sort of borrowing was still rampant before the copyright era.

Donizetti, as usual, worked at lightning speed; Ruffini could barely supply the words fast enough. The composer had to step in with major text changes and supplements, so many that Ruffini declined to accept authorship in the printed libretto. A certain "M.A." is listed as the librettist—"Maestro Anonimo," that is.

Donizetti claimed to have completed the score in 11 days, but this does not count the days he spent orchestrating it. Also slowing down the composition was the jealousy between the singers Antonio Tamburini (Malatesta) and Luigi Lablache (Don Pasquale) over the flashiness of their respective parts. There was presumably less friction between the original-cast lovers Giulia Grisi (Norina) and Giovanni Matteo Mario (Ernesto)—the two would become husband and wife in real life. And there was another family connection: Lablache's son Federico played the Notary.

Donizetti did reuse some older compositions, but *Don Pasquale* was novel in having its recitative sections accompanied by strings rather than by a harpsichord. The bubbly, conversational flow of the musical action is occasionally interrupted by vocal set pieces, which are all the more striking when they occur, such as Norina's Act I reading of a courtly novel, or Ernesto's melting serenade in Act III, daringly delivered off-stage with an accompaniment in the Roman style—guitars, drum, and chorus la-las.

Just as fascinating are the abundance of delightful ensembles, from the Act I duet in which Doctor Malatesta instructs Norina on how she should seduce Don Pasquale, to the rather 18th-century "moral" finale, in waltz time. Exasperated, pattery exchanges between Pasquale and his antagonists are balanced by touching moments when Donizetti allows us pity for the foolish old man's plight. And throughout the opera are piquant little examples of melody and orchestration that lift the heart, as in the trumpet solo that begins Act II, or in Ernesto's earlier, short but glorious confession of love, "Amo Norina, la mia fed'è impegnata," or his rueful one-line aside that follows, "Ci volea questa mania."

Don Pasquale opened at the Théâtre Italien on January 3, 1843, a day after Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* had its first night in Dresden. Donizetti enjoyed a personal and financial triumph from performance royalties and sales of the vocal score and arrangements of the opera's melodies. Rather appropriately, the score was dedicated to the wife of Donizetti's Paris banker.

Also acclaimed were the singers, especially the rotund Irish-French bass Lablache in the title role. The critic Henry Chorley called him "the most remarkable man whom I have ever seen in opera," a "richly toned and suave" singer giving a performance that avoided any hint of "grossness or coarse imitation." Lablache, with Tamburini and Grisi, had already created Bellini's *I Puritani* at the same theater in 1835.

Don Pasquale quickly spread throughout the operatic world, with performances in Italy, London, New Orleans, and New York. The star of the first Met production in 1900 was the Polish soprano Marcella Sembrich, for whom the company had earlier revived *La Fille du Régiment* in its original French—it had generally been performed in Italian—and who had already triumphed as Donizetti's bride of Lammermoor in the very first Met season in 1883.

—Richard Traubner