# Synopsis

## Act I

*Italy, 1836.* Nemorino, a young villager, is unhappily in love with the beautiful farm owner Adina, who he thinks is beyond his reach. Adina tells the gathered peasants about the book she is reading—the story of how Tristan won the heart of Iseult by drinking a magic love potion. A regiment of soldiers arrives, led by the pompous Sergeant Belcore, who immediately introduces himself to Adina and asks her to marry him. Adina declares that she is in no hurry to make up her mind but promises to think over the offer. Left alone with Nemorino, Adina tells him that his time would be better spent in town, looking after his sick uncle, than hoping to win her love. She suggests that he do as she does and change affections every single day. Nemorino reminds her that one can never forget his first love.

Dr. Dulcamara, a traveling purveyor of patent medicines, arrives in the village advertising a potion capable of curing anything. Nemorino shyly asks him if he sells the elixir of love described in Adina's book. Dulcamara claims that he does, slyly proffering a bottle of simple Bordeaux. He explains that Nemorino will have to wait until the next day—when the doctor will be gone—to see the results. Though it costs him his last ducat, Nemorino buys and immediately drinks it. Nemorino begins to feel the effect of the "potion" and, convinced he will be irresistible to Adina the next day, feigns cheerful indifference towards her. Surprised and hurt, Adina flirt with Belcore. When orders arrive for the sergeant to return immediately to his garrison, Adina agrees to marry him at once. The shocked Nemorino begs her to wait one more day, but she dismisses him and invites the entire village to her wedding. Nemorino desperately calls for the doctor's help.

## *Intermission*

## Act II

At the pre-wedding feast, Adina and Dulcamara entertain the guests with a song. Adina wonders why Nemorino isn't there. She doesn't want to sign the marriage contract until he appears. Meanwhile, Nemorino asks Dulcamara for another bottle of the elixir. Since Nemorino doesn't have any money left, the doctor agrees to wait so the boy can borrow the cash. Belcore is bewildered that Adina has postponed the wedding. When Nemorino tells him that he needs money right away, the sergeant persuades him to join the army and receive a volunteer bonus. Nemorino buys more elixir and suddenly finds himself besieged by a group of women. Unaware of the news that his uncle has died and left him a fortune, he believes that the elixir is finally taking effect. Adina feels responsible for Nemorino's enlistment, but her concern turns to jealousy when she sees him

with the other women. Dulcamara boasts about the power of his elixir and offers to sell Adina some, but she is determined to win Nemorino all on her own.

Nemorino now feels sure that Adina cares for him: He noticed a tear on her cheek when she saw him with the other women. Adina returns to tell Nemorino that she has bought back his enlistment papers. When he again feigns indifference, she finally confesses that she loves him. Belcore appears to find the two embracing and redirects his affections to Giannetta, declaring that thousands of women await him elsewhere. Dulcamara brags to the crowd that his miraculous potion can make people fall in love and even turn poor peasants into millionaires.

*Gaetano Donizetti*

# L'Elisir d'Amore

*Premiere: Teatro alla Canobbiana, Milan, 1832*

Since its premiere more than a century and a half ago, *L'Elisir d'Amore* has been among the most consistently popular operatic comedies. The story deftly combines comic archetypes with a degree of genuine character development rare in works of its kind. Considering the genre, the story's ending is as much a foregone conclusion as it would be in a romantic comedy film today. The joy is in the journey, and Donizetti created one of his most instantly appealing scores for this ride. The music represents the best of the bel canto tradition that reigned in Italian opera in the early 19th century, from funny patter songs to rich ensembles to wrenching melodies like the tenor's famous aria "Una furtiva lagrima."

## *The Creators*

Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) composed more than 60 operas, plus orchestral and chamber music, in a career abbreviated by mental illness and an early death. Apart from this opera, the ever-popular *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and *Don Paquale*, most of his works disappeared from public view after he died; however, critical and popular opinion of his huge catalog has grown considerably over the past 50 years. Felice Romani (1788–1865) was the official librettist of Milan's Teatro alla Scala and worked with many of the most popular Italian composers of the time. He collaborated with Donizetti on several of his best-known operas, including *Anna Bolena* and *Lucrezia Borgia*, and provided Vincenzo Bellini with all but three of his libretti. For *L'Elisir*, Romani adapted an earlier French libretto by Eugène Scribe (1791–1861), *Le Philtre*, originally set by the composer Daniel Auber (1782–1871). Scribe was a prolific dramatist whose work was influential in the development of grand opera. He provided libretti for such composers as Rossini, Meyerbeer, and Verdi.

## *The Setting*

The opera is set in a small village in rural Italy, though some early editions indicate a location in Basque country. More importantly, it's the kind of town in which everyone knows everyone and traveling salesmen provide a major form of public entertainment. The Met's production sets the action in 1836, when the Risorgimento, the movement for Italian independence, was beginning to gather momentum.

### *The Music*

What separates *L'Elisir* from dozens of charming comedies composed around the same time is not only the superiority of its hit numbers but also the overall consistency of its music. The bass's entrance aria, the comic patter song "Udite, udite, o rustici," is funny and difficult, and it establishes Dr. Dulcamara as slimy but ultimately harmless and actually rather likeable. This persona is explored further in his Act II duet with Adina, in which he parodies a rich old Venetian man becoming foolish over a pretty young girl. The framework of this duet is a barcarolle, a sailing song typical for Venice and usually set in 6/8 time. Changing the meter to 2/2 time accentuates the rickety old man's clumsiness in his attempts at gallantry. This sort of sly humor is a hallmark of the score, which maintains a prominent and insightful connection between the music and the unfolding romance. The tenor's Act I solo "Adina, credimi" gives us a mere glimpse of the man he will become later in the opera. When this finally begins to happen in Act II's show-stopping aria "Una furtiva lagrima," it is much more than an excuse for a gorgeous melody: The aria's variations between major and minor keys in the climaxes are one of opera's savviest depictions of dawning consciousness, as the hero simultaneously accepts the possibility of love and his own power of self-assertion.

### *Met History*

The 1904 Met premiere of *L'Elisir d'Amore* starred Marcella Sembrich and Enrico Caruso, who went on to sing the role of Nemorino a total of 32 times at the Met. Famous Nemorinos of the first half of the 20th century also include Beniamino Gigli (1930–32) and Ferruccio Tagliavini (1948–62). A popular new production by Nathaniel Merrill, designed by Robert O'Hearn, premiered in 1960 with Fausto Cleva conducting Elisabeth Söderström and Dino Formichini. Other tenors who have appeared in the opera over the years include Nicolai Gedda, Alfredo Kraus, Roberto Alagna, Ramón Vargas, Juan Diego Flórez, and especially Luciano Pavarotti, who sang Nemorino 49 times between 1973 and 1998. Sarah Caldwell conducted a series of performances in 1978, with Judith Blegen as Adina and Pavarotti and José Carreras sharing the role of Nemorino. Pavarotti also starred in the 1991 premiere of a new production directed by John Copley, opposite Kathleen Battle. Other notable Met Adinas include Bidú Sayão, Roberta Peters, Renata Scotto, and, more recently, Ruth Ann Swenson, Angela Gheorghiu, and Diana Damrau. Among the many great basses who have sung the role of Dulcamara are Ezio Pinza, Fernando Corena, Giuseppe Taddei, and Paul Plishka. The Met's current production by Bartlett Sher premiered on Opening Night of the 2012–13 season, with Anna Netrebko, Matthew Polenzani, Mariusz Kwiecien, and Ambrogio Maestri in the leading roles and Maurizio Benini conducting.

# Program Note

"Music for the Italians is a sensual pleasure and nothing more," sniffed Hector Berlioz after walking out of one of the first performances of *L'Elisir d'Amore*, irritated by the noisy, inattentive audience (par for the course in early-19th-century Italy). "For this noble expression of the mind they have hardly more respect than for the art of cooking. They want a score that, like a plate of macaroni, can be assimilated immediately, without having to think about it …"

Such comments might be expected from the creator of the ambitious epic *Les Troyens*, but what the French composer failed to recognize was that the Italians have always respected both the culinary and musical arts as essential parts of their culture.

Gaetano Donizetti was the most prolific, as well as the most masterful, Italian composer of the first half of the 19th century. His output—more than 60 operas, plus a slew of orchestral and chamber works, piano pieces, songs, and sacred music—was astounding, even in an era in which composers churned out commissions at high speed. Early on, the impoverished Donizetti formed the habit of tackling every commission that came his way, no matter the fee or the venue. Though he was only 21 when he saw the first of his operas premiered (*Enrico di Borgogna*, in 1817 at Venice's Teatro San Luca), it would take 12 more years and 30 more operas for Donizetti to score his breakthrough success with *Anna Bolena*, at the Teatro Carcano in Milan in 1830.

*L'Elisir d'Amore* was a hastily concocted work by any standards. Biographer William Ashbrook speculated that Donizetti landed the assignment just ten (or quite possibly fewer) weeks before the projected premiere, after another composer had failed to deliver a commissioned opera to impresario Alessandro Lanari, who had leased Milan's Teatro alla Canobbiana for the 1832 spring season. Donizetti seemed energized, even exhilarated, by the pressing deadline, and perhaps also inspired by the prospect of besting his slightly younger archrival Vincenzo Bellini's recent smash hit, *La Sonnambula*, performed at the Teatro Carcano in 1831. This minimal timetable for creating an opera, inconceivable nowadays, was entirely feasible during the bel canto era, when composers relied on boilerplate forms and structures, and recycling portions of one's earlier works was the norm.

Donizetti's collaborator was Felice Romani, the leading Italian librettist of the day, with whom Donizetti had previously worked on *Anna Bolena* and three other operas. With more than 100 libretti to his credit, Romani was as prolific as Donizetti and purportedly penned the text for *L'Elisir d'Amore* in a mere eight days. Donizetti then completed the opera in anywhere from two to four weeks, depending on which biographer you believe.

The text of *L'Elisir d'Amore,* like most of the libretti of Romani and his contemporaries, was adapted from an existing work, in this case Eugène Scribe's French libretto for Daniel Auber's opera *Le Philtre* (1831), in turn adapted from

Silvio Malaperta's Italian play *Il Filtro*. Romani changed and Italianized the characters' names, editorializing along the way: Adina is a Hebrew-derived name meaning "lovely" or "slender"; Belcore and Dulcamara are, literally, Italian for "Handsome-heart" and "Bittersweet" ("Dulcamara" is also a synonym for bittersweet nightshade, a traditional homeopathic remedy used to treat a host of ailments). And the name of Nemorino, the hero, is a diminutive of the Latin "nemo": i.e., he's "Little Nobody."

Though Romani left most of Scribe's situations intact, he tempered the French frothiness with soulful Italian pathos. To that end, he added several key passages which have no analogues in Scribe's text, most notably Nemorino's desperate plea "Adina, credimi" in the Act I finale and Adina's heartfelt but oblique confession of love, "Prendi, per me sei libero," in Act II. Another addition was made at Donizetti's insistence, entirely against Romani's will: the opera's beloved hit tune, "Una furtiva lagrima." Donizetti was certainly vindicated; the opera is now unimaginable without this game-changing romanza of poignant self-revelation. A stunningly simple strophic aria that dignifies both Nemorino and his obbligato partner, the unlikely bassoon, it renders *L'Elisir* a rare tenor vehicle amid the forest of diva-driven bel canto operas.

*L'Elisir d'Amore* is a sweeter, gentler work than most of its opera buffa counterparts, including the comedies of Rossini and Donizetti's own later, pricklier *Don Pasquale* (1843). Donizetti termed his sentimental comedy a melodramma giocoso as opposed to an opera buffa like *Pasquale*, surely sensing that this tale demanded empathic sighs as well as hearty laughter from its audiences. The music of *Elisir* seamlessly embraces both melting romantic cavatinas and madcap patter songs, mock-military marches, and passionate protestations.

Yet the easy appeal of *L'Elisir d'Amore* transcends even its seductive musical charms. Like so many other operas that remain central to the standard repertory, its essentially timeless plot is rooted in myth. This mythic resonance has rendered *L'Elisir d'Amore* ripe for countless revisionist stagings, in settings that include a modern-day golf resort and a 1950s diner in the American Southwest. Though the villagers who populate the opera are Donizetti's contemporaries, their roots are clearly traceable to ancient Roman comedy by way of commedia dell'arte, the low-comic, improvisational street theater of the Renaissance. The two lower-voiced males are stock figu es of these genres: Belcore is the quintessential "miles gloriosus," or swaggering soldier, and Dulcamara the stereotypical cagey quack doctor. Nemorino is the classic Pierrot pining for the love of his wily, fickle Colombina (Adina). But while Belcore and Dulcamara bluster through the action and remain happily clueless, Romani and Donizetti allow Nemorino and Adina to learn and grow, underpinning the rollicking antics with genuine pathos.

Another potent mythical aspect of *L'Elisir* is its focus on a supposed love potion. The concept of capturing a love object through magical means can be traced back to the ancient Greco-Roman world, up through the Middle Ages

and the Renaissance through the present day, in both pagan and Christian traditions. Tales of love potions, successful and not, have cut a long and wide swath through legend, art, and literature, from the Greek myth of Heracles and Deianira to the Irish story of Tristan and Iseult, which Adina roundly mocks in Act I but Nemorino takes rather more seriously. In 1840, Richard Wagner arranged Donizetti's *L'Elisir* for solo piano; it's a subversive pleasure to imagine that this experience gave him some big ideas.

Despite Donizetti's dissatisfaction with his opening-night cast—a German soprano, a stammering tenor, a French baritone "not worth much," and "a buffo with the voice of a goat," according to the composer—the premiere of *L'Elisir d'Amore*, on May 12, 1832, was an unalloyed triumph. Donizetti's teacher and mentor, the German émigré composer Johann Simon Mayr, proudly pronounced the work "inspired throughout with joy and happiness," and both critics and audiences concurred.

The opera's popularity has never waned. Between 1838 and 1848 it was the most frequently performed opera in Italy. At a major La Scala revival in 1900 conducted by Arturo Toscanini, it became the career-launching signature opera of the incomparable tenor Enrico Caruso. Even today, it is among the most frequently performed operas around the world.

All of this was handily prophesied by the Italian critic Francesco Pezzi at that hurriedly cooked-up world premiere. He wrote in *La Gazzetta Privilegiata di Milano*:

> The musical style of this score is lively, brilliant, truly of the buffo nature. The shading from buffo to seria takes place with surprising gradations and the emotions are handled with the musical passion for which the composer of *Anna Bolena* is famous. The orchestration is always brilliant and appropriate to the situation; it reveals a great master at work, accompanying a vocal line now lively, now brilliant, now impassioned. To lavish greater praise on the composer would be unfair to the opera; his work does not need exaggerated compliments.

*—Cori Ellison*

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