

Don Pasquale premièred 1843 in Paris

GAETANO DONIZETTI (1797-1848)

Libretto by Giovanni Ruffini and Donizetti

Running time: 2 hours 13 minutes

Performed 2010 by the METROPOLITAN OPERA

Don Pasquale, elderly bachelor	<i>John del Carlo</i>	Bass
Dr.Malatesta, his doctor	<i>Mariusz Kwiecien</i>	Baritone
Ernesto, Don Pasquale's nephew	<i>Matthew Polenzani</i>	Tenor
Norina, young widow loved by Ernesto	<i>Anna Netrebko</i>	Soprano
Notary	<i>Bernard Fitch</i>	Bass
Conductor	<i>James Levine</i>	
Director	<i>Otto Schenk</i>	

Synopsis

ACT 1 SCENE 1: Don Pasquale – impatiently awaiting his friend and doctor – is determined to disinherit his nephew Ernesto, who to his uncle's displeasure has fallen in love with the young widow Norina. The elderly bachelor wants to consult Malatesta about his own marriage plans. Once this topic is raised, Malatesta informs Pasquale that he's found the perfect solution. Although he claims that his own sister will be the bride, he intends to employ Norina (who is actually his cousin).

Pasquale then confronts Ernesto who's refused to marry a woman approved by his uncle. He orders his nephew out of the house, and announces his own impending marriage. Realising that his own hopes of marrying Norina are now ruined, Ernesto suggests that his uncle should consult Dr.Malatesta about this implausible prospect. He's astounded to learn that the doctor has already given his whole-hearted approval.



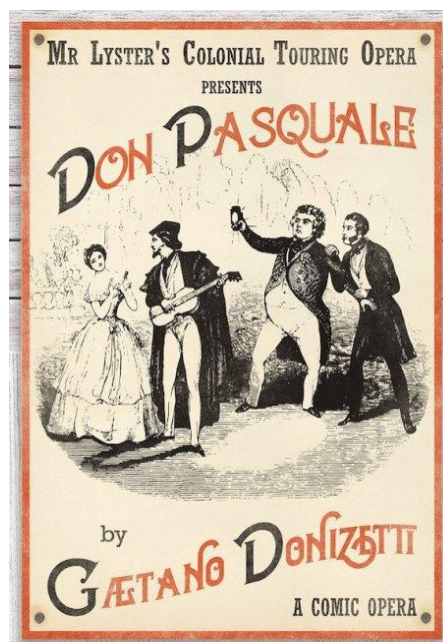
ACT 1 SCENE 2: Norina reads a tale of chivalric love laughing over its absurdity, and expressing her conviction that real femininity is far more persuasive. Dr.Malatesta comes to enlist Norina's help with his plan to bring Pasquale to his senses. She's to be his own sister 'Sofronia' fresh from a convent, and they agree how she should be impersonated.

ACT 2: The disillusioned Ernesto is almost ready to depart. Pasquale awaits his bride in a fever of impatience. He's excited when a demure young lady is led in wearing a veil. *Sofronia* is upset to find herself with a strange man. When questioned she says that sewing is her only pastime. Malatesta has persuaded his nephew to act as notary, so a marriage contract is drawn up, in which Pasquale's bride is endowed with half of his worldly goods. When Ernesto appears to bid his uncle farewell, he's dismayed by Norina's apparent infidelity. Once the contract is signed *Sofronia* completely changes character, and she appoints Ernesto as her 'cavaliere servante' (ie as a man who's expected to attend her with exceptional devotion). When Pasquale objects, she insists on having her way. The old man is stunned by this turn of events. *Sofronia* demands more servants, carriages and other extravagances, leaving Pasquale close to apoplexy.

Interval

ACT 3 SCENE 1: Don Pasquale is dismayed at the accumulation of bills run up by his bride, who appears in evening dress to announce that she's going to the theatre. When he objects, she advises him to go to bed. At the height of this dispute she slaps his face. Thoroughly disillusioned, Pasquale contemplates the consequence of his impulsiveness. Feeling sorry for his discomfiture, Norina advises him to get a good night's sleep. As she leaves she drops a note, which Pasquale picks up and reads. Horrified to learn that a garden assignation is planned for that very evening, Pasquale summons Malatesta. The servants comment on the household turmoil. When Malatesta appears, he and the doctor plot how they will catch Norina and unmask her infidelity.

ACT 3 SCENE 2: Ernesto serenades his beloved. Norina steals in, and they sing a tender duet. Pasquale surprises them, but Malatesta resolves the imbroglio by persuading his friend to annul his recent marriage and allow Ernesto to marry Norina. Although he realises that he's been made a fool of, Pasquale is so relieved to be free of *Sofronia* that he blesses the young lovers.



Operatic Context for Don Pasquale

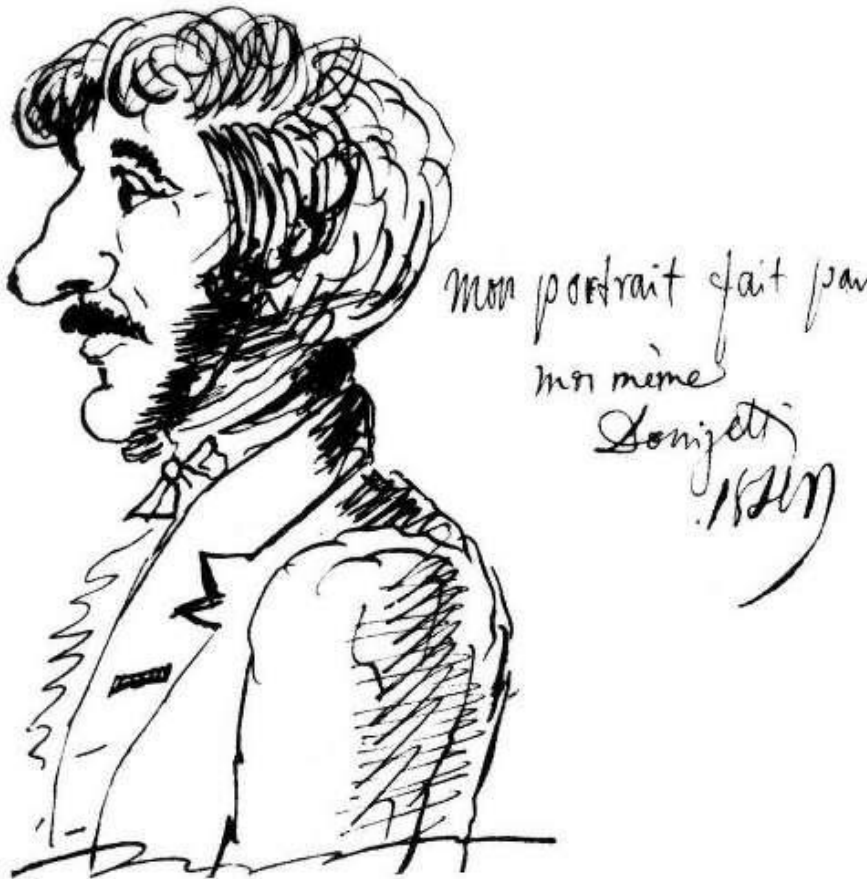
Among the early 19th century opera buffa that have remained in the international repertoire, Donizetti's comic masterpiece was the last to be composed. It was designed for the four star singers who performed at the Théâtre-Italien in Paris. With his talent and unrivalled theatrical experience, Donizetti was able to produce a work whose freshness has never faltered. There's no hint that this 45 year old composer was less than 12 months away from the illness that would terminally dim his mental capacity. During the early 1840s about one quarter of all the Italian operas currently performed in Italy had been written by Donizetti.

Malatesta's opening aria – describing the charms of his mythical sister – is a fine example of bel canto irony. To conclude Act One Malatesta teaches Norina how she must bamboozle Pasquale in a duet that epitomises the high spirits of this opera. Act Two, which builds up relentlessly to an hilarious climax has been cited as one of Donizetti's greatest achievements. Act Three includes three irresistible duets, and an apt finale which emphasises the ill-advised nature of Pasquale's exploits.

Gaetano Donizetti

Coming from a poor background Donizetti was fortunate to have his talent recognised early, and to receive the best available training. Confronted by an audience insatiably demanding freshness – and with the need to support himself by accepting every commission – he deliberately set out to master each of the current operatic genres, as well as demonstrating that he could write effectively for every vocal range.

His *Zoraide di Grenata* (scheduled at this autumn's Wexford Festival) attracted enough attention in Rome in 1822 to win him a decisive contract with the Neapolitan impresario Barbaja. The next eight years were effectively a 'journeyman' phase (eg following a traditional apprenticeship), since Donizetti was able to experiment during a period of unflagging productivity. His 1830 success with *Anna Bolena* in Milan was a turning point that won him commissions from all the leading Italian opera houses. Although his two greatest opere buffe (including *Don Pasquale*) were still ahead of him, Donizetti mainly confined himself to tragedy after this. *Lucrezia Borgia* (Milan 1833) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Naples 1835) soon made him a household name.



Donizetti left Naples for Paris in 1838 attracted by fewer censorship restrictions, as well as by the chance of greater fees and prestige. Four years later he was also named Hofkapellmeister to the Habsburg court in Vienna, so from 1842 to 1845 he divided his time between these two glamorous capitals with occasional trips to Italy. By 1846 he was confined to a sanatorium, but next – in an extremely debilitated state – he was brought back to Bergamo where he'd been born about fifty years earlier.

By inclination Donizetti was gregarious and good-humoured, but his life was increasingly tragic. None of his three children lived more than a few days, and his wife also died young in 1837 during a horrifying cholera outbreak. Thereafter a morbid streak in his character became more pronounced.

Donizetti found a variety of ways to adapt existing conventions to suit his manifold dramatic needs. In his late works Donizetti felt free to depart more radically from conventional restrictions. It's difficult to imagine how Verdi would have developed without the foundations that Donizetti had already created. The centrality of Donizetti to the tradition of Italian melodrama can hardly be exaggerated.

From peak popularity around the time of his death Donizetti's standing declined, particularly towards the end of the 19th century. However since WW2 most of his output has been thoroughly re-examined, confirming Donizetti's importance as a pivotal link in the development of Italian opera.

Donizetti's Operas

It's impossible to imagine any composer who could have written more operas than the 67 written by Donizetti!

<i>Years</i>	<i>Operas</i>	<i>Principal Theatres</i>	<i>Some Better Known Works</i>
1816-1821	6	Bologna	Il Pigmaliione
1822-1826	12	Naples and Rome	Emilia di Liverpool
1827-1829	9	Naples and Genoa	Il castello di Kenilworth
1830-1831	8	Naples and Milan	Anna Bolena
1832-1833	7	Milan, Rome, Naples, Florence	L'elisir d'amore
1834-1835	5	Naples, Milan, Florence, Paris	Lucia di Lammermoor
1836-1837	7	Naples and Venice	Roberto Devereux
1838-1841	8	Paris, Rome, Naples, Milan	La fille du régiment
1842-1843	5	Paris, Vienna, Naples	Don Pasquale

This table demonstrates his fecundity throughout a professional career lasting more than two decades, with a particularly prolific period from 1827-1837 where he regularly completed at least three operas every year.

One curious feature of the individual titles highlighted above is that more than half of them are operas with a British setting! Donizetti worked in an era when Walter Scott was a widespread inspiration. For those familiar with a sunny Mediterranean climate, Scott was able to conjure up an irresistible vision of Celtic islands that lay tantalisingly close to the West European coast!

Scott can be directly connected to two of these five 'British' operas, but within the rest of Donizetti's oeuvre his influence is more indirect. For example *Maria Stuarda* is primarily based on Schiller's play. Owing to Donizetti's long-running struggle with censors, it's also fair to note that plots associated with Tudor monarchs were more likely to be acceptable in Italy, because they dealt with Protestant rather than Catholic royalty.

Selected Musical Biographies

NORINA: ANNA YURIEVNA NETREBKO is a Russian coloratura soprano born in 1971, who's performed in New York, Vienna and London. Discovered by Valery Gergiev, she began her career at the Mariinsky Theatre. She attracted global attention at the 2002 Salzburg Festival. Having been known for lyric and coloratura roles, Netrebko later proceeded into heavier 19th century romantic repertoire, particularly Verdi. Since 2016 she's focused on verismo roles.

CONDUCTOR: JAMES LEVINE (1943–2021) was an American conductor and pianist. Levine held leadership positions which included the Munich Philharmonic, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He made his Metropolitan Opera debut just before he turned 28 in 1971, and was named its principal conductor in February 1972. Following a series of injuries in his seventies, Levine's health problems led to fewer Metropolitan Opera engagements, and he stepped down from his position as music director at the end of the 2015–16 season.