

# OPERA SUPERS OF IOWA CITY NEWSLETTER

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Editor: Arthur Canter, 30 Brookfield Drive, Iowa City, Iowa 52240

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## Letter from the Editor

The production, staging and singing of Così were a gratifying success and all those concerned with its preparation and performance should be pleased. As for the attendance at the performances, that is another matter. The first night was fairly good, about 1300, but the second performance on Sunday could not have been watched by many more than 700. Considering that the Spring Opera is an annual event, carefully planned, and generally lavishly staged, why such small audiences? Opera may be for everybody but obviously everybody is not interested in seeing a live performance. We can speculate about the various reasons Così did not attract greater audiences and perhaps come up with ideas to improve matters for the future. Think about it.

We should look ahead to the summer production of Donizetti's Elixir of Love. Plan now to attend a performance of this heart-warming comedy either on Friday evening, July 29, or Sunday afternoon, July 31, or as a number of us do, attend both performances and hear the different singers. Better yet, get some of your non-opera-going acquaintances to do something different for a change and attend the Summer Opera. If they enjoy good theater, or Broadway musicals, they will respond favorably to The Elixir of Love.

I have been underwhelmed by the responses to my request in the last Newsletter for volunteers to help prepare material for the Newsletter or help in its production. I expected only a few responses, but I may have to redefine "few." We shall manage. I know that many readers do enjoy the Newsletter and want it to continue but have little or no time to devote to submitting material for its content. It is just that without feedback I get the feeling that I am writing to myself. Wasn't there an old song about "I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter. . ."? Hey, out there, are you listening?

## What to Take with You Upon Exile

In the last Newsletter, under "Food for Thought" I raised the question of what musical recordings you would take with you if you were to be exiled to another planet, never to return to Earth, and limited to a choice of five albums. For example, would you choose an album containing all nine Beethoven symphonies as one of the five? Your second pick could be an album of all five of his piano concerti. The third could be an album of the four Brahms symphonies, and so on. By careful reading of the Schwann catalog or going through your own collection, you could end up taking five albums containing close to 40 or more records. However, the intent of this question is not to see how many LP's, CD's or cassetts you could take meeting the "limit of five" but rather to force you into a decision of what music you would want to listen to for the rest of your life if the range of choices were drastically limited. I have made my choices, or rather tried to, and find that each time I make a list I change two of them but steadfastly hold on to three. Here are my selections in order of preference: (1) the middle quartets of Beethoven (if there is a single album containing all 16, that would be my choice); (2) Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro, the complete opera; (3) Verdi's Otello complete opera; (4) the Mahler

Symphony Number Five and the Songs of Rückert—I know there is an album containing both. My alternate here would be Mahler's Third Symphony with a selection of his songs (also available combined on a new CD album); (5) I vacillate in this between the recording of Gershwin piano music and songs (by the Bolcoms) and Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov. Now that is a contrast. What do you make of the list? Would you like to hear my reasons for the choices? There are personal ones. I wonder if any of you would be willing to reveal your choices. Pick the right ones and I'll let you go into exile with me.

"Who Is Donizetti and What Was He?" (I keep paraphrasing old songs.)

In the past I have prepared biographical sketches of the composer and background material of the opera that is to be presented in a separate packet for the Supers. Rather than limit its availability to those of the Supers who can attend meetings, I have decided to put this material in the Newsletter. If I am going to spend all that time researching the opera and its composer, why limit the fruits of that research? What follows is a biographical sketch of Gaetano Donizetti, the composer of The Elixir of Love. There are many books on Donizetti, but unfortunately for most of us the bulk of the material appears in Italian. The two most comprehensive biographies written in the English language are William Asinbrook's Donizetti and His Operas, Cambridge University Press, 1982 (a revision of his 1965 book) and Herbert Weinstock's Donizetti and the World of Opera in Italy, Paris, and Vienna in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century, New York, 1963. There is also a Journal of the Donizetti Society. All three sources are available in the Rita Benton Music Library of the University of Iowa. Of course, biographical sketches may be found in the various encyclopedias and musical dictionaries, such as Groves.

Gaetano Donizetti was born on November 29, 1797, in Bergamo in the province of Lombardy. He was born into a large family that at the time was living in rather impoverished circumstances, a fact that left quite an impression on Gaetano. In a letter written just a few years before his death, Donizetti, reminiscing about his birthplace, wrote: "I was born underground in Borgo Canale. You went down cellar steps where no glimmer of light ever penetrated. And like an owl I took flight . . . never encouraged by my poor father, who was always telling me: it is impossible that you will compose, that you will go to Naples, that you will go to Vienna." Took flight, indeed he did. This late letter reflects much about his drive and motivation to get above his surroundings, fight the odds and prove himself to his father. The "lack of encouragement" notwithstanding, Gaetano was allowed to study at the local Musical Institute in Bergamo. There he received instruction and guidance from Johann Simon Mayr (1763-1845), the Bavarian-born composer who settled in Italy and founded the Bergamo Institute. One cannot overestimate the importance of Mayr's influence upon Donizetti. He was not only his teacher but also a lifelong friend and benefactor whom Gaetano referred to as his "second father." We now marvel at Donizetti's output of 66 operas

(not counting revised versions of a few of them). However, forgotten is the fact that his teacher, Mayr, had composed 61 operas himself between 1794 and 1824! His works are remembered chiefly by his Medea in Corinto. The biographers do not put it this way, but it seems likely that Mayr served as a role model in this drive for output. In his youth, Gaetano studied voice and hoped to become a singer as well as a composer, but his shortcomings as a singer were so extensive that he became discouraged about his musical training and sought to enter a local art school to study design and figure instead of music. He was redirected to a musical career by Mayr. At age 18, encouraged and supported by Mayr, Gaetano left Bergamo to study in Bologna under the tutelage of Stanislao Mattei who had been one of Rossini's teachers (from 1806-1810). In Bologna, Donizetti composed his first complete opera, Il Pigmaliione (1816). (This is a one-act comedy which was never performed in Donizetti's lifetime but in fact got its first performance in October of 1960 at the Teatro Donizetti in Bergamo!) In 1817, Donizetti returned to Bergamo. There with a burst of energy he wrote chamber music, particularly string quartets. At least some of the inspiration for this must have come from the fact that there was a fine amateur quartet in Bergamo with Mayr as its violist. By the end of 1821, Donizetti had composed 16 string quartets (two more came later for a total of 18) as well as other chamber pieces. He also worked on operas during this period. He received his first commission for an opera in 1818 when he was 21 years of age. This was for Enrico di Bergamo, an opera eroica, said to have been hampered by a libretto "that wobbles between the turgid and the ludicrous" (Ashbrook). Its premier went off well at the Teatro San Luca in Venice on March 4, 1818. Despite the flawed libretto, Donizetti's score was judged to be "well considered and appropriately lively and spirited" by the reviewers at the time. The opera's limited success led to other commissions and it was not long before Donizetti's name became known in opera houses all over Italy. Invitations to compose operas for these houses began to pour in. He produced from two to five operas per year for the remainder of his professional life. Many were for the Teatro San Carlo in Naples but also he wrote for Rome, Milan, Palermo, Florence, Venice and ultimately for the opera theaters in Vienna and Paris. He was as willing to compose farce and opera buffa as he was the romantic opera, many on historical subjects which became exceedingly popular. He had a flair for romantic and expressive melody that is exemplified in L'Elisir d'Amore, one of his most popular comic operas.

What about Donizetti, the person? What was he like? He has been described as warm, humorous, fair in his comments about other composers (this in contrast to his contemporary Bellini, who was notoriously jealous and even paranoid). He was mostly modest about his achievements. He had great understanding about costs and concern about finance almost to the point of obsessiveness, which perhaps can be attributed to his early life of poverty and fear of becoming poor again. He was widely read and was partial to Dante. His letters to his father and to Mayr reveal him to have been ambitious and driven to compose quickly. He was more concerned with the dramatic essence of opera than the working out of musical formulae. Apparently he could compose in the midst of confusion but if he heard anyone singing or playing an instrument he would break off his work saying he was unable to continue. He seems to have been completely apolitical. In his extensive correspondence there are almost no references to political matters. His consistent silence was considered to have reflected a lack of interest rather than a concern about censors.

However, he did have a knack for diplomacy in his dealings with business persons and friends as well as family members. Despite his father's selfishness and stubbornness, Donizetti treated him with the patience and generosity indicative of a strong filial loyalty.

He married Virginia Vasselli on June 1, 1828, in a private ceremony. The couple moved to Naples where they lived until her death in 1837 at age 28. The cause of death has been a matter of speculation as it occurred at the time of a cholera epidemic. She suffered a puerperal fever and died not long after the delivery and death of their third child. The couple's first two children also died during infancy. Ashbrook suggests that there is evidence to indicate that Donizetti infected his wife with syphilis which he contracted sometime before 1829 and that the children died from complications of syphilitic infection, as did the wife. Following her death, Donizetti suffered frequent bouts of depression and despair, particularly revealing such moods in his letters around the anniversaries of her demise. Whether he blamed himself or even had any insight into his possible contribution to her death is not known. He never remarried and there were rumors from time to time about his sexual liaisons and amorous affairs. His disease developed into its final stages beginning in 1843. He started to show dramatic mental, physical and behavioral changes with increasing periods of confusion, weakness, mania, depression, and convulsive episodes. He was attended in the period of his decline by Philippe Ricord, a noted physician of that time, who had demonstrated that gonorrhea and syphilis were two distinct diseases. Gaetano Donizetti died on April 8, 1848, at age 51. After his death problems over his estate with intrafamilial squabbles persisted for many years.

### **The Elixir of Love (L'elisir d'amore): A Synopsis to Win You Over**

Nemorino (tenor) is hopelessly in love with Adina (soprano) but he is too passive in his courtship, which annoys Adina. The arrival of Sergeant Belcore (baritone), army recruiter, creates a diversion for Adina. The sergeant is a ladies' man and almost sweeps Adina off her feet. One Dr. Dulcamara (buffo) comes on the scene selling cure-alls and convinces Nemorino that a bottle of his elixir (actually wine) will make him irresistible to the ladies after 24 hours. Drinking the stuff down gives Nemorino a rush of self-confidence, but he suffers a severe let-down when Adina announces she will marry Belcore that evening. Feeling he needs more elixir, Nemorino discovers he is too broke to buy more. He signs up for the army to get the enlistment bonus money as soon as the sergeant returns to the scene and buys more elixir. Nemorino doesn't know that Belcore has already been turned down by Adina at the last moment. Meanwhile the village girls have heard that Nemorino's rich uncle has died and left his fortune to his nephew. They crowd around him and Nemorino thinks his attraction is due to all the fresh elixir he has been drinking. When Adina sees all the fuss over Nemorino whom she expected to be downcast, she is shocked. From Dulcamara she learns that Nemorino truly loves her and drank the elixir in order to win her. She claims she has a more potent weapon than Dulcamara's. Nemorino, noting tears in her eyes, is deeply moved and proclaims his love. After Adina tells him she has bought back his enlistment, she confesses she loves him. They agree to marry and the whole village celebrates the betrothal.

## Miscellani

### Post Così Performance Events

The "Strike Party" (hate to think of this as a celebration to destroy such wonderful sets) went off well and the strikers are most appreciative of the contributions of food, drink and cash made by the Supers. This event is important to the Opera Theater and the contribution the Supers make helps it go off smoothly and less painfully.

The potluck at Mary Wall's was a great success as usual. Good food, good company and good conversation all combine to make it a pleasing event that we will continue each year after the Spring and Summer Operas. One of the Supers attending the potluck left a tablespoon at Mary's. It has a rose design on the handle—check your tableware.

### Obligations of "Subscribers" to the Newsletter

If you are on the mailing list for the Newsletter by choice, you are expected to make some contribution to the activities of the Supers, when asked, at least once during the year, even if you are not an active Super. Thus if you get a call to help provide something for the Strike Party, be it food or a small cash contribution, it would be fitting for you to do so. We are not charging you a subscription fee for the Newsletter but its creation and distribution are costly what with mailing and printing charges. Perhaps we should charge a subscription fee but as yet we do not prefer that route. The cooperation by the Supers has been unassailable but we were surprised to have been turned down on the Strike Party business by one or two persons whose excuse was not being an "active" member.

### Benefit Recital

Rosemay Lack, soprano, will give a benefit recital on ~~Saturday~~ <sup>Sunday</sup>, June 26<sup>th</sup>, at 8:00 p.m. in the Gloria Dei Lutheran Church (Market and Dubuque Streets). Professor Robert Eckert will join her for some duets on this occasion. The Supers will provide the reception following the performance. Plan on attending.

"It is a miracle!"  
-Sgt. Belcore

Dr. Dulcamara's

MAGIC  
ELIXIR

A REMEDY FOR ANY DIAGNOSIS  
including fallen arches, housemaid's knee, warts, infections, halitosis, wrinkles, tonsillitis, phlebitis, senility, imbecility, and repugnancy. My elixr will serve your every need!

A RECIPE DERIVED FROM :  
SECRET ANCIENT CULTS!

# *Elixir of Love*

by Gaetano Donizetti

Libretto by Felice Romani

Beaumont Glass, stage director  
UI Symphony conducted by Michael Deane Lamkin

July 29 at 8:00 p.m. and July 31 at 2:00 p.m.

## UI Opera Theater Cast

Adina	Kerri Rosenberg and Kristie Tigges
Giannetta	Barbara Buddin and Nancy Hagen
Nemorino	Richard Heard and Philip Koffron
Dulcamara	Jeffrey Hook and Jay Jingst
Belcore	Brian Burkhardt and Mark Walters

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