THE ELIXIR OF LOVE

Music by Gaetano Donizetti, Libretto by Felice Romani

A Study Guide

Houston Grand Opera
A lovesick country boy; the beautiful, wealthy girl who has stolen his heart; a blustering officer; gullible villagers; and a quack selling potions from his horse-cart: this is the personnel of L’elisir d’amore, or The Elixir of Love. Written by Gaetano Donizetti in 1832, it is one of the most enduringly successful comic operas, and one that achieves a rare distinction: it’s a comedy with heart.

Donizetti and his librettist, Felice Romani, dashed off the score within the space of a few weeks to fill the opening bill of the opera season at the Teatro Canobbiana when another composer failed to complete his opera in time. After only a few rehearsals, on May 12, 1832, the opera premiered in Milan and was a triumph, securing Donizetti’s place as one of the leading Italian opera composers of his day.

Daniel Slater’s production, originally conceived in 2001, is set in 1950s Italy. In this updated and colorful setting, the character of Adina is a wealthy bar/hotel owner, Nemorino a lovesick waiter, and the charmer Belcore a naval officer who makes his entrance on the most iconic of Italian status symbols—a Vespa! The stage is often very busy with the full chorus taking part in many scenes, all playing their own distinctive characters, which makes for a great theatrical experience!

With its timeless setup, its twists and turns, and its gentle satire of such 19th-century theatrical staples as the traveling doctor, the dashing soldier, and the lure of romantic folktales, L’elisir d’amore offers a good-natured exploration of the tangled webs we weave in love. The story of Adina and Nemorino, the young couple-to-be, is universal. Transport yourself to the last era of innocence in recent history and experience this universal love story.
ACT I

In a town on the Amalfi Coast, a poor young man named Nemorino is hopelessly in love with the capricious and unobtainable Adina. He listens longingly as she reads aloud to her workers and guests the tale of Tristan and Isolde, whose love for each other was inflamed by the drinking of a magic potion.

A stranger arrives in the village—Captain Belcore—who immediately begins to flirt with Adina. Nemorino is miserably jealous, and appalled when Belcore precipitately asks for Adina’s hand in marriage. She does not immediately accept, but neither does she categorically refuse him. Fearful of losing Adina, Nemorino declares his love for her: kindly, but firmly, she turns him down.

Then, another stranger arrives—the colorful and charismatic Doctor Dulcamara. Claiming to offer a miraculous cure for every ill, he sells his wares to the townspeople. Nemorino, believing that the hand of fate is helping him, asks the doctor if he stocks Isolde’s love potion. Seizing the chance to make some easy money, Dulcamara instantly produces the elixir of love. It will not, he warns, take effect for 24 hours: by the time Nemorino discovers it’s nothing but cheap wine, the “doctor” will have left the village.

Nemorino, who has never touched alcohol before, proceeds to drink the entire bottle. He quickly grows more cheerful and confident. Seeing Adina, he adopts an air of lofty indifference. Piqued by his change in attitude, she informs Belcore that she will marry him at the end of the week.

At that moment, the captain’s officers arrive with orders to return to duty the following morning. Belcore therefore suggests they bring forward the wedding to that very evening. Nemorino is horrified: by the time the love potion works its magic, Adina will be married. He pleads with her, but to no avail. To the joy of everyone in the village, Adina and Belcore make preparations for their nuptials.
ACT II

The pre-wedding party is in full swing. Dulcamara invites Adina to sing a duet with him. Belcore summons a lawyer to arrange the wedding contract but Adina—annoyed by Nemorino’s apparent absence—decides to wait before putting pen to paper.

Nemorino, in despair at the prospect of losing the love of his life, begs Dulcamara for another dose of the love potion. The doctor says he will be happy to oblige—in return for hard cash, of course. The penniless Nemorino is therefore easy prey for his rival Belcore, who offers him money to enlist.

What Nemorino does not know is that he has just inherited a fortune, thanks to the death of his uncle. But Giannetta, one of Adina’s senior employees, has heard the news and passes it on to the women in the village. All at once, Nemorino is the most eligible bachelor in the area. Initially bewildered, he attributes his sudden popularity with the ladies to the effects of the elixir.

Dulcamara, too, starts to believe in the power of his own potion. Adina, fearing that she is about to lose Nemorino to another woman, finally acknowledges the strength of her feelings for him and resolves to win him back. Nemorino dares to hope that his dream may be about to come true. It does: Adina, having repaid Belcore the recruitment fee, confesses to Nemorino that she loves him. When they hear of the inheritance, their happiness is complete. Belcore is obliged to leave empty-handed but Dulcamara, attributing all this success to the power of his elixir, departs in triumph.

VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO
the highest-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO
the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian “mezzo” = middle, medium)

CONTRALTO
the lowest female voice, also called an alto

TENOR
the highest voice type in adult males

BARITONE
the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS
the lowest male voice
## The Cast

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<td>The hotel-owning town beauty</td>
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<td>Belcore, baritone</td>
<td>The dashing naval officer</td>
<td>Ben Edquist</td>
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<td>Nemorino, tenor</td>
<td>The poor, lovestruck laborer</td>
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<td>Dulcamara, bass</td>
<td>Traveling quack, quick to make a buck off of his elixir</td>
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Domenica Gaetano Maria Donizetti was born November 29, 1797, in Bergamo, Italy. He was born in a windowless cellar into a poor family of a government clerk. At the age of nine he became a protégé of Johann Simon Mayr, maestro di cappella of Bergamo. Johann Mayr hosted and educated young Donizetti, and later sent the talented boy to study music under the renowned Padre Stanislao Mattei, the headmaster of the music school in Bologna. After graduation he enlisted in the army, and avoided going back to poor life in Bergamo.

In 1818 Donizetti’s first operas were performed in Venice with modest success. In 1822 Donizetti settled in Naples and there had his first big success with two operas: Zoraida di granata (1822) and La zingara (1822). He was developing the bel canto style, writing his hallmark melody lines in a perfect match to Italian lyrics. Donizetti played with a variety of genres from the comedy L’ajo nell’umbarazzo (1824) to the heroic neo-classical drama L’esule di Roma (1829) to the romantic melodrama Il paria (1829).

Donizetti became famous beyond Italy with his opera Anna Bolena (1830). The superb quality of his music made him the rival of Vincenzo Bellini and Gioachino Rossini. Donizetti’s next operas—L’elisir d’amore (1832), Parisina (1833), Lucrezia Borgia (1833), and Maria Stuarda (1834)—were performed in Rome, Genoa, Florence, and La Scala in Milan. Meanwhile, he had a teaching position at the Naples Conservatoire and had a good reputation for his warmth, generosity, and devotion to his work.

Vocally challenging, The Elixir of Love remains a perennial favorite among the bel canto repertoire worldwide. It was made into the eponymous film in 1992, starring Luciano Pavarotti as Nemorino and Kathleen Battle as Adina.
The 19th century was a turbulent period in Italian history. In its early decades, the country was divided into many small kingdoms, duchies, and republics, as well as states controlled by the Catholic Church. Napoleon had invaded Italy in 1796. By 1805 he consolidated the northern territories into a new Kingdom of Italy and reduced the southern Kingdom of Sicily to a small island, renaming its mainland portion the Kingdom of Naples. After Napoleon’s fall in 1815, the peninsula again split into an array of small, antagonistic domains, most under the influence of the Austrian Empire. It was during this period that the notion of a single unified Italian nation arose, driven by a popular democratic movement known as the Risorgimento, or resurgence. Unification would not be achieved until 1870, 22 years after the death of Gaetano Donizetti. But the patriotic passion it brought has, by some, been found in works as apparently apolitical as L’elisir d’amore.

Opera was popular entertainment in 19th-century Italy. In an opera house, all segments of society, literate and unlettered alike, came together, and all Italians could be addressed as one. Still, unlike the younger Giuseppe Verdi, a fiercely political and patriotic man and artist, Donizetti is usually seen as a figure more interested in mounting successful shows than in rallying his countrymen. During a period of political upheaval in Rome, he wrote to his father, “I am a man whom few things disturb, or rather only one: that is, if my opera goes badly. For the rest I do not care.” But Donizetti did occasionally cover political themes in his work, especially his serious operas. And royal censors would sometimes remove such provocative words as “libertà” (liberty) from the librettos he set. In L’elisir d’amore, Belcore and his men serve as a reminder that foreign troops—first Napoleon’s armies, then mercenaries sponsored by Austria—were a common sight in Italian towns during Donizetti’s lifetime, though notably the loyalties of the gently mocked Belcore are never addressed. The strongest connection between Donizetti and the Risorgimento may be found in the writings of Giuseppe Mazzini, who singled out Donizetti as the only living composer who held the promise of creating music of the future—that is, one that could express the complex feelings and political yearnings of the Italian people. Whether Donizetti agreed, we cannot know.
Italian librettist Felice Romani (1788–1865) wrote librettos for such composers as Bellini, Donizetti, Meyerbeer, and Rossini. His well-structured plots and musically favorable texts made him one of the most sought-after Italian librettists of his day.

Romani was born in Genoa to a bourgeois family. He studied in Pisa and Genoa, receiving an excellent legal and literary education. He traveled to France, Spain, Greece, and Germany before settling in Milan in around 1812. He first began working as a librettist in 1813 for Mayr. He was propelled into the first rank of librettists in 1830–31, when his collaborations with Donizetti (Anna Bolena) and Bellini (La sonnambula) were performed in the Milan carnival. Apart from a near-hiatus in 1834–49, when his post in Turin curtailed his work as a librettist, he worked prolifically throughout his life with the major opera composers of the day; many of his librettos were set by more than one composer.

As was the custom of the day, Romani rarely worked closely with the composers using his librettos. Exceptions to collaborative work were Meyerbeer and Bellini, who each worked closely with Romani on plot and structure. Romani’s collaborations, particularly with the latter, became exemplars from the golden age of bel canto opera.

Romani wrote 90 known librettos for 34 musicians before his death in 1865. He worked with the finest composers in Italy, and was well-respected for the quality of his libretto structures and versification.
Ballet and opera were born out of royal entertainments in 17th-century Italy and France. These were spectacular productions celebrating marriages or political visits used by kings or nobles to show off their wealth and power. They were unashamed propaganda aimed at impressing foreign dignitaries and other royals.

These entertainments mixed music, dance, and magnificent processions with spectacular technical effects and extravagant costumes. The stories or themes were taken from classical mythology drawing parallels between the ruler and the mythological gods or heroes.

The tradition of making music an integral part of the theater grew in Roman times and continued through the Middle Ages. Opera flourished for centuries as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, having retained dominance in the field from its earliest stages (the first opera was composed by Italian Jacopo Peri in 1597) to the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924.
The symbiotic relationship between literature and music strengthened as the 19th century unfolded. Richard Wagner (1813–83) created a new genre of opera whereby the function of music was to serve dramatic expression. The *Ring* cycle used Norse mythology and leitmotifs to cohesively bind four operas together using musical themes for characters, situations, and ideas. Wagner composed massive orchestrations, increasing the orchestra size from 50–60 to 90–100 players. Toward the end of the Romantic period, Claude Debussy (1862–1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) explored musical impressionism by stretching tonality and form. Debussy’s one successful opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, is based on the symbolist play by Maurice Maeterlinck, and Ravel’s delightful opera *L’enfant et les sortilèges* (The child and the spells, 1925) places singers in the orchestra pit to vocally depict the items in the child’s room as they come to life on stage.

As drama became more important to the portrayals of characters on stage, composers of the 20th century began to create operas for the actor/singer. The operatic singers who tackle these roles need to be excellent musicians, vocal technicians, and superb actors.

In the 21st century, successful opera composers include Jake Heggie (b. 1961) for *Dead Man Walking* (2000) and John Adams for *Doctor Atomic* (2005). It is noteworthy that Houston Grand Opera mounted the premiere of Adams’s first opera *Nixon in China*, which appears in this 2016–17 season as well as Jake Heggie’s new work *It’s a Wonderful Life*. 
1821  Napoleon Bonaparte dies at the age of 51 under British authority on the island of St. Helena.

1821  A treaty is signed between the United States and the declining power of Spain. The United States buys Florida for 5 million dollars.

1822  Officials of the American Colonization Society have purchased a strip of land they call Christopolis on the Atlantic Coast in western Africa. Eighty-six freed Africans have arrived.

1822  In Vienna the accordion is invented.

1823  Austria, Russia, and Prussia authorize French troops to enter Spain to destroy the liberal revolution there and re-establish the rule of Ferdinand VII.

1823  Steam-powered shipping begins between Switzerland and France.

1823  Mexico, interested in populating Texas, allows Stephen F. Austin to sell plots of land to settlers so long as they are of “good character.”

1824  In Britain, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is founded.

1825  Louis XVIII has died and is succeeded by his reactionary brother, Charles X.

1827  In Vienna, Austria, over 10,000 mourners attend the burial of Beethoven.

1827  New York passes a state law emancipating slaves.

1829  Scotch tape is invented.

1829  Mexico abolishes slavery in its territories.
LANGUAGE ARTS ACTIVITIES

VIEWING/REPRESENTING
Analyze The Elixir of Love. There are certain aspects that pertain to any story. Describe each of the following and how it relates to The Elixir of Love: setting, protagonist, antagonist, point of conflict, climax, denouement, resolution.

WRITING
Choose a character from The Elixir of Love. In first person, write an essay that would describe your feelings as that character throughout the opera. How would you react to other characters? Would you do anything differently?

Write an essay that takes place before or after the opera. What were the characters’ lives like? How were things different or the same?

Do some research on the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Write a compare-and-contrast essay on the legend of Tristan and Isolde and the opera The Elixir of Love. Can you think of other stories that relate to the legend of Tristan and Isolde?

SOCIAL STUDIES

CRITICAL THINKING
Marketing and advertisements bombard us everywhere, whether we recognize it or not. Dulcamara is able to market his products successfully even though they are a sham. Imagine what tactics he uses to get consumers to purchase his products. Are they similar or different to the ones used today? How?

Divide students into groups of three or four, and have them think of marketing tactics used today. Have the students come up with products marketed, and how companies sell them. Here are some questions for them to consider: How does the role of marketing today affect consumers? Think of everyday items and how they are marketed. What makes them so appealing? Do they do what they say they’re going to do? What sort of strategies do you think companies use in their advertisements? Is it difficult to convince consumers to purchase certain products?
**Geography**

The setting of the opera is a town on the Amalfi Coast in the 1950s. Do some research on the Amalfi Coast and write a short essay. Compare what it would have been like in the 1950s to what it is like today.

**Culture**

After viewing the opera, you should have noticed differences between the time period in which the opera took place and today. How was the dress different? How did people interact in their relationships? What were some of the differences and what were some of the similarities? Although there were some differences, could the story be adapted to any time period? Why or why not? Give an example of what the opera would look like in a different setting.

**Math**

Have students create a budget for a student or professional opera production. An opera is often quite expensive to produce, and requires many artists and technicians including singers, musicians, conductor, director, costume maker, props and set designers, lighting designers and technicians, and administrators. For an added technology component, have the students use Microsoft Excel or a similar spreadsheet program.

**Science**

In *The Elixir of Love*, Nemorino drinks the “love potion.” While there is no known substance that can make someone fall in love with you, there are several plants that have been used throughout history as ingredients for a panacea. Research herbalism, and look for plants that have been used for centuries to cure ailments. Are some of them still used today? What cultures use alternative medicine?

**Music**

Have your students create their own opera aria. They can write the text to match an old melody, or even compose a new melody for pre-existing text.

There are five main singers in *The Elixir of Love*. Have your students arrange the voice parts of the characters from highest to lowest. For more information on voice types, see page four of this study guide. What kind of voice would be used to portray a villain? A young child? A king?
Discussion Questions

1. *The Elixir of Love* was written during a period of opera history called the bel canto era. Bel canto opera focused on the voice as the most important element. How does Donizetti demonstrate that the voice is preeminent in *The Elixir of Love*?

2. Which character sings an aria that is distinguished by a repetitive “patter” both in words and music?

3. What makes the role of Captain Belcore a comic character?

4. Who are the two stock comic characters, and how are they different from the two leading characters? Do the stock characters ever change? Do the leading characters change?

5. One element inserted into the libretto by Donizetti is human pathos. Where do we see examples of this in the opera and why is it important?

6. How does the simple accompaniment of the orchestra help us focus on the vocal line?

7. The character Dulcamara has a voice part called *basso buffo*. The Italian word buffo is like the English word buffoon. Compare the word buffoon with the basso buffo character Dulcamara.

8. The French composer Hector Berlioz once complained during the bel canto period that Italian audiences treated opera like a bowl of macaroni. It was something to be consumed and enjoyed—not thought about. He felt opera should be a great exercise of the mind. Is *The Elixir of Love* a bowl of macaroni, or a great exercise of the mind, or both?

9. This opera has been called an example of the “male Cinderella” myth. Do you agree?

10. Was the “elixir” merely a catalyst for action on the part of Nemorino or were there other factors that influenced the outcome?

11. Compare the effects of the “elixir” on Nemorino with the “placebo effect.” Do you think Nemorino acted differently because he thought he was under the influence of a magic potion?

12. In most cases the purpose of a love potion is to make someone fall in love with the giver of the potion. This is not the case in Donizetti’s opera. How is it different?