

THE DAUGHTER OF THE REGIMENT

BY GAETANO DONIZETTI

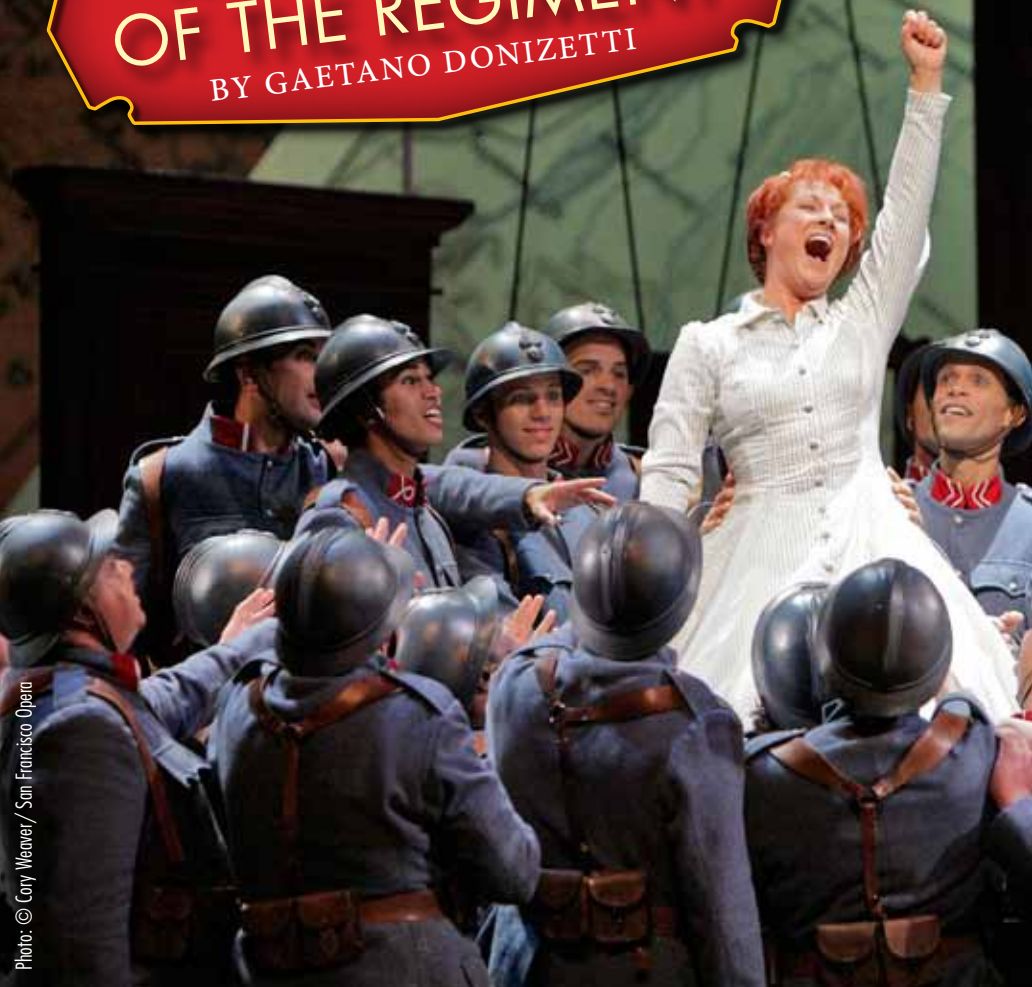


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AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE

WRITTEN BY STU LEWIS OF THE LYRIC OPERA GUILD

An In-Depth Guide written by Stu Lewis
of the Lyric Opera Guild

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Table of Contents

Introduction -	2
The Characters -	4
The Story -	5
Gaetano Donizetti -	10
The Librettists -	13
Donizetti & French Opera -	14
Donizetti & <i>Bel Canto</i> -	16
Donizetti's Comic Heroines -	18
Bibliography -	20

“There are those who insist that an artistic experience be Good for You,” writes Frederick Walter, “and who accordingly plumb that experience for spiritual and sociological values. They forget one thing: laughter, too, is good for you.” While these words were written about Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*, they could equally apply to *The Daughter of the Regiment*. Opera can be a serious art form, releasing our deepest emotions. But sometimes it can be just plain fun.

While *The Daughter of the Regiment* has its share of laughs, as does any good comedy, the fun from watching it comes from another source as well. The singers performing it seem to be having a great time, too. Few operatic roles exude such pure joy as do the principal characters in this opera.

Mezzo-sopranos (lower-voiced women) revel in Rossini; dramatic sopranos dream of singing Aida and Tosca; but for a coloratura soprano, there is no greater composer than Donizetti, and no greater role than that of Marie in this opera. The role of Marie has been a favorite of such singers ever since the opera’s premiere, and a list of its interpreters would constitute a Who’s Who of specialists in the *bel canto* repertoire, including such legendary names as Adelina Patti, Jenny Lind, Luisa Tetrazinni, and Lili Pons. In more recent times, the role came to be associated with Joan Sutherland and Beverly Sills. Today, Natalie Dessay is The Metropolitan Opera’s most popular Marie.

And let’s not forget the role of Tonio. It was a 1966 Covent Garden production that helped launch the career of a young tenor who appeared opposite Ms. Sutherland – Luciano Pavarotti – whose performance of the treacherous “Ah! mes amis” earned him the nickname “the king of the high C’s.” The highlight of a recent documentary film about The Metropolitan Opera’s National Council Auditions featured a young tenor, Alek Shrader, triumphantly negotiating the nine high C’s in the opera’s big tenor aria. And in a recent Kansas City recital, renowned tenor Lawrence Brownlee

received a rare *mid-recital* standing ovation for his rendition of this aria.

A performance of this opera, however, is not about vocal skill alone. It is, rather, about the sheer joy of living. So fasten your seatbelts and come along for the ride.

THE CHARACTERS

4

Marie (soprano) – A vivandière, the “Daughter of the Regiment”

Sulpice (bass) – A French sergeant

Tonio (tenor) – a Tyrolese peasant, later a soldier

The Marquise de Berkenfield (mezzo-soprano)

The Dutchess of Krakenthorp (spoken role)

A Corporal (bass)

A Notary (spoken role)

A Peasant (tenor)

A Valet (spoken role)

Hortentius (bass) – Steward to the Marquise

Chorus of soldiers, villagers, and guests of the Marquise

OVERTURE

Whereas in Donizetti's time the overture often had little to do with the opera it preceded and a composer might simply recycle an overture from an earlier opera, this overture was written specifically for this opera. Not only does it contain references to the regimental song soon to be heard in Act I; it has a military tone appropriate to the subject of the opera and even contains some brief horn sections that suggest a military band.

Note: The Lyric Opera production may omit or condense some of the scenes described below. In addition, in some productions it has become customary to add comic dialogue that is not part of the original text.

ACT I: Outskirts of a Tyrolean Swiss village: 1805

The story begins shortly after the French military victory at the Battle of Marrengo, an event which figures prominently in another well-known opera, Puccini's *Tosca*. A group of villagers, including the Marquise and her attendant, Hortentius, are watching a battle from afar, and fearing the advancing French forces, they pray to a statue of the Virgin Mary for protection. In a brief aria, the Marquise expresses her own concerns about the alleged barbarity of the French soldiers, fearing that her high rank will be of no consequence to the advancing troops. When one of the villagers delivers what turns out to be a premature report that the French are retreating (shades of *Tosca*), all express their relief in a rousing chorus. After issuing instructions to her attendant to be sure that her material possessions are safe, she assures the villagers that she will not abandon them. This brief exchange is expressed in spoken dialogue, a feature of operas written for the Opera Comique.

Reports of the French defeat, however, were premature. Sulpice, an old French sergeant, enters, frightening the villagers, though he assures the people that his regiment has arrived not as conquerors but rather as peace-keepers. He is soon followed on stage by Marie, the "daughter of the regiment," a young woman who was abandoned at birth and has been raised by the men of the regiment, whom she considers to be her fathers.

As fanciful as this story may be, there is some truth behind the institution of the “daughter of the regiment.” During the Napoleonic period, the time setting of this opera, it was common to have a young woman attached to a fighting unit (in a non-sexual role) as a *viviandiere* (a term which will later be used to describe Marie), whose function was to help provide food and drink for the fighting men and to help nurse the ill or wounded soldiers. This practice was adopted by both armies in the American Civil War.

Sulpice, in typical male chauvinist fashion, praises Marie’s beauty, but she reminds him that she has the heart of a soldier. In a duet which gives the soprano ample opportunity to display her vocal agility while the sergeant provides the bass line, Marie sings of her love of military life while Sulpice praises her for the work she has performed for the regiment. They both express their love of the drum rolls – “rataplan, rataplan.”

In a brief spoken-dialogue interlude, Sulpice asks Marie about a local man with whom she has been seen, and she replies that the man in question had saved her life. Their conversation is interrupted by the entrance of the soldiers, who have taken a young man captive, believing him to be a spy. Marie informs them that the man, Tonio, had saved her life when she was about to fall to her death, and they immediately forgive him and toast him as a hero. As he informs us in an aside, he had not been spying but was merely trying to get close to the woman whom he loves. He responds to their toast by declaring his newfound allegiance to France.

In celebration of the moment, Marie sings the regimental song (“Chacun le sait”), a wonderful showpiece for a coloratura soprano, as the soldiers join in the chorus. The soldiers, singing another marching song, escort Tonio, still technically their prisoner, offstage. Tonio quickly escapes his captors, however, and rejoins Marie. In a duet, the two declare their love for each other, though Marie chides Tonio for risking his life, telling him that when one

person loves another, he should take better care of himself for the sake of his beloved. Sulpice returns, just in time to observe the pair departing.

The plot thickens when Hortensius enters with the Marquise. In a relatively lengthy spoken dialogue, the Marquise explains that her surname is Berkenfield, which Sulpice recognizes as the surname of a former captain of the regiment. The Marquise explains that the captain was married to her late sister, and that their orphan child was to be delivered to her care but was lost when the servant escorting her was killed. Sulpice realizes that Marie is the niece in question, and he assures the Marquise that she has grown to be a woman worthy of the Berkenfield name. Marie enters, and Sulpice introduces them. The Marquise insists that Marie accompany her to her home. They prepare to exit, accompanied by the soldiers singing the “rataplan” chorus.

Tonio enters in the regimental costume, having enlisted in order to comply with the demand that Marie could marry only a member of the regiment. In the aria “Ah! mes amis” he explains that the two are in love and he plans to marry his beloved. The aria actually consists of two sections, with Tonio’s opening remarks and the brilliant cabelledda (up-tempo concluding section) surrounding a dialogue between himself and the regiment. The cabelledda, containing nine high C’s, is one of the most challenging numbers for *bel canto* tenors in the entire repertoire, and tenors capable of negotiating these high notes frequently put the two solo sections together into a single aria in their solo recitals.

Tonio’s joy, however, is dampened by the revelation that Marie will be leaving the unit to go off with her aunt. In a touching farewell, Marie, who has not questioned her duty to join her new-found blood relatives, bids a tearful farewell to the soldiers (“Il faut partir”). The sense of pathos is increased by the alternation between Marie’s minor-key solo portions and the major-key sections in which her voice is joined by the regiment. The fact that we – the

audience – realize that this is a comedy and must end happily does not detract from the genuine emotion conveyed in the music. (*The Elixir of Love* contains similar moments of tender emotions, as in the aria “Una furtiva lagrima.”) Marie leaves Tonio in despair as the curtain falls.

ACT II: A drawing-room in the Marquise’s chateau; some time afterward

The orchestra plays a minuet, suggesting the elegance of Marie’s new surroundings. A notary, who has just completed Marie’s marriage contract, bows to the Marquise and departs. Sulpice enters, having been summoned by the Marquise. She informs him that a prestigious marriage has been arranged for Marie, to the Duke of Krakentorp (a comically unromantic name) and she wants Sulpice to encourage Marie to show some enthusiasm for the match. In an aside, Sulpice expresses his own disapproval.

The ensemble which follows is one of the most celebrated comic scenes in all of opera. As part of her education in learning to live as a proper lady, Marie has been taking music lessons, and the Marquise instructs Marie to sing a song by Fettucinne (one wonders if the name itself had to same comic overtones for the original audiences as it does to our ears). The formal melody, with its overblown classical references, is actually Donizetti’s parody of a genuine French art song, and in this context appears to be a parody of the entire classical art-song repertoire and the genteel society it represents. The unrefined Sulpice finds the melody much too slow and boring, and he interrupts the rehearsal when he begins to sing the regimental “rataplan” song to himself, and soon Marie finds herself joining him in the regimental song. The Marquise brings her back to the art song, but once again Sulpice distracts her, and after several trills designed to give the soprano portraying Marie a chance to demonstrate her high notes, she succumbs to the allure of the regimental song. Despairing of her efforts to transform Marie into a proper lady, the Marquise exits, followed by Sulpice.

Left alone on stage, Marie, in another sentimental aria, laments her fate, explaining that she would prefer marriage to her poor soldier to the life of luxury that her sense of duty is forcing her into. Her spirits rise, however, when she hears a military march offstage. The change in mood is reflected in an up-tempo cabaletta expressing her joy at the impending arrival of the regiment, which soon arrives to rescue her from her fate. Tonio, who has been promoted to lieutenant, follows them onstage.

In a lively trio, Marie, Tonio, and Sulpice express their joy at being reunited, and the two lovers implore Sulpice to intercede on their behalf, refusing to listen to his protests. The Marquise enters, and in an impassioned aria, Tonio explains the length he has gone to in order to woo Marie.

The Marquise appears unmoved, and she asks for a moment alone with Sulpice. She proceeds to explain to him what we might have already guessed: Marie is not her niece but her out-of-wedlock daughter. He is moved by her plight and offers to help persuade Marie to enter into a marriage which will allow her to remain part of the Marquise's society.

The snobbish Dutchess enters, complaining that she has not been treated with the proper respect because Marie is not there to greet her. Marie, having learned the truth of her parentage, agrees to the prestigious match, but once again the soldiers come to the rescue. Maternal instinct finally conquers pride, and the Marquise, moved by Marie's devotion to Tonio and the regiment, consents to the marriage of the two lovers. A rousing tribute to France – quite likely impelled by Donizetti's gratitude toward the French for the hospitable reception he had received there – brings the opera to its happy conclusion.

If a measure of an opera composer's significance is the number of his operas that are part of the "standard repertoire," then Gaetano Donizetti (guy-TAH-noh do-nee-TZET-tee) is undoubtedly one of the leading such composers of all time, one of six or seven to have three or more works in that category (the others being Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, Richard Strauss, and possibly Rossini). Though he was once considered the weak link among the big three *bel canto* composers, Donizetti's fame has grown during the last half century. At least four operas – *The Elixir of Love*, *The Daughter of the Regiment*, *Don Pasquale*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor* – have solid places in the repertoire, and interest in several other works has grown, attributable, to a great extent, to Beverly Sills, whose recording of the "three queen" operas – *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda*, and *Roberto Devereaux* – has helped advance the popularity of these works and others.

Donizetti was born November 29, 1797 into an impoverished family in Bergamo, Italy. Fortunately, the music director of a local church, Johannes Simon Mayr, had undertaken the task of raising money for a free music school (partly out of a desire to provide singers for the church choir), and when the school opened in 1806, Donizetti was a member of the first class. At the time, Mayr himself was a well-known opera composer, though today he is remembered primarily as Donizetti's mentor. Like most great composers, Donizetti exhibited his musical skill at an early age, and it was not long before he went off to the conservatory to further develop his talents. Bologna had more to offer than music, and the handsome young man soon became quite a hit with the ladies. Biographers generally believe that it was at this time that the young composer contracted syphilis, a disease that lay dormant for a period of time but eventually caused him to have numerous bouts with poor health and led to his mental collapse and early death.

In 1816, at the age of 19, Donizetti completed the first of his seventy operas, *Il Pigmalione*. It was not until 1822, however, that the world first began to take note of his work with the success of the now forgotten opera seria *Zoraide di Granata*.

In 1828 he married Virginia Vasselli over the objections of his parents, and in a series of tragic events that were later mirrored in the life of Verdi, the couple lost three children in infancy, and Virginia herself died after nine years of marriage during a cholera epidemic, though some biographers have speculated that her death and those of the children may have been precipitated by Donizetti's dormant syphilis infection.

The early 1830's were pivotal in Donizetti's career. In 1830 he collaborated with Felipe Romani on *Anna Bolena*, his first opera to achieve any lasting success. Two years later the pair came out with *L'elisir d'amore* (*The Elixir of Love*), which was an instant hit. The opera was written at break-neck speed, and Donizetti took no more than six weeks to compose the music. He claimed it took two weeks, but he was known at times to have exaggerated the speed at which he worked.

In November, 1834 he signed a contract with the Royal Theatres of Naples to compose three operas, with subjects to be chosen by the company. The following spring, after a considerable delay which caused him to have to compose under terrible time pressure, the company put him in touch with librettist Salvatore Cammarano, and the two began to work on *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which had its premiere September 26, 1835. Several operas had already been written on the same subject, but all except Donizetti's have essentially been forgotten. The opera was an instant hit. Donizetti wrote, "Every piece was listened to with religious silence and hailed by spontaneous cheers." Throughout the remainder of Donizetti's lifetime, it remained the single most popular Italian opera.

The death of his wife in 1837 and his own declining health caused him to fall into deep depression, but fortunately for both him and us he was able to fight through it, perhaps using music as a form of therapy.

In 1838 he began work on *Poliuto*, but the ubiquitous censors, who later were to plague Verdi for much of his career, found too many political undertones to allow it to be produced, so he set his sights on Paris. France not only offered composers more artistic freedom; there was also better copyright protection, creating a more lucrative environment for composers. He was already somewhat of a celebrity in Paris, as both *Anna Bolena* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* had been performed there to great acclaim.

La Fille du Regiment (*The Daughter of the Regiment*), first performed February 11, 1840 at the Opera Comique, was Donizetti's first opera to be composed to a French libretto. The critics were not kind. The composer Hector Berlioz, in particular, attacked him for using recycled music from earlier in his career, an allegation which Donizetti furiously denied. Some of Berlioz's comments reveal a more sinister motive for his criticism; his French chauvinism had caused him to resent the growth of foreign influences on French music. "M. Donizetti seems to treat us like a conquered nation," he complained; "It is a veritable invasion."

Fortunately, the public paid little attention to the critics, and the opera was a major success, and an enduring one. By 1850 it had been performed over one thousand times at the Opera Comique theater alone.

Donizetti was to enjoy additional success in Paris, writing *Don Pasquale*, considered by many to be his greatest masterpiece, for Paris' Theatre Italien, a company devoted to the production of Italian opera.

During the 1840's he moved between Paris and Vienna, but by the middle of the decade his illness began to affect his brain, and he sank into paranoia, delusional behavior, and paralysis. He was at first institutionalized in Paris, though his relatives eventually arranged for him to be transported home, where he died April 8, 1848.

The libretto of *The Daughter of the Regiment* was a collaboration between two men, Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges (1799-1875) and Jean-Francois-Alfred Bayard (1796-1853), two playwrights who were associated with the “school” of Eugene Scribe and the “well-made play.” The former was a prolific writer who enjoyed great popularity in his day, despite (or maybe because) of his predictable use of improbable coincidences. In addition to this opera, he also wrote the libretto for Bizet’s *La jolie fille de Perth*. Bayard, though he also produced a number of works, is generally regarded as a one-hit wonder, and were it not for his collaboration on this opera, he would barely be a footnote in the history of French drama.

DONIZETTI & FRENCH OPERA **14**

The final season at the Lyric Theater is truly an international experience. We began with a French opera set in Spain, followed by an Italian opera set in France. We will conclude the season with an Italian opera by a German-speaking composer, set in Spain, based on a French play. And our present offering is a French opera by an Italian composer, sung (in this production) in English, and set in Switzerland.

La fille de regiment is definitely a French opera, not an Italian-style opera that happened to be written in French. It was written specifically for the Opera Comique, with spoken dialogue instead of recitative (sung speech) to advance the plot between the musical numbers, though Donizetti does frequently use recitative, and the spoken dialogue is kept to a minimum. When Donizetti transformed the opera into *La figlia del reggimento* for its Italian premiere at La Scala, the piece underwent a thorough revision to appeal to Italian tastes. (The Lyric Opera 2011 production is translated from the French version).

More than that of any other nation, French opera has been influenced by non-native composers. Jean-Baptiste Lully, the first significant French opera composer, was an immigrant from Italy. German-born composers – including Gluck, Meyerbeer, and Offenbach – played a major role in the development of French opera. Though the Parisian audiences did enjoy Italian opera, supporting a separate theater specifically devoted to that genre, they generally wanted to hear operas written in the French style to French librettos. When Verdi, for example, composed for the Paris Opera, he specifically adapted his works for that company. Both *Le trovatore* and *Don Carlos* are significantly different from their Italian counterparts, *Il trovatore* and *Don Carlo*. Rossini spent the last several years of his life in Paris; *Guillaume Tell* (a work which unfortunately is known to most people today only for its overture, containing what was to become the “Lone Ranger” theme) was written for the Paris Opera. (An interesting bit of trivia: the legendary Jeopardy champion Ken Jennings once kept his streak alive by identifying French as the

language in which this opera was written – “the language of neither its composer nor its subject.”) Donizetti, as we have mentioned earlier, also spent a significant amount of time in Paris, to the point where some French critics became concerned over his influence.

A significant characteristic of French opera was its focus on the text. Composers were expected to write in such a way that the meaning of the libretto would be emphasized. At the Comique, as we have mentioned earlier, spoken dialogue was used to advance the plot, a custom which was to influence the development of English-language operetta and the Broadway musical. (Perhaps if Americans accepted the idea that opera can include spoken dialogue we would come to admit works such as *Carousel* and *West Side Story* to the American operatic canon.)

Beyond the spoken dialogue, however, the French focus on text influenced the style of the music itself, leading to a more free-flowing style of music as the melodies were designed to follow the pattern of the spoken word. As early as 1702, the Abbe Ragnuet noted, “there are so many things in which the French music is better than Italian...our operas are much better composed: nothing could be more lively and natural than their dialogues: gods are caused to speak with suitable dignity, nymphs and shepherds with gentleness and innocent merriment...the French, in their airs, aim at the gently, easy, flowing and coherent.” Even if we do not accept the French style as superior – certainly, most opera lovers do not share this prejudice – these words do describe a difference of style that continued well into the twentieth century.

The era in which Donizetti composed his major works is generally known as the *bel canto* era, though the term itself came into being years later, when Rossini lamented that the *bel canto* tradition no longer existed. Along with Bellini and Rossini, Donizetti is regarded as one of the “big three” *bel canto* composers. Meaning literally “beautiful singing,” the term is generally associated, in the words of music historian Owen Jander, with “a naturally beautiful voice that was even in tone throughout its full range, careful training that encouraged effortless delivery of highly florid music, and a mastery of style that could not be taught, but only assimilated from listening to the best Italian exponents.” One important component of *bel canto* is the coloratura style, the sort of vocal acrobatics which have made superstars of so many sopranos throughout the ages. The legendary Maria Callas, in fact, was instrumental in reviving *bel canto* music after it had fallen out of vogue early in the twentieth century.

During the *bel canto* era, the importance of set pieces (such as arias, duets and ensembles) increased, leading to the term “numbers operas” – operas in which individual sections could be identified as independent units. Since the conventions of Italian opera called for continuous music, recitatives, a sort of sung speech, were used to replace spoken dialogue and tie the various numbers together in those operas that were written for the Italian stage.

One feature of *bel canto* singing is the latitude that singers have to improvise, especially when a melody is repeated. Donizetti frequently created roles for specific singers, and he wrote only the bare bones of the melody, expecting them to devise their own variations. (Of course variations could be overdone. It was reported that one singer performed a Rossini aria for the composer and made so many alterations that the composer wryly commented, “That was a beautiful aria. Who wrote it?”)

One of Donizetti's most significant innovations was the development of the dramatic tenor as the leading man. While Verdi and Puccini developed this voice type even further, it could be said that the fact that we have "Three Tenors" rather than "Three Baritones" concerts is a direct result of Donizetti's influence.

While with the exception of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Donizetti is best remembered for his comic works, he was also influential in the development of the romantic opera as an alternative to the stiff "opera seria" of the previous generation.

But despite these advances in drama, Donizetti never lost sight of the fact that it was melody that most appealed to his audiences. He remarked, "If you want to know if a certain piece of music is good, play the melody without the accompaniment." Known as a "singer's composer," he believed that the voice, rather than the orchestra, was the most important component in opera, and, like many other Italians, he believed in the supremacy of melody, which even in his lifetime was coming under attack: "The German student says: 'Ah, here there is too much rhythm! Ah! Here there is too much melody!... But I will not ever say, however, as various people do; that that which is regularly rhythmical, is not sublime.'" Today's composers and critics, many of whom sneeringly brand as "retro" any opera that includes hummable melodies and set pieces, might well pay attention to this credo, for it has enabled Donizetti's operas to continue to delight audiences down to the present day.

DONIZETTI'S COMIC HEROINES 18

As was mentioned earlier, sopranos love to sing Donizetti's music, not only because of the beautiful melodies he composed but also because of the wonderful characters in his operas. In *Anna Bolena* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* he created two of the stage's most memorable tragic heroines, but in many ways the heroines of his three best-known comic operas are even more memorable, all of whom defy society's conventional expectations of women.

Marie, having been raised by a regiment of soldiers, is in many ways free of the stereotypical role women were expected to play in real society in Donizetti's time. She is assertive and self-reliant, one of the guys. When Sulpice tells her she is pretty as an angel, she replies that she has the heart of a soldier. Despite the aforementioned male-chauvinist remark, Sulpice genuinely admires her assertiveness, and when he assures the Marquise that she has had a proper upbringing, the virtues he admires in her are clearly far different from the ones she is looking for. In the music-lesson scene, Sulpice is acting in her best interest when he successfully rescues her from the "high" culture that the Marquise is attempting to impose on her. Having seen her in action, most audiences will be dismayed at the timidity she expresses in deference to the Marquise, but this seems to be more of a plot device than a real expression of her character.

Adina, in *The Elixir of Love*, is one of the few women in opera admired more for her brains than for her looks. From the way that the villagers hang on her every word during the opening scene, we may suspect that she is the only literate person in the village. Nemorino gazes at her lovingly, singing of her "reading, studying, improving, learning..." Like Marie, she does have a lapse of judgment, coming dangerously close to marrying Belcore, who is a caricature of a male chauvinist, but ultimately she chooses Nemorino while still believing him to be poor. In some ways her life is a feminist fantasy for her age, as she is an independent woman, depending on no man for her support.

The young widow Norina in *Don Pasquale* is likewise free of male control. Far from a stereotypical member of the “weaker sex,” she instead uses her wits to play on Don Pasquale’s expectations of women by pretending to fit into two masculine stereotypes of women. Pasquale is seeking to marry again and disinherit his nephew, whom she loves, so she first acts out the stereotype of “woman as airhead” to win Pasquale’s affection, and then following a mock wedding, she turns herself into another stereotype, that of a shrew and spendthrift. She ultimately gets what she wants by acting like a stereotypical woman rather than by becoming one.

Taken together, all three of these women demonstrate a remarkable degree of intelligence, wit, and determination. This is why both audiences and singers have fallen in love with them.

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Lyric Opera of Kansas City
1029 Central
Kansas City, MO 64105
(816) 471-4933 Administrative Office
(816) 471-7344 Patron Services
www.kcopera.org