

## L'ELISIR D'AMORE – AN OPERA BY GAETANO DONIZETTI

Researched by George Kurti Plohn

During our Sunday opera series at Esplanade, we encountered until now Gaetano Donizetti in some of his other operas, namely Lucia di Lammermoor, Anna Bolena and Don Pasquale, and today we present another Donizettian gem, *L'elisir d'amore* (Italian for The Elixir of Love). This is a comic opera in two acts, a lovely sentimental comedy. Donizetti a man of opposites, known in equal measure for his delightful opera buffa comic pieces, such as this one, but also for his tragic operas like the blood-soaked tragic tale of Lucia di Lammermoor.

Written in haste in a six-week period, so much so that working at a frenzied pace, he wrote only the dots of the notes on the staff and then he'd come back and put in the stems and flags later.

*L'elisir d'amore* was for long time the most often performed opera in Italy in the XIXth century and it has remained continually in the international opera repertory since then.

There is also personal history in this opera, as Donizetti's military service was bought by a rich woman, so that, unlike his brother Giuseppe, he did not have to serve in the Austrian army, Lombardy at that time being under Austrian rule, and this fact was made part of this opera; Adina, the soprano protagonist in this opera buying Nemorino's military service contract so he doesn't have to go to war.

The opera was composed and first performed with a tumultuous success in 1832, when Donizetti was 35 years old. Sixteen years later, in 1848, at only 51, he will die of syphilis!



The story of this opera is not only a mere comedy with respect to an elixir of love. But you can listen to melodies which are filled with much of sorrow. You will be fascinated by a mysterious atmosphere between comedy and sorrow. The heroine, Adina, is not only a mere beautiful and rich young lady but also one who has a tender heart. Nemorino is not only a mere credulous poor simple villager but also a young man who has a passionate heart. You can enjoy to full extent these double characters in this opera.

There is no doubt that Nemorino's aria, "*Una furtiva lagrima* (A Furtive Tear)," in act 2 is one of the most lyrical and famous aria in all operas. But, this opera contains other wonderful arias and duets as well.

The pitiful fellow Nemorino, a poor, lovestruck laborer yearns for the lovely Adina, a rich and beautiful young lady who shows him nothing but indifference (don't they always?). But when Nemorino hears the legend of "Tristan and Isolde," about the love potion that causes Isolde to fall madly in love, Nemorino wonders if such a potion exists, and soon finds a con man, Dulcamara, who gladly sells him a "potion" that's really just plain wine. Dulcamara is a travelling charlatan, quick to make a buck off his

cure-all elixir and even quicker to leave town afterwards.

Here are two trivia tidbits about the names of our heroes:

- The name 'Dulcamara' is a combination of the Latin words for 'sweet' (*dulce*) and 'sour' (*amara*).
- The name 'Nemorino' means 'the little nobody' and comes from the Latin word for nobody (*nemo*).
- Another character in the opera is the sergeant Belcore (bel –beautiful; cuore – heart)

The usual comic hijinks ensue; Nemorino thinks the potion has made him more desirable to Adina, but in fact she has had feelings for him all along.

And when Nemorino sings "Una furtiva lagrima" in the opera's second act, it is all love and hope, when he discovers that Adina cares for him after all. He sees what he thinks is a tear in her eye (the name of the aria translates to "a single secret tear"). And Pavarotti sings it for us the way only he was able to, almost hypnotizing us with his golden voice! The verses translated into English say it all:

A single secret tear  
from her eye did spring:  
as if she envied all the youths  
that laughingly passed her by.  
What more searching need I do?  
She loves me!  
Yes, she loves me, I see it. I see it.  
For just an instant the beating  
of her beautiful heart I could feel!  
As if my sighs were hers,  
and her sighs were mine!

But time is running out – Adina, in the meantime has agreed to marry the pompous and dashing sergeant Belcore. Will the potion work? Will Dulcamara get out of town before anyone discovers it doesn't work? Will Nemorino get his girl? So much suspense!

## **Synopsis.**

### Act 1

In the 19th century, in Spain, a beautiful and rich young lady, Adina, reads the book "Tristan and Isolde" to the people in her village. A young and poor villager, Nemorino, also listens to the story which she reads. In that story, Tristan takes the elixir of love, and Isolde falls passionately in love with him. So, Nemorino thinks, "I'd like to get the elixir of love. I wish it were true." Because, he loves Adina.

Then, sergeant Belcore appears, and attempts to seduce Adina this most beautiful girl in the village. Nemorino is frustrated by the appearance of a masculine rival.

A traveling purveyor of medicines, Dulcamara also arrives in the village. He advertises a potion capable of curing anything. Nemorino asks him if he has the elixir of love, which Tristan took. Actually, Dulcamara is an impostor. He sells Nemorino a bottle of cheap wine, and explains to him, "This elixir will have an effect on you, tomorrow." Dulcamara intends to

run away before the day is over.

Nemorino tells Adina that she will fall in love with him the next day. Adina of course gets angry. She declares she is going to marry the sergeant Belcore, this day. Nemorino begs her to wait till the next day. But Adina ignores him.

## Act 2

Nemorino attempts to buy one more bottle of elixir, but he doesn't have enough money. So, he decides to sign up for the army, in order to get the sign-up money they offer.

Adina is given an account of Nemorino's plan from Dulcamara. Adina learning that Nemorino is willing to risk his life by entering the army is moved to tears by Nemorino's affection for her. Nemorino also notices her tears, and understands their meaning.

Adina then pays Nemorino's sign-up money back, and marries him. So then, after all, Dulcamara's elixir has an effect. And Dulcamara peacefully leaves the village.



Luciano Pavarotti and Judith Blegen in *L'elisir d'amore*

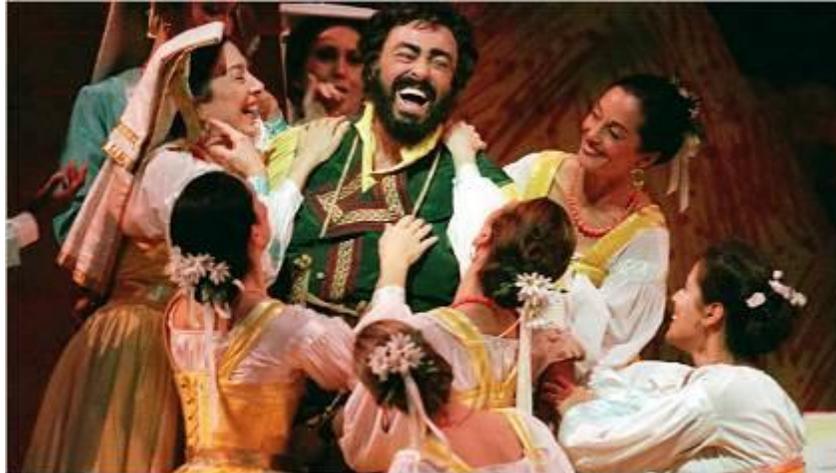
Our recording with the Metropolitan Opera is of 1978, in the cast the one and only Luciano Pavarotti as Nemorino, the American soprano Judith Blegen as Adina , and in the role of Doctor Dulcamara: Sesto Bruscantini, the Italian baritone, one of the greatest buffo singers of the post-war era.

As the duration of this opera is 2:20, we will have today only Act 1 lasting 1:15. Act 2 will be on next Sunday with a duration of 65 min.

I feel the need to stop here for a short reminiscence about Luciano Pavarotti. Like Enrico Caruso before him, Pavarotti extended his presence far beyond the limits of Italian opera. He became also a titan of pop culture, millions saw him on television and found in his expansive personality, childlike charm, taking a bow with his extended hands clutching a huge white handkerchief, a generous figure who for so many became a link to an art form with which so many had only a glancing familiarity. His popular nickname was and remains "King of the High Cs".

Luciano Pavarotti died on September 6, 2007 after a yearlong battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 71 years old. His funeral was held in Italy at the Modena Cathedral. The then Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and UN Secretary Kofi Annan attended. The *Frecce Tricolori* (Italian for The Tricolored Arrows), the aerobatic demonstration team of the Italian Air Force, flew overhead, leaving green-white-red smoke trails, the national flag colors of Italy. After a funeral procession through the center of Modena, Pavarotti's coffin was taken the final 6 miles to the

village of Montale Rangone, and was interred in the Pavarotti family crypt. The funeral, in its entirety, was also telecast live on CNN. The Vienna State Opera and the Salzburg Festival Hall flew black flags in mourning. Tributes were published by many leading opera houses of the world. The world lost one of its greatest.



Luciano Pavarotti during dress rehearsal for "L'Elisir d'Amore," at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1998.



Luciano Pavarotti in 2002

## JUDITH BLEGEN

**Judith Blegen** (born in 1943, Lexington, Kentucky) is an American soprano of Norwegian descent, particularly associated with light lyric roles of the French, Italian and German repertoires. She was raised in Missoula, Montana, population 66,000. Her father was a surgeon and her mother a music teacher. Blegen's musical talent was enhanced by her energy and dedication, while her budding vocal talent was nurtured through voice lessons from the age of 14 and by singing soprano in her church choir. At 17, she weathered an unlucky audition for the New York Metropolitan Opera during on-the-road tryouts held in Washington. The experience left her undeterred and by her senior year at Missoula High School she was enrolled in music lessons at the University of Montana, Missoula. She attended the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, CA. As a leading soprano at the New York Metropolitan Opera, Judith Blegen earned a reputation as the singer whose looks

were as pretty as her voice. Critics applaud her talent, and there is much to praise, from her light, 'canary-like' tremolo to her charm. Blegen, is a surprisingly petite diva of Norwegian heritage, and projects a sweetness equaled only by her musical talent and attractive looks. She married in 1967 and had one son, Thomas, born in 1970. She divorced in 1975 and married again in 1977.



Judith Blegen



Judith Blegen and Johnny Carson