

Donizetti's *Love Potion* with a bite of tech

Colón offers famous opera with post-WW2 setting and over-the-top use of technology

BY PABLO BARDIN
FOR THE HERALD

Gaetano Donizetti was one of the most prolific opera composers in the age of *bel canto*. He wrote 71 works between 1816 and 1844, only a few of which are nowadays in repertoire: *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La favorite* and the *Three British Queens*: *Anna Bolena*, *Roberto Devereux* and *Maria Stuarda* (all three presented by Adelaida Negri in BA), on the serious side; and two first-rate comedies, *L'elisir d'amore* and *Don Pasquale*, both sung this season in Buenos Aires.

L'elisir d'amore (*The Love Potion*) is Donizetti's 39th opera, written in 1832 when he was 35. It was a great success and came directly after a flop, *Ugo, conte di Parigi*. Amazingly, the librettist — the famous Felice Romani — and the composer managed to create on extremely short notice, just 15 days, one of the best comedies of those years.

However, Romani had “help,” sort of, because he based his plot on Eugène Scribe's libretto for Daniel Auber's *Le philtre*, which I would love to get to know and thus compare it to Donizetti's opus. For it happens that Auber was a past master of French opera, with a vast production.

Almost at the start, you find a curious link of Donizetti with Wagner (I wonder if he knew *L'elisir d'amore*): Adina reads the fragment of the story of Tristan and Isolde where they fall in love after taking a potion; she breaks into laughter. Later on, Nemorino will mention it to Dulcamara and the “doctor” produces a “potion” — but tells us that it's “Bordeaux”. Most of the plot is about the effect and its swiftness.

But there's a big question at the end: was Adina aware that Nemorino had just inherited a big fortune when she told the lad that she loved



A scene from the Colón's latest revival of *L'elisir d'amore*.

him? Would a rich farm owner marry such a limited swain? It strains credibility.

However, the charm of the situations and of the music is maintained throughout, with many excellent moments: the melancholy and achingly beautiful *Spirto gentil*, the side-splitting entrance scene of Dulcamara with its catalogue of complaints erased by his *specifico*, the melting Adina-Nemorino duet after the mentioned aria...

The Colón last presented *L'elisir...* in 2002, with an Argentine cast. This revival is welcome. It is the seventh since 1957 for this famous opera.

However, all was not well. When Pedro Pablo García Caffi planned this season, he chose *L'elisir...* because he needed a comedy in a year where

all the rest was dramatic. But two facts must be faced: a) the cast of four young Europeans made their local debut and proved to be uneven — no big names, probably for budgetary reasons; b) the team of producer Sergio Renán, stage designer Emilio Basaldúa and Gino Bogani (costumes) had been successful in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, and was called for this Donizetti. But this very simple piece needs a traditional, conventional approach, and these artists thrive on complexity.

The best singer-actor was the Dulcamara, Simón Orfila; he has good vocal means and handles them professionally. Without exaggerating, he gave character to his imaginative charlatan. Slovak soprano Adriana Kucerová is personable and jaunty,

though her voice is small for the Colón; she sings agreeably, albeit without a personal touch.

I learned during the interval that Sicilian tenor Ivan Magri was singing with a high fever and there was rumour that he might be replaced for the Second Act, but, showing admirable control, the artist recovered and delivered a very commendable *Spirto gentil*. The voice, rather gruff when he started the First Act, plus some questionable details later on, sounded much better in the Second Act. As an actor, he was correct.

I found Giorgio Caoduro unacceptable as Belcore, even if he looks right for the part, for his voice is harsh and vibrato-ridden and his florid singing was unclear. Jaquelina Livieri sang nicely her Giannetta, the girl

that tells the news about the inheritance to the gossips of the hamlet.

Francesco Ivan Ciampa is a young conductor with a mainly Italian career; he kept things together acceptably, but with no finesse, and the orchestra took some time to settle. The choir under Miguel Martínez was alright.

I don't question the vast experience and talent of the production team, but I feel, as I implied, that *Elisir...* needs a plainer production, with the rural ambience of Raúl Soldi's 1971 stage designs. Renán decided to transport the action to post-WWII Italy — less believable than the original setting — and made Adina the owner of an orange-juice plant. He goes over the top in his use of projections (audiovisual design, Álvaro Luna), some funny (Tristan and Isolde under the guise of Nemorino and Adina), many unnecessary or negative (the shot with a Dulcamara trailer). But he moves the action well and has a sense of show, though sometimes exaggerated (Dulcamara doesn't need four assistants, one of which is a variety girl).

Basaldúa is technically very accomplished, and his ample designs for the first three tableaux are impeccably solved. The use of the revolving disk allows the audience to go from the vast interior of the processing plant to a beautiful wood with cypresses and an enormous moon (the cunning lighting design is by Sebastián Marrero).

As to Bogani, his exuberant imagination can't be fully applied in this particular piece, but there were fine gowns for Adina and a humorous costume for Dulcamara.

WHERE AND WHEN

Teatro Colón (Cerrito 628). Today at 8pm. Tickets from 115 to 2250 pesos available at the venue.