

## Donizetti's elixir is still a winning formula at Covent Garden

By David Kalin, 14 November 2012

Take one hapless but lovable hero, one capricious but ultimately vulnerable heroine, a doctor and an army officer straight out of *commedia dell'arte*, a couple of *basso buffo* patter songs, at least one memorable romantic ballad, and stir the lot into a good lashing of boisterous Italian music with a sprinkling of furtive tears. Donizetti's formula for *L'Elisir d'Amore* may not have made all the girls fall at his feet, it did bring him money and enduring fame beyond even the wildest predictions that could have been made by the quack Dr. Dulcamara.

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*L'Elisir d'Amore* has never really fallen out of favour since its premiere in 1832, and something about its uncomplicated charm seems to inspire opera directors: the productions I've seen have all been quite different in setting, but all have been thoroughly entertaining. Laurent Pelly's 2007 production, however, getting its second revival at Covent Garden this season, tops the lot.

For the first and last thirds of the opera, set designer Chantal Thomas creates a giant pile of haystacks on an Italian farm of the 1950s. This gives way to an open area next to farm buildings in front of a diorama of cornfields stretching out into the distance. Villagers ride on bikes and scooters around a main road which serves for Dulcamara's arrival in an enormous truck and for a drunken Nemorino to arrive on his tractor, which he crashes spectacularly into a lamppost. The fire curtain is a work of art in itself, covered with 1950s style ads for Dulcamara's various pills, lotions and potions, and Pelly's delightful costumes complete the picture. Revival director Daniel Dooner's attention to detail is noticeable, from the barcarole sequence in which Belcore puts his army cap on backwards and mimes rowing a gondola (to be shushed by Adina, who realises how ridiculous he looks) to Nemorino fishing out straw from various bits of Adina's clothing as they return to the stage for the finale from their proverbial roll in the hay.

All of the four main singers were big stars, either established or up-and-coming. Two of them, however, weren't necessarily obvious choices for *opera buffa*. Roberto Alagna (as Nemorino) and Fabio Maria Capitanucci (as Sergeant Belcore) both have fine, strong and musical voices and act well, but both seemed more comfortable singing the dramatic parts of their roles, rather than trying to infect their musical lines with bubbling gaiety. We're used to hearing Nemorino sung by a lighter, more agile voice than Alagna's, so the part sounded different from how it often does. However, I'm not going to quarrel with his rendering of *Una furtiva lagrima* or his other big arias: he has all the notes and didn't sound as forced as you might have expected from a tenor who made his name singing more dramatic repertoire.

The other two main singers, however, were completely in their element. As Adina, Aleksandra Kurzak displayed wonderful vocal flexibility: the coloratura passages sounded effortless, beautifully phrased and weighted, with the occasional overly strident high note timed perfectly for comic effect. Ambrogio Maestri clearly relishes the larger-than-life role of Dulcamara, extolling his cleverness with gusto. All the singers absolutely looked the part, Kurzak stretched out flirtatiously on the haystacks, bounding around them or dancing gaily in the square, Maestri lumbering, fat and self-satisfied, Alagna rustic and a bit dim, Capitanucci an imposing military figure.

My one disappointment was the orchestra, conducted by Bruno Campanella. It was all nice and elegant, but for the first two thirds of the opera at least, I felt that the playing was a bit slow and lacked some of the devil-may-care sparkle in Donizetti's score. First rate acting performances made me forget this some of the time, but not all. One nice musical touch came in the recitative when Dulcamara is explaining to Adina about the love potion of Queen Isolde: the harpist dropped into the accompaniment a quick bar of Wagner's famous Tristan Chord. Half the audience giggled, the other half must have been wondering what on earth the joke was.

*L'Elisir* isn't an opera for lovers of the cutting edge of drama. But for a quick bit of frothy romantic comedy, it's hard to beat, and even if this wasn't the best I've ever heard the orchestral music, Pelly's magical setting and fine performances by Kurzak and Maestri made this a fun and memorable evening's opera. And I'm still humming *Quanto è bella, quanto è cara*.