

*Virginia  
Opera*

The  
Elixir  
of Love  
*Donizetti*

**STUDY GUIDE**

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# THE ELIXIR OF LOVE

by  
**Gaetano Donizetti**

Libretto by  
**Felice Romani**

based on the libretto by Eugène Scribe  
for the opera *Le Philtre*  
by Daniel Auber

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# THE ELIXIR OF LOVE

## Premiere

First performance at Teatro della Canobbiana in Milan, Italy, on May 12, 1832.

## Cast of Characters

<b>Adina</b> , a wealthy village girl.....	Soprano
<b>Nemorino</b> , a young peasant.....	Tenor
<b>Sergeant Belcore</b> , a soldier .....	Baritone
<b>Dr. Dulcamara</b> , an itinerant quack doctor.....	Bass
<b>Giannetta</b> , a peasant girl.....	Soprano
Villagers, Soldiers, Peasants .....	Chorus

## Brief Summary

Setting: A rural Italian village in the nineteenth century

Adina is reading to a group of villagers about the love potion in the story of Tristan and Isolde. Nemorino is one of the listeners. He secretly loves Adina. Sgt. Belcore arrives in the village with his men. Belcore asks Adina to marry him. She gives no answer. Nemorino also speaks to Adina and reveals his feelings. Adina replies that she feels nothing for him and she prefers to remain free and capricious. The traveling “doctor” Dulcamara arrives in the village selling a fake tonic that “cures” all ailments. Nemorino asks if he has the love potion of Queen Isolde. Dulcamara says “Of course,” and sells Nemorino cheap red wine with instructions to wait one day for results. Nemorino gets tipsy from the wine and ignores Adina when she comes near. Adina tells Belcore that she will marry him in six days. Belcore convinces her to marry him right away. Nemorino sinks into despair.

The pre-wedding dinner is underway. Adina wants Nemorino present for the wedding so she can spite him. In order to stop Adina, Nemorino decides he needs to buy more elixir. To get the money he needs to buy the elixir, he allows Belcore to enlist him in the army for the bonus money. Dulcamara reveals to Adina why Nemorino enlisted. She realizes his goodness and her love for him. She buys back his enlistment and confesses her love to Nemorino. Nemorino then learns that he has inherited a lot of money. Dulcamara takes credit for having an elixir that brings both love and money. The villagers buy his entire stock of elixir and all cheer him as he drives away a very happy man.

## Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

### ACT I

A short prelude begins Act I. It contains a theme and variations musically unrelated to the rest of the opera. The opening scene reveals the wealthy and beautiful Adina sitting with her friend Giannetta, reading a book. Close by are a group of peasants resting from their labors. One of them, Nemorino, is hopelessly in love with Adina. He sings **“Quanto è bella, quanto è cara!” (Oh, how charming, oh how lovely!)** wondering how he could possibly win her love when she is so much better than him. Adina laughs over the book she is reading and the peasants beg her to read to them. She does so, recounting the story of the magic love potion that bound Tristan and Isolde together, **“Della crudele Isotta” (Love for the cruel Isolde).**

A drum roll signals the arrival of the bombastic and dashing Sergeant Belcore leading a troop of soldiers. He gives Adina a bouquet and asks her to marry him, commenting aside that he knows she'll accept because he's so handsome. Adina, however, tells him she needs time to think it over. She orders refreshments for the weary soldiers and instructs the peasants to get back to their work. As they leave Nemorino calls her aside and professes his love, but Adina expresses boredom with his swooning and suggests that he find new diversions and adventures, or go home and watch over his old, but rich uncle. She expresses her desire to remain free and capricious in the duet, **“Chiedi all'aria lusinghiera,” (Ask the gently flowing breeze).** She claims that she is restless as a breeze or a bubbling stream (which is represented by rolling arpeggios in the clarinets) and must find new loves and diversions with every passing day.

Dr. Dulcamara, a congenial and talkative quack, arrives in the town square generating a great deal of excitement. He extols the wonders of his extraordinary remedy that is guaranteed to cure all ills in a *buffo* aria, **“Udite, udite o rustici,” (Listen now, you villagers)** which is a legitimate descendant of that most famous of all *buffa* arias, Leporello's “Catalogue aria” from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Here is a catalogue recital delivered in characteristic *buffo* style (note the excessive patter on a single pitch) that enumerates cures instead of conquests.

The villagers buy eagerly, delighted that the potion is so inexpensive! The naive and gullible Nemorino begins a duet, asking the doctor if he also sells the Elixir of Queen Isolde. Dulcamara produces a bottle of cheap red wine and claims that it will take effect after twenty-four hours have passed—which is enough time for the good doctor to have left town. After Dulcamara produces the magic elixir, Nemorino breaks into melodic ecstasies, **“Obbligato, ah, sì, obbligato,” (Thank you kindly, oh, yes, thank you kindly).** The good doctor sings along in parallel thirds signifying the delight of both men. Nemorino has found his magic elixir and Dulcamara has found another fool willing to buy his wares.

Nemorino begins to drink his “potion,” and becomes quite tipsy. Adina appears and is annoyed to find him singing and laughing instead of languishing over her. When Belcore returns Adina flirts with him to punish Nemorino for ignoring her, and even promises to marry Belcore in six days time. Suddenly the soldiers rush with orders from their Captain to leave the village in the morning. Belcore implores Adina to marry him immediately. To his delight and Nemorino's distress, she consents. The ensuing quartet, **“Adina, credimi,” (Adina, trust in me)** begins the ensemble finale that ends Act I. Nemorino begs her to wait just one day, the time he needs for the elixir to take effect. But Adina rebuffs him, inviting everyone to her marriage feast. Plunged into despair, Nemorino calls out for Dr. Dulcamara's help and is mocked by the villagers.

## ACT II

The guests have arrived for the pre-wedding supper and they join in a welcoming chorus, **“Cantiamo, facciam brindisi” (Let us sing a toasting song)**. Nemorino’s absence is quite obvious to the distracted Adina. In honor of the occasion Dulcamara suggests that Adina join him in singing a special duet he has brought from Venice, **“Io son ricco e tu sei bella”** (I am rich and you are lovely). At its completion Belcore announces the arrival of the notary, and everyone but Dulcamara moves to an adjoining room for the signing of the marriage contract. Nemorino enters, greatly distressed, and upon seeing the doctor asks how he might hasten the effect of the potion. Dulcamara suggests he double the dosage but Nemorino has no money with which to buy another bottle. At that moment Belcore reappears, unhappy that Adina has postponed signing the contract until evening. Questioning the despondent Nemorino, Belcore learns that the lad has no money. Belcore tells Nemorino to join the army to receive an immediate bonus in silver in the duet, **“Venti scudi!” (Twenty scudi!)**. Nemorino signs the necessary papers and quickly takes his money as Belcore rejoices over having recruited his own rival.

Giannetta hears some exciting news, **“Saria possibile?” (Can it be possible?)**. She shares her news with the village girls. Nemorino’s old uncle has passed away leaving him all his riches but no one must know until it is made official. When Nemorino appears, unaware of his inheritance, the village girls flock around him. He attributes their sudden interest to the effects of the elixir that he assumes must be working. Adina arrives, accompanied by Dulcamara, and becomes extremely jealous when she sees the local girls pursuing Nemorino. This activity quickly becomes a lively ensemble – a quartet with female chorus, **“Dell’elisir mirabile” (Elixir so miraculous)**. Dulcamara tells Adina of the elixir and suggests that she purchase some for herself. He also reveals how Nemorino earned the money for the additional elixir. When Adina hears that Nemorino has sold his freedom for her she is deeply moved and realizes that she is in love with him.

After being escorted away by the village girls, Nemorino sits alone and thinks about Adina’s reaction to the village girls swarming around him. He is sure that he saw a tear in her eye. His thoughts coalesce into the aria (in the form of a ballad-like *romanza*) **“Una furtiva lagrima” (A furtive tear)**, the crowning jewel of the opera. The plaintive simplicity and spontaneous character of the minor-major melodic line stand in high relief against the vocal fireworks previously employed in the opera. Particularly effective is Donizetti’s use of bassoon and harp in the introduction and the genuine sense of pathos embodied in the music.

Adina joins him, holding his enlistment papers that she has purchased. She tries to give them to him in the aria, **“Prendi, per me sei libero” (Take it, I give you liberty)**. He refuses them until she confesses that she loves him. They appear together before the assembled villagers and all participate in a spirited finale ensemble. Belcore accepts his defeat with bravado—after all, the world is full of women awaiting his attentions. Dr. Dulcamara reveals that Nemorino has inherited his uncle’s riches and attributes Nemorino’s good fortune to his elixir. He quickly sells his entire stock to the villagers. Dulcamara climbs into his carriage and triumphantly drives away being hailed by the assembled company for his wondrous elixir that produces both love and riches!

## Historical Background

THE ELIXIR OF LOVE was a work completed in a hasty fashion. A last minute open date at a Milan theater and a plea for an opera from the theater manager was a challenge that Donizetti could not pass by. His librettist, Felice Romani, borrowed the story from the libretto of Daniel Auber's opera *Le Philtre* and Donizetti applied himself vigorously to the task of composing an opera in a few short days. The finished work, completely crafted in approximately two weeks, revealed the absolute genius of the composer. The premiere of THE ELIXIR OF LOVE on May 12, 1832, was a triumph. Records show that between 1838 and 1848 THE ELIXIR OF LOVE was the most performed opera in Italy. Donizetti had composed what would be hailed as the finest comic opera of the 19th Century.

Donizetti called THE ELIXIR OF LOVE an *opera comica* rather than an *opera buffa*. ELIXIR is more gentle and refined than the more coarse and boisterous comedy of the *buffa* style. It does contain two stock figures of the *buffa* genre, Belcore the conceited soldier, and Dulcamara the cagey quack "doctor." However, ELIXIR also contains two touching human characters, Nemorino, the sentimental country peasant, and Adina, the flirtatious girl who turns into a caring woman. Belcore and Dulcamara, the stock *buffa* characters, never change, playing out their expected roles. Nemorino and Adina grow and learn and provide a genuine pathos to the story.

The element of pathos is one that Donizetti insisted be added to the libretto, feeling that the comedy could not be fulfilling without a means for the audience to empathize with the characters. Romani made the necessary additions even though he felt the addition of "Una furtiva lagrima," a *romanza* with bassoon obbligato and sung by Nemorino, was inappropriate and would alter the proper flow of the comedy. Donizetti wishes prevailed and were vindicated by the impact the aria had on audiences. It has since become one of the world's most famous tenor arias and a consistent showstopper.

The music of THE ELIXIR OF LOVE contains many marvelous examples of *bel canto* writing. This operatic style of the early nineteenth century reflected the dominance of the solo vocal melody giving singers the freedom to vary the tempo, dynamics, and even the vocal line itself at key points for heightened emotional expression. Singing in this style involves a wide and even vocal range, great variety of dynamics and many kinds of ornamentation, requiring considerable vocal agility. THE ELIXIR OF LOVE also represents the *opera buffa* at its most elegant. The comedic situations are set to the musical forms of the day—solo song (aria), ensemble and chorus, and recitative (a kind of speech-song designed to elucidate the text more clearly in moments of plot development).

Donizetti presented these conventional forms in ways that seemed original and new, minimizing the recitative and preparing for arias in innovative ways. His music complemented the good-hearted nature of the characters, using the melodic line to help define some aspect of those characters. Alternating throughout the opera is a broad array of sentimentality and broad comedy, romantic airs and patter songs.

THE ELIXIR OF LOVE became an integral part of the opera repertory in all the major opera centers. It was called *Der Liebestrank* in Germany, and was lovingly embraced in Vienna, Paris, London and New York. A significant revival of the work took place at La Scala Opera House in Milan on March 17, 1900, when Enrico Caruso sang the part of Nemorino under the baton of Arturo Toscanini. The frenzied audience reaction which greeted his rendition of "Una furtiva lagrima" marked the beginning of the great days of Caruso's career. The character of Nemorino became one of Caruso's great signature roles.

## GAETANO DONIZETTI

Gaetano Donizetti was born into a very poor family in Bergamo, Italy, on November 29, 1797. He was fortunate to have his musical talent discovered at an early age and received an excellent education. As a boy he was mentored by composer Johann Simon Mayr who eventually sent him to study with Padre Mattei in Bologna. Donizetti developed into one of the most prolific composers of the nineteenth century during a period in opera history called *Bel Canto*. In addition to seventy operas, he composed twelve string quartets, seven masses, and a multitude of songs, piano music, cantatas and motets.

Opera composers of the *bel canto* period were travelers, moving from one opera house to another, composing and staging their work. Donizetti was no exception. He accepted every commission proffered in order to support himself financially. In some years he produced as many as four operas. By 1830 and the success of his opera *Anna Bolena*, Donizetti was celebrated throughout the Italian peninsula.

*Bel canto* composers were a prolific lot because of their reliance on a formulaic process in composition. This suited audiences of the period because they seemed to enjoy and encourage opera as pure entertainment. They were very content with music crafted for singers and productions that did not require deep thought to enjoy. During this period French composer Hector Berlioz was very critical of Italian audiences, stating that to Italians music was like a bowl of macaroni, to be consumed and enjoyed on the spot, like a sensual pleasure, not a worthy expression of the mind. Donizetti, like other composers of his day, knew what his audiences wanted. He was able to turn out operas with astonishing rapidity.

Donizetti also seemed to be challenged by the conditions under which he composed. The circumstances surrounding his opera, *THE ELIXIR OF LOVE*, clearly demonstrate how exhilarated he was by forced deadlines. In 1832 Donizetti was contacted by the manager of a theater in Milan who needed an opera for an opening that was scheduled in two weeks. The manager suggested rearranging something old and producing it as new, but Donizetti would have none of it. A new work it must be! He told the librettist, Felice Romani, that he had one week to provide a libretto and he himself would compose the music in the remaining week. All work was completed on schedule. *THE ELIXIR OF LOVE* was a success at its opening and has remained so throughout its history including the present day. According to Opera America, *THE ELIXIR OF LOVE* is one of the twenty most performed operas in the United States.

In 1835 Donizetti composed the opera that would become one of the most popular of the nineteenth century, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. When it was composed it was considered the epitome of the Romantic ideal. Mad scenes were very popular with *bel canto* audiences, and Donizetti's were particularly admired. The Mad Scene from *Lucia* is deemed to be the opera world's most famous. Other popular Donizetti operas include *Maria Stuarda* (1834), *La Favorite* (1840), *La Fille du Régiment* (1840) and *Don Pasquale* (1843).

Donizetti lost his beloved wife in a cholera epidemic in 1837 and never truly recovered from the shock of her death. None of their three children survived infancy. In succeeding years he was subject to periods of poor health, probably due to syphilis. He moved to Paris in 1838 seeking greater prestige, fees and artistic freedom. He also traveled to Vienna in 1842 to accept a musical appointment to the Hapsburg court. He split his time between the two cities until his illness became completely debilitating in 1845. Stricken with paralysis and insanity, Donizetti returned to Bergamo and was nursed by friends until his death on April 7, 1848.

## Discussion Questions

1. THE ELIXIR OF LOVE was written during a period of opera history called Bel Canto. 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 Sergeant 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?





# The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, and Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving a unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<b><i>Soprano</i></b>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<b><i>Mezzo-Soprano</i></b>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Cosi fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<b><i>Tenor</i></b>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Cosi fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<b><i>Baritone</i></b>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Marriage of Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<b><i>Verdi Baritone</i></b> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<b><i>Bass</i></b>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<b><i>Buffo Bass</i></b> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Cosi fan tutte)	<b><i>Basso Cantate</i></b> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

# Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

