What Kind of Opera Is L’Elisir d’Amore

L’Elisir d’Amore (The Elixir of Love) belongs to the type of opera known as opera buffa (BOOF-fah). Opera buffa is a lighter form of opera that usually has a happy ending. It is entirely in music; there are no spoken lines.

Opera buffa contrasts to an older type of opera known as grand opera, which is more formal in style and usually has a serious theme and a tragic ending.

Italian comic operas are known for lively, humorous action; highly developed comic characters; and finales with large-ensemble singing. L’Elisir dates from a period of especially beautiful, musically expressive comic operas.

The characters of opera buffa are ordinary, common people rather than men and women from high stations in life. The plot of the opera usually involves these characters in complicated and witty entanglements.

L’Elisir d’Amore, composed in 1832, is one of the most popular of all comic operas. Today it is performed throughout the world, often in the original Italian language. Its popularity can be attributed to the accomplishments of both the composer and the librettist.

Felice Romani’s highly entertaining libretto is based on the play Le Philtré by Eugene Scribe, which had been set to music by the French composer Daniel Francois Auber the year before Donizetti began working on L’Elisir. Romani’s version features the quack peddler Dr. Dulcamara (“sweet-bitter”), who dupes a whole village into buying his bogus wares. Donizetti’s score balances sparkling, witty music with more emotional, passionate passages to create credible, engaging operatic characterization. By the time the plot of romance and harmless trickery reaches its amusing end, the characters, in spite of their humorous shortcomings, have endeared themselves to the audience.

Gaetano Donizetti and L’Elisir d’Amore

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) had already written 40 operas by 1832, when, at the age of 34, he turned his hand to composing L’Elisir d’Amore. He completed the work in five weeks or less, and it was an instant success in the opera house.

Donizetti’s librettist, Felice Romani, objected to the tenor aria “A furtive tear” (“Una furtiva lagrima”), fearing that its pathos would needlessly retard the action in a comic opera. But the composer held his ground, and Nemorino’s emotional song has become the most famous piece of music in the opera.

For the first production of L’Elisir at New York’s Metropolitan Opera, Enrico Caruso sang “Una furtiva” with such beauty and power that the audience would not allow the performance to continue until he had sung the aria again.
**L'ELISIR D'AMORE**

Nemorino, a bashful young peasant whose name means “little nobody,” loves Adina, a rich and capricious landowner. Although Adina scorns him, Nemorino is heartened when she reads aloud the story of Tristan, a legendary knight who drank an elixir that made Isolde love him forever.

After Adina takes a fancy to the handsome and boastful Sergeant Belcore, Nemorino spends his last cent to buy a potion from the quack Dr. Dulcamara, who boasts of the miraculous powers of his wares. Nemorino empties the flask and immediately becomes tipsy under the influence of this elixir of love.

The newly confident, lively Nemorino then feigns indifference toward Adina, whose irritation with the naive dolt intensifies as he becomes merrier. Acting on impulse, Adina at last announces that she will marry the proud recruiting officer, Belcore.

While his rival exults in the conquest of Adina’s heart, the gullible Nemorino still hangs his hopes on the power of a love potion to turn the situation to his favor.

But when Adina announces that she will be wed that very day, Nemorina almost despair. While the villagers prepare for the wedding, he entreats Dulcamara for a more potent elixir. This time, however, he can pay for the purchase only by enlisting in Belcore’s unit.

After consuming more potion, Nemorino finds himself suddenly very popular with the village girls. (Unbeknown to either him or Adina, Nemorino’s rich uncle has died unexpectedly, leaving a fortune to his nephew.) Adina becomes jealous, while Nemorino enjoys this flattering turn of events, which he attributes to the potion.

Dr. Dulcamara tells Adina that Nemorino is so enamoured of her that he has sold his freedom to buy an elixir in hopes of gaining her favor. Deeply moved by the peasant’s persistent, sincere efforts to win her love, Adina buys Nemorino’s release from the army.

After Adina publicly declares her love for Nemorino, the happy pair extol the power of Dr. Dulcamara’s elixir and vow that their love is eternal. Belcore consoles himself with the thought that the world is full of pretty girls, and Dulcamara takes credit for the triumph of true love. The villagers cheer the good doctor and stock up on his wares.

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Donizetti’s Accomplishment in *L’Elisir d’Amore*

The following statement was written by the Milan critic Francesco Pezzi following the opera’s May 12, 1832, premiere.

“The style of this score is developed and accompanied by a vocal line now lively, now brilliant, now impassioned. To praise the composer more lavishly would be unfair to the opera; his work does not need exaggerated compliments.”

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*Bob Jones University Opera Association’s 1985 production of The Elixir of Love*
Bob Jones University Opera Association’s 1995 production of *The Elixir of Love*

**Nemorino** hopelessly loves Adina, who finds Sergeant Belcore more to her liking. Hearing that the knight Tristan won the love of his lady Isolde by drinking a love potion, Nemorino buys an elixir from the quack Dr. Dulcamara.

Soon Nemorino feigns indifference toward Adina and enjoys the attention of the village girls. Adina reacts by agreeing to marry Belcore that very day.

In order to pay for more elixir, Nemorino enlists in Belcore’s unit. When Adina realizes the extent of her former suitor’s devotion, she buys back his contract and declares her love for him.

Nemorino and Adina pledge their eternal love, Belcore muses on all the beautiful girls in the world, and Dr. Dulcamara does a booming business in elixirs before leaving town.

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**L’Elixir d’Amore** Plot: The Short of It

Nemorino hopelessly loves Adina, who finds Sergeant Belcore more to her liking. Hearing that the knight Tristan won the love of his lady Isolde by drinking a love potion, Nemorino buys an elixir from the quack Dr. Dulcamara.

Soon Nemorino feigns indifference toward Adina and enjoys the attention of the village girls. Adina reacts by agreeing to marry Belcore that very day.
What Is Opera?

An opera is a stage play in which the roles are sung instead of spoken. Opera gives audience members an opportunity to experience several art forms at once, for it involves both performing arts and visual arts. The elements of opera include drama, music, poetry, acting, stage movement, stage design, costuming, lighting, and makeup.

Music is usually regarded as the most prominent element of opera. An opera begins with instrumental music played by an orchestra, or a large group of musicians who perform together on various instruments, including strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion instruments.

After the opera has been musically introduced by an orchestral prelude or overture, the curtain goes up, and the audience sees the stage. Throughout the entire production the orchestra plays under the leadership of the conductor.

The orchestra accompanies as singer-actors, also directed by the conductor, perform their roles. It accompanies opera chorus members as they sing. And sometimes the orchestra plays to provide music that carries the plot action forward even when no one is singing.

Besides orchestral playing, opera gives the audience an opportunity to hear singing by individuals, small ensembles, and chorus.

Composers include roles for a variety of voice types among the soloists for each opera. The highest singing voice for a woman is called soprano and for a man, tenor. Mezzo-soprano is a female voice in the middle range, and contralto, in the low. The middle-range male voice is called baritone, and the low, bass.

Opera soloists sing two kinds of vocal pieces: the recitative and the aria. A recitative is a speech-like musical passage with slight melodic variation used to carry the action along. An aria is a more elaborate, longer song in which the singer-actor expresses emotion and usually displays vocal technique. An ensemble is a musical passage for two or more singers.

Like any form of drama, opera tells a story by means of action and words. If the opera is being sung in a foreign language, the opera company often provides supertitles, or English translations projected above the stage, to inform the audience of the exact meaning of the lines. As the characters enact the story set to music, their stage movement can also be very interesting to watch. Finally, we enjoy seeing beautiful stage sets, furnishings, and costumes throughout the opera performance.

Why Go to the Opera?

People go to the opera for the same reason they read stories, watch films, or even go to a ballgame: enjoyment. Opera is a social form of entertainment. Most people enjoy going to the opera with family members and friends rather than alone. But opera also gives the audience an excellent opportunity to develop an appreciation for the performing and visual arts.

Perhaps opera’s main attraction is the music. Some of the most beautiful music ever composed, both vocal and instrumental, can be heard in the opera house. In most operas you will hear the singers perform some very difficult music created by the composer just to allow them to show off their gifts as singers. Although seasoned opera-goers thrill to such technically demanding singing, it may sound strange to those hearing it for the first time.

However, opera also includes melodies that are not vocal display pieces but simple, graceful songs that everyone can enjoy.

In addition to music, opera offers drama for an audience to enjoy. Opera stories are derived from many sources and many periods in history. The plots of some operas are taken from ancient legends; others come from modern stories and plays. Each has been especially adapted for the opera stage.

The text of an opera is called a libretto, an Italian word that means “little book.” A few composers write their own librettos, but most of them hire a librettist to write or adapt a script that the composer then sets to music. The written form of the music for an opera is called the score.

Composers and librettists usually write to suit the tastes of audiences of their own day. Therefore some operas we hear today may impress us as overly sentimental or gloomy because they were written to entertain audiences of a bygone era who liked such stories.

But operas also introduce audiences to some of the world’s greatest stories. Even if these plots at first appear overdone or old-fashioned to us, we can still sit back and enjoy the timeless music that keeps them alive. Then as we learn to enjoy the music, we may begin to find the entire opera exciting and beautiful.

Operatic characterization can also be emotionally moving. For example, anyone who has experienced the rocky course of true love might sympathize with Nemorino in Donizetti’s L’Elisir, a man who is extremely good-hearted but not very intelligent in his pursuit of the object of his love.

Some opera-goers and performers learn to recognize and appreciate meaning in opera as well. In her book about the famous opera Aida, the celebrated American soprano Leontyne Price writes that Verdi’s heroine is a fictional character who has become very meaningful to her personally: “Aida’s deep devotion and love for her country and for her people—her nobility, strength, and courage—are all qualities I aspire to as a human being. I will never forget her.”