

# Cruel comedy comes to a head: Donizetti's *Malatesta* and the Black Comedy that came in its wake

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How much of the libretto of *Don Pasquale* did Donizetti write himself? No one has ever really known. Comedy was self-generating on the Italian stage, in its neo-slapstick Neapolitan guise it re-created itself nightly. Donizetti supplied an enigmatic “MA” to identify the librettist of *Don Pasquale*, initials which mean *medesimo autore* and - whatever anyone else might suppose or claim – reveal that he considered himself to be the author of its text as well as its music. And why not? The opera is a summation of all the comedy that came from his pen.<sup>1</sup>

*Opera buffa* had begun to turn sour even before the end of the eighteenth century. In company with *romance*, as witnessed by Paisiello's *Nina pazza per amore* (1789) whose affective core formed the basis of Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* some fifty years later - a shadow - an emotive question-mark - emerged over lightweight themes in the opera house during the pivoting revolutionary years that turned into cynicism and derision in the decades that followed. You *laughed at* lovers rather than with them in Rossini's comic operas (as in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*), his tenors – as in an earlier operatic mode - were just as likely to be villains as the lovers they would become in the *melodramma romantico*. He liked to make his *buffi* ridiculous and treat them cruelly, like Don Magnifico in *La cenerentola* whose wonderful deflation Donizetti inherited joyfully.

You can find traces of Pasquale in innumerable early comedies by Donizetti; his Ser Cuccupis for example in *Pietro il grande, Kzar delle Russie* (1819) is sent-up unmercifully (as exemplified by the derision in his name); senior citizens irrespective of gender are invariably grist to his mill: the bullied tutor of *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (1824) has a horrid time at the casual hands of his irreverent pupils while Mamm'Agata, the travestied mother of the frustrated *seconda donna* may well have a triumph in *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* (1827) but is a grotesque frump out of tune with everyone in the cast and her theatrical apotheosis is a disaster.

This relish for the discomfort of the faded and jaded with all its giddy potential emerges most hilariously and memorably however with Donizetti's overworked pharmacist of *Il campanello di notte*, a *melodramma giocoso*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the programme book of the acclaimed Laurent Pelly revival of *Don Pasquale* at the De Munt/La Monnaie Opera House in Brussels of December 2018, where the text appeared in Flemish and French translation

(1836) with a text too by the composer<sup>2</sup> and in which the amorous middle-aged Don Annibale Pistacchio – obliged by law to keep his pharmacy open at all hours - makes attempt after attempt on his wedding-night to get into bed with his brand-new wife Serafina but is kept down behind his counter by the brilliant masquerades of a young fox of a tenor rival pretending to be ill (a tenor - not-entirely coincidentally - called “Ernesto” as in *Don Pasquale*)

It is with this fabulous *Don Pasquale* (1843), however, his terminal sweet and sour comedy - that the composer’s personal input reaches its limits. Here “*medesimo autore*” reflects a painful reality, erotic disappointment and a clash of generations are also present in full measure it is true but backed now by cruel insights and a veiled if quite deliberate essay in self-parody. This opera asks all sorts of questions about the state of mind of the great artist at his very peak. Do we actually *laugh at* the misfortunes of Don Pasquale? Is his vanity so very amusing? Are his pathetic efforts at self-deception really so funny that we can forget the calculated betrayal to which he is about to be subjected by his *friends*? Beguiled by some of the most enchanting music the composer was ever to write can we really join in the gaiety of the company that sets out to deprive Don Pasquale of his comfortable home, his peace of mind and his ephemeral prosperity?

The *real* enigma of this deceptive comedy has never been “MA.” It is Dr Malatesta, the *close friend* of its superannuated hero. What a name! You shrink at his pitiless charade. Whatever motive could Dr Malatesta ever have had? Before he introduces his fake sister “Sofronia” (whose sexual differentiation from her twin Serafina in *Il campanello* leaves little to the imagination) he comes up with a malefic jingle not unworthy of the Mad Hatter in ‘Alice in Wonderland’:

MALATESTA

Poco pensa don Pasquale  
Che boccon di temporale  
Si prepari in questo punto  
Sul capo a rovinare.

Urlo a fischia la bufera  
Vedo il lampo, il tuono ascolto;  
La saetta fra non molto  
Sentiremo ad iscoppiar.

Dr. Malatesta was about to bring Don Pasquale’s happiness to an abrupt conclusion.

The composer, like his follow maestri, channelled his everyday preoccupations into his music. Racked by the headaches that were a constant companion throughout all his years of glory, prematurely aged, *faded and*

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<sup>2</sup> In which context he also used the abbreviation “MA”

*jaded*, deprived of family and permanently threatened by the loss of a fragile domestic bliss (like Don Pasquale) the famous maestro was on the edge of the cerebral collapse that would bring his fabulous career to an end. The name *Malatesta* embodied a coded suffering that supplied the *comédie humaine* to this cruel comedy - a comedy due to blight his wonderful adventure so triumphantly achieved against all the odds. Two years later this *Doctor Malatesta* would literally bring down the curtain upon his light-hearted music with a cruel trail of events to underpin its medical débâcle.

Could it be that the composer was laughing at himself? Who knows? It is to be suspected that ironic amusement must certainly have inspired the fabulous duet between Don Pasquale and his nemesis! This insertion of the maestro himself into his operas was unique. A personalised imprint for a final fling of independence from the cruelty that was to terminate his career? He flirted with elegant cruelty repeatedly in the last decade of his creative life but it did not always reach the stage. His *Le Duc d'Albe* (c1839) proposed a portrayal of the notorious governor of the Spanish Netherlands obliging his illegitimate son to acknowledge his paternity by compelling him to watch his fiancée being led to the scaffold while his *Rita* aka *Deux Hommes et une Femme* (1841), proposed husband-beating as a theme for comic entertainment obliging the far from diverted Peppe to take part in a game of chance to try to get rid of her. But neither of these ventures reached performance.

It was the cruel impact of *Don Pasquale*, however, combined with its comic posturing that prompted a late flowering of grim humour in the opera houses of Italy. Its autobiographical intimations were not lost on his musical contemporaries. The composer's dialogue with his nemesis was soon succeeded - if not precisely emulated - by his most loyal pupil Nicola De Giosa, and his fervent disciple Antonio Cagnoni upon whom the tragic destiny of the composer had made a personal impact. The mid-century was to experience a tsunami of macabre humour, a tidal wave, not necessarily of cruelty *per se* but of Black Comedy to embellish an era of political strife such as Italy had never known. The death of Donizetti (1848) was its focus; 1850 its *point fort*, at which the medical consequences implicit in *Doctor Malatesta* at last became overt.

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Black Comedy – a twentieth century term – is defined in dictionaries as: “ - a film, a play, that looks at the funny side of things that are usually considered serious, like death or illness.” It is a definition that smells of Antonin Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelty of the 1930's but is wonderfully exemplified by the convulsive sequel to *Don Pasquale* emerging long before the morbid invocations of this latter.

The hugely popular *melodramma fantastico-giocoso in quattro atti: Crispino e la comare* (1850) went the rounds of Italy. With a libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and music by the Neapolitan siblings Luigi and Federico Ricci – joint heirs to decades of unashamed farce - an epitome *dramma buffo* it featured the unhappy cobbler Crispino (buffo bass) about to jump into a well to drown his sorrows when he finds himself confronted by an old woman (the *comare*) who tells him that all he needs to do to be happy and to have a brilliant future is to *pretend to be a doctor*. She will guarantee his return to good fortune. He has no need to study medicine, all he has to do is to look around the bedside of his patient, if he does not see her standing there beside his patient in the room his patient will recover. Crispino is overjoyed by this simple remedy for financial redemption, gives-up his suicide attempts and goes off to rejoice with his wife, duly becoming the richest and most sought-after physician in Venice, gleefully compiling hysterically imbecile pharmaceutical remedies in mock Latin homoeopathy (all too reminiscent of those prepared by Ernesto in *Il campanello*) to torment his impotent rivals while remaining blissfully unaware (until it is too late) that the old crone is *death* coming to his assistance. Death being an infallible cure for poverty.

This Black agenda, this cynical evocation of a friendly nemesis as close to home as any *Malatesta*, veneered cheerfully with a sparkling layer of good tunes comparable to those of its Parisian progenitor.

Parodistic themes, morbid themes, were the legacy of Donizetti's masterpiece and proliferated widely. Operatic siblings followed thick and fast; the focus of their comedy invariably a *basso buffo* of traditional style and verbiage (like Don Pasquale), with an almost inexhaustible font of Neapolitan-style syllabic loquacity (like Crispino), taking possession of the stage for a number of critical years. The ecstatic duetting of a *basso buffo* with a *buffo* antagonist as proposed by Donizetti mimicked widely and finding a home in spiky, antagonistic semi-comic operas like the *Don Bucefalo* of Antonio Cagnoni (1847); the *Don Checco* of Nicola de Giosa (1850) and the *Ser Babbeo* of Giuseppe Lillo (1853), a trio of crypto-comedies more provocative than amusing with their various levels of doom and gloom - at the same time making the point of dusting off old comedy plots in entirely new terms with the intention of bringing them up-to-date before a new and more cynical audience. *Revision* was to become the *fons et origo* of Black Comedy. Just as Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* was an unashamed updating of the plot of the Anelli/Pavesi *dramma giocosa Ser Marcantonio* of 1810 - in which Tobia, the brother of the fake wife foisted by a false notary upon Marcantonio proposed a sinister darkening of the spoof marriages that had once been such an excuse for domestic dilemma in more genteel years so revision would be the template that fashionable Black humour

would grasp with both hands. (Tobia's epitome statement: "*Tradir così un amico? Non me ne importa un fico*" giving the turn of the screw to his character that would re-emerge as *Malatesta*)

The sardonic *Il domino nero* (1849) of Lauro Rossi is a prime example of this development. A parodistic re-creation of Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's innocuous Spanish opéra comique *Le domino noir* (1837) Lauro Rossi perverted the character of its heroine - turning her into a nun taking refuge in a brothel in an empowered attempt to wrest her fortune from the hands of an unscrupulous *basso buffo* - the *mise-en-scène* passing easily from convent, to brothel to royal palace and featuring the renegade heroine's extravagantly flaunted Andalusian song and dance routine offered to the enchanted clientèle of the brothel - distracting the enemies in pursuit and enabling her presence to pass completely unnoticed!

Black Comedy - humour on this scale and dimension - put into relief a period of disaster in Italy. *Revision* and a wilful reversal of roles permitting cynicism and worldliness to re-model the traditional themes of the comic stage to reflect the dismay and despair of the day.

Black Comedy was not simply a wry intermezzo however, even if it made small impact upon the relentless tragedies of Verdi, Petrella et al, it is not absent in *La Gioconda* by Ponchielli (1876) and it inserted itself briefly into Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) and *La forza del destino* (1869) but as an ironic aside - these two particular operas were primarily intended for fringe and foreign consumption.

*Don Pasquale* was the last major *opera buffa* presented to the Italian stage in the nineteenth century; henceforth comedy would be relegated almost exclusively to operetta in the smaller venues. Verdi did not reverse this trend with his *Falstaff* as some enthusiasts would like us to believe, it is no irresistible end-of-century burst of laughter despite the efforts of modern theatre managements fascinated by its dependence upon Shakespeare's 'Merry Wives of Windsor'. *Merry Wives* is a misnomer, *Falstaff* is no comic opera no more than it was based on a "comic play". Whatever its great merits Boito and Verdi called it a *commedia lirica in tre atti*, a title that invokes nothing potentially amusing however you would like to interpret it.

Luigi Ricci had long anticipated this descent into a pessimistic reality in his choice of plots; many of the operas of his earlier career - like his *Il nuovo Figaro* (1832) and his near-sacrilegious *Le nozze di Figaro* (1838) both of which gave rise to hollow laughter north of the Alps - made only too clear his eagerness to drive the sacred cows of operatic legend into new and less comfortable pastures. This same dark message became the driving force of his final comedy entitled, perhaps dangerously: *Il diavolo a quattro* (1859), its revisionist element (it was a re-run of Auber's *La part du diable* of 1843 - another *opéra comique* contemporary with *Don Pasquale* but now with devious insights scarcely anticipated by Eugène Scribe) offering his

long comic parabola of the stage an extended tutti and whose reception by the public was not distinguishable from that of Donizetti a decade and a half earlier. Alas it proved more a tragic emulation than a simple reminiscence: that same year he was to die from the same disease as his Bergamasco hero. (There is a famous sad tale of Luigi Ricci in his final days pointing to a portrait of Donizetti and crying “*I’m finished, like him!*”)

The masquerade of *Don Pasquale* in the pursuit of sardonic effect made a lasting impact upon popular theatre in subsequent years, reaching its apex in Carlo Pedrotti’s cynical *Tutti in maschera* (1856) an omnifarious operatic updating of Goldoni with its deliberate perversion of an original play and an exotic forbear that would find an echo in the verismo apogee of the century to follow.

*Don Pasquale* as proposed by its composer is not in itself an amusing offering whatever the interpretation proposed by the artists concerned in a modern revival. Its décor, its dazzling characterisation (its dazzling music) and its potential for parody as exemplified by its very first cast - most notably by Lablache in the title role - being supremely entertaining despite, but not in response to, its intrinsic implications. The artists who recreate it have the requirement to do so any way they please - the composer would have expected nothing less. But the plot is never *funny*.

Is it too fantastical to suggest that *Don Pasquale* – this essay both in personalised triumph and tragedy - was intended to evoke the conflict between irrational expectations and the inflexible reality of passing time, deflation and loss, the insights of a doomed composer concealed within the carapace of an opera buffa he orchestrated as brilliantly as never before?

It is true that intimations of mortality may well have marked the approaching end of the great composer’s career yet in provoking his most profound comedy they gave birth to a comic mode that would continue to flourish far beyond his era. Does not Black Comedy offer a suitable model for our mediatised world? It is to be feared that it does.