

Cruel comedy comes to a head!

Donizetti's *Malatesta* and the Black Comedy that came in its wake

Alexander Weatherson

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.¹

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 as with the grandiloquent Don Magnifico of *La cenerentola* whose irresistible deflation Donizetti inherited joyfully.

You can find traces of *Don Pasquale* in most of the early comedies of Donizetti; the superannuated Ser Cuccupis, for example, of *Pietro il Grande, Kzar delle Russie* (1819) is sent-up unmercifully, a factor underlined by the scatological implications of his name; senior citizens irrespective of gender are grist to his mill: the elderly tutor of *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (1824) has a horrid time at the hands of his careless 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 she is a grotesque frump out of tune with everyone in the cast and her hilarious apotheosis at the end is an essay in derision.

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

This relish for the discomfort of the faded and jaded with all its giddy potential for brutal treatment at the casual hands of an emergent generation is underlined most memorably by the fate of Donizetti's conscientious pharmacist of *Il campanello di notte*, a melodramma giocoso (1836) with a text too by the composer² 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 interminable masquerades of a young fox of a tenor rival pretending to be ill (a pitiless youth far-from coincidentally celled "Ernesto" - as in *Don Pasquale*)

It is with this climactic *Don Pasquale* (1843), however, the most introspective of his sweet-and-sour comedies that the ageing composer's input reaches its apogee. Here "*medesimo autore*" reflects a painful reality, erotic disappointment and a clash of generations are present of course but now backed by deeply personal insights and a veiled if never-quite obvious exercise in self-parody. This opera asks all sorts of questions about the state of mind of the great artist at his peak. Do we actually *laugh* at the misfortunes of Don Pasquale? Is his defeat at the hands of his tormentors so very funny? Are his pathetic efforts at self-deception really so entertaining that we can forget the betrayal of those who pose as his friends? Beguiled by some of the most enchanting music the composer was ever write can we really join in the gaiety of the company that sets out to reduce Don Pasquale to abject submission and deprive him of his domestic bliss in order to get their hands on his money?

The *real* enigma of this deceptive comedy has never been "MA" it is *Dr Malatesta*, the "*close friend*" of the unfortunate hero. What a name! You shrink at his pitiless charade. Whatever motive could ever he have had? Before he introduces his fake sister "Sofronia" (whose sexual differentiation from 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.

² In which context he also used the abbreviation "MA"

Dr. Malatesta is about to bring Don Pasquale's happiness to an end.

The composer, like other of his fellow maestri, channelled his everyday preoccupations into his music. Racked by the headaches that were a constant accompaniment to his years of struggle and achievement, prematurely aged, *faded and jaded*, deprived of parents, wife and children and permanently threatened by a loss of what remained of a strenuous itinerant lifestyle the celebrated maestro was on the brink of the cerebral collapse that would bring his orbit of the stage to a sudden conclusion. The headaches: ie "*Dr Malatesta*" - encapsulated a relentless régime of suffering that supplied the *comédie humaine* to his cruel parabola of the stage - a sword of Damocles poised to blight the wonderful adventure so triumphantly achieved against all the odds. Two years later this *Malatesta* that would bring down the curtain upon his light-hearted career with a pitiless charade of cruelty to underline its medical débâcle.

•

Could it be that the composer was laughing at himself? Who knows? It is to be suspected that ironic amusement only could have proposed the celebrated duet between Don Pasquale and his nemesis - the brilliant vocal apex of his bitter comedy. Surely a personal confrontation of this kind in a stage-work was exceptional, its painful autobiographical imprint permitting him a final fling of detachment in the face of the cruel fate that was to terminate his career. He flirted with ironic cruelty repeatedly in these culminating years but it did not reach the stage. His *Le Duc d'Albe* (c1839) proposed a portrayal of the notorious governor of the Spanish Netherlands forcing his illegitimate son to acknowledge his paternity by making him to witness his fiancée being led to the scaffold while the gloriously sour anti-heroine Rita (of *Deux Hommes et une Femme*) two years later offered husband-beating as a recipe for light entertainment obliging the bigamous Peppe together with the valid husband to take part in a game of chance to try to lose their monstrous spouse! But neither of these cruel sports emerged in the composer's lifetime.

It was the contentious impact of *Don Pasquale*, however, combined with its terminal character, that launched a late flowering of grim humour in the opera houses of the day. Its autobiographical ingredients were not lost on his musical contemporaries. The composer's dialogue with fate was soon followed - if not exactly emulated - by his most loyal pupil Nicola De Giosa and his fervent admirer Antonio Cagnoni - upon both of whom the tragic destiny of the composer was to make a singular impact. The mid-century

was to experience a tsunami of macabre humour, a tidal wave of Black Comedy to accompany the impasse that stuck the peninsula in those years. The death of Donizetti in 1848 was its point of departure, 1850 its *point fort*, when operatically the sinister consequences of a politically Europe-wide “*Doctor Malatesta*” became overt.

*

Black Comedy – a twentieth century term – as defined in the dictionaries is: “*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 host of forgotten operas emerging less than a century earlier.

The hugely popular melodramma fantastico-giocoso in quattro atti *Crispino e la comare* (1850) for example was an epitome Black Comedy that went the rounds of Italy. With its libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and jointly composed by the Neapolitan siblings Luigi and Federico Ricci, twin heirs to decades of unashamed farce, it featured the unhappy cobbler Crispino (*buffo* bass) about to jump into a well to drown his sorrows but finding himself suddenly 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 needs do is to look-around the bedside of his patient; if he does not see her standing there, the patient will recover. Crispino is overjoyed by this simple remedy for financial redemption. Gives-up all thought of suicide and goes off to rejoice with his wife duly becoming the richest and most sought-after physician in Venice. Gleefully compounding hysterically imbecile pharmaceutical remedies in mock Latin homoeopathy (all too reminiscent of those prepared by Ernesto in *Il campanello di notte*) 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 benevolent bestowal of a friendly nemesis as cynically negative as any *Malatesta* being cheerfully venerated with a sparkling layer of good tunes comparable with those of its Parisian inspiration.

Parodistic themes, morbid themes, were the legacy of Donizetti’s comic masterpiece and proliferated widely. A wide range of part-serious siblings followed thick and fast, the focus of their comedy almost invariably a *basso buffo* of traditional style and verbiage (like Don Pasquale), paired with a *buffo*

antagonist with an inexhaustible source of Neapolitan-style syllabic loquacity (like Malatesta) taking possession of the stage for a number of critical years; their ecstatic duetting mimicked widely and providing the key vocal substance to spikily antagonistic scores like that of the *Don Bucefalo* of Antonio Cagnoni (1847), *Don Checco* of Nicola de Giosa (1850) and *Ser Babbeo* of Giuseppe Lillo (1853), crypto-comedies all, more provocative than amusing with their various levels of doom and gloom and manifesting themselves in a cynically undisguised dusting-off of old comedy plots in brand-new settings brought up-to-date before the streetwise audiences of the mid-nineteenth century.

Such a taste for revision was to become the *fons et origo* of nineteenth century Black Comedy. In the same way that Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* had been 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 Ser Marcantonio initiated a sinister darkening of the spoof marriages that had once been merely an excuse for genteel domestic diversion - so *revision* would be the template that Black humour chose to grasp with both hands. (Tobia's epitome statement: "*Tradir così un amico? Non me ne importa un fico*" had been the turn to the screw that would re-emerge as *Malatesta*)

The wonderfully entertaining *Il domino nero* (1849) of Lauro Rossi is a prime example of operatic transformation into Black Comedy, in this case in a deliberately sardonic bad taste. A parodistic re-creation of Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's innocuous Spanish *opéra comique* *Le domino noir* (1837) 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*, its *mise-en-scène* passing effortlessly from convent, to brothel, to royal palace and starring the renegade heroine's extravagantly flaunted Andalusian song-and-dance routine - an enchanting vocal coup offered to the enthusiastic clients of the brothel thus foiling her enemies in hot-pursuit and enabling her presence in such unsanctified surroundings to pass completely unnoticed (!)

Cynically disreputable opera of this propensity once again putting into context a period of disaster and dismay, its daring impropriety re-modelling the traditional themes of the stage to underline the dire political convulsions then remodelling Italian culture and institutions beyond the stage. This was not simply a wry intermezzo however, even if it made small impact upon the portentous romantic universe of Verdi, Petrella et al, but remained a dramatic resort for radical librettists. Black Comedy would not be absent as late as *La Gioconda* in the hands of Boito/Ponchielli (1876) for instance and had even inserted itself earlier briefly into Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) and *La*

forza del destino (1869) as ironic embroidery - these operas being heavily focussed upon death and its uncontrollable consequences.

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

Luigi Ricci had long before anticipated this descent into a pessimistic reality in his choice of plots. Many of his initial operas 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 intention to drive the sacred cows of operatic legend into new and less comfortable pastures. Indeed a dark message remained the driving force up to the time of his ultimate comedy: entitled, perhaps dangerously, *Il diavolo a quattro* (1859), it was a re-run of Auber's *La part du diable* of 1843 an *opéra comique* contemporary with *Don Pasquale* but with devious insights not envisaged by Eugène Scribe it set out to offer his loyal fans an extended tutti whose reception would be indistinguishable from that of Donizetti a decade and a half or so earlier. Alas it proved a tragic emulation: that same year he was to die of precisely the same disease as the Bergamasc hero. (There is a famous account of Luigi Ricci in his last days pointing to a portrait of Donizetti and crying out "*I'm finished, like him!*")

The masquerade of *Don Pasquale* in the pursuit of sardonic disturbance made a lasting effect upon the popular theatre of the following years achieving a moot point with Carlo Pedrotti's provocative *Tutti in maschera* (1856) - an uncomfortable operatic updating of Goldoni with its deliberate perversion of an original play and an exotic forbear of the *verismo* revelation in the century to follow. But *Don Pasquale* as proposed by its composer could not be accused of decorative frivolity whatever the interpretation proposed by the artists concerned in its revival, its décor, its dazzling characterisation (its dazzling music) and its potential for savage criticism as exemplified by its very first cast - most notably by Luigi 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 take every

liberty - the composer expected nothing less - but the plot was never an exercise in domestic survival of any kind or dimension.

Is it too fantastical to suggest that *Don Pasquale* – an essay in personalised triumph and tragedy - was intended merely to elaborate the struggles between irrational expectations and the inflexible reality of passing time. The insights of the doomed composer concealed within the carapace of an opera buffa orchestrated as brilliantly as never before?

No one can deny that intimations of mortality may here have marked the approaching end of the great composer's career, yet in provoking his most profound comic rebuttal they gave birth to a comic mode that would continue to flourish far beyond his era. Does not the Black Comedy that followed offer a suitable model for our mediatised world? It is to be feared that it does.