

Donizetti - *L'elisir d'amore*

After Rossini's early retirement in 1829, Gaetano Donizetti was the dominant force in Italian opera. He was amazingly prolific, completing 65 operas. While most were tragic stories, his comedies *L'elisir d'amore* (The Elixir of Love) and *Don Pasquale* are mainstays of his reputation. In *L'elisir* the lovesick bumpkin Nemorino pines for Adina and enlists the help of quack Dr. Dulcamara in providing a love potion to make him irresistible. In the Act I finale, *Caro elisir*, he drinks the elixir (in reality, just wine) and Adina wonders why Nemorino has lost his lovesick disposition in favor of confidence. In his romance *Una furtive lagrima* (A furtive tear), he is convinced she loves him.

Puccini - *Gianni Schicchi*

Another Italian composer of operatic tragedies, Puccini made only a couple of lighter exceptions. *Gianni Schicchi* has proven irresistible for its wry elaboration of an episode in the *Inferno* (Hell) of Dante- hardly an obvious source for a comic subject! This short opera was intended for performance between two of Puccini's one-act tragedies, and the three are collectively known as *Il trittico* (The Trilogy). They were first given at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1918, weeks after the end of WWI. Tonight's two arias drawn from *Gianni Schicchi* take the story's Florentine setting as common themes. Rinuccio and Lauretta are lovers in their twenties navigating the family politics of an inheritance while hoping for marriage.

Lauretta is given one of Puccini's soaring melodies for her heart-wrenching plea *O mio babbino caro* (Oh, my dear daddy). In it, she threatens to throw herself off the Ponte Vecchio (Old Bridge) if she cannot marry Rinuccio. Never mind that the bridge was not yet constructed in its familiar stone form by the A.D. 1299 setting of the opera. Rinuccio, for his part, acclaims the wily Schicchi, his intended father-in-law. The aria, sung in the style of a Tuscan folksong, tells of the architectural, artistic, and economic glories of Florence.

Verdi - Overture to *La forza del destino*

Giuseppe Verdi was ambivalent toward his profession for most of his long life. He was indisputably the king of Italian opera, but loathed the politics, mercenary business dealings, and temperamental fits of the personnel required for the complex process of producing an opera.

In his late forties, Verdi had retreated to his villa Sant'Agata and spent most of his time managing the farm and estate in the Po river valley. An Italian tenor on tour in Russia sent a letter to the maestro making the offer of an opera commission from the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg. Verdi's wife Giuseppina received the letter and replied, promising to "insist, annoy him (Verdi) until we get what we want." In the event, it wasn't necessary; Verdi accepted, needing money for building improvements.

After the usual haggling with the censors about the subject- a constant problem for European opera composers- Verdi settled on a Spanish play of a melodramatic character, *The Force of Destiny*. He had almost a year to write the music before planning a trip to St. Petersburg to supervise the production. For someone accustomed to the Italian climate, winter in Russia was a dreadful prospect. Only when Giuseppina arranged to have 140 bottles of wine taken along with Italian food did Verdi feel better about it.

The couple was welcomed in November 1861, but the *prima donna* (leading lady) of the opera was seriously ill, and really the only one who could sing the demanding part. Verdi got metaphorical cold feet besides his literal ones, and tried to withdraw to no avail. The première was simply postponed and he had to schlep back to Italy, finding his house in the disarray of construction. Giuseppina reported on Verdi's foul mood through this period.

They returned to Russia in the fall of 1862, and the opera was duly performed to acclaim. Unusually for the composer, he seemed happy with it, but as productions cropped up in other countries, he noticed cuts were being made and figured if it was happening anyway, he might as well be the one to make them. Among his other revisions was the expansion of a short orchestral prelude into the full-scale overture heard tonight, with its austere "fate" motive at the beginning, and memorable melodies from the opera. Verdi's publisher convinced him to take this new 1869 version to La Scala in Milan, the major opera house closest to home. Despite a confusing and somewhat episodic plot, the score's color and passion have kept it relatively popular, and the overture is one of Verdi's most played.

Verdi - *Rigoletto*

Situated historically mostly between Donizetti and Puccini, Verdi is often called the greatest of Italian opera composers for his keen sense of psychology in musically drawing a character. *Rigoletto* is the name of the court jester to the Duke of Mantua, a notorious womanizer. The duke disguises himself as a student in an attempt to seduce the jester's daughter Gilda, which sets tragic events in motion. Their farewell duet takes place at her home after his appearance to declare his love.

Lehár - *Giuditta*

Giuditta is a weightier story, using a larger orchestra, than Franz Lehar usually adopted for his stage works. It comes at the end of his career, in 1934, and has pictorial elements familiar from his many light operettas. The title heroine, bored of bourgeois life, has taken up dancing in a North African nightclub, a time and place very close to *Casablanca*. Her catchy aria *Meine lippen, sie küssen so heiss* (My lips, they kiss so hot) would have been too racy for the beginning of Lehar's career in the nineteenth century.

Lehár - *Das Land des Lächelns*

Das Land des Lächelns (The Land of Smiles) is an operetta set in Vienna, then China, in 1912. It opened in Berlin in 1929. Sou-Chong is a Chinese prince who declares his love for aristocrat Lisa, a Westerner now living with him in his Peking palace. As in *Giuditta*, the plot contains a woman unhappy with the social constrictions imposed on her, who then acts independently. The prince's song *Dein ist mein ganzes Herz* (My whole heart is yours) is one of the composer's most instantly memorable tunes, and became virtually a personal theme for the role's originator, Richard Tauber.

Lehár - *Gold und Silber waltz*

Prior to being the king of the German-language operetta stage in the early twentieth century, Franz Lehár was a military bandmaster. During the Carnival (pre-Lenten) season of 1902, the elderly Princess Metternich planned a ball with the theme gold and silver, extending all the way from star and palm tree décor to guest attire. At such a themed occasion, a namesake piece was required to open the festivities, and Lehár was her choice to provide it.

The waltz is elaborate, befitting the richness of its title and containing six themes. But that first illustrious crowd did not pay much attention, starting to talk and dance from the outset. It was only after Lehár sold the waltz to a publisher that it found its way to foreign capitals and spread his fame. Just three years later came his mega-hit *The Merry Widow*, containing another blockbuster waltz.

Charpentier - *Louise*

The heroine of Gustave Charpentier's *Louise* defies (albeit reluctantly) expectations of whom she should marry, much to the consternation of her parents. The opera's text incorporates multiple commentaries on class and social conflict at the turn of the twentieth century in Paris. But *Depuis le jour* is a conventional love song in sentiment, clothed in luxurious music for the soprano voice. In it, Louise is ecstatic over her relationship with the poet Julien.

Massenet - *Werther*

A disciplined worker and respected professor, Jules Massenet turned out passionate operas to the Parisian public regularly in the late nineteenth century. *Werther* is arguably his best for its melodic inspiration and psychological subtlety; it is certainly helped by a well-crafted adaptation of its source material, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the German novel by Goethe. In that literary classic credited for helping to start the Romantic era in the arts, a young poet pines desperately for the married Charlotte in a village setting and eventually takes his own life.

The gloomy plot was off-putting to early producers and it was only a decade or so after the 1892 première that the opera was fully appreciated. Its music is poignantly personal, and includes as an emotional climax the tenor aria *Pourquoi me reveiller*, combining the poet's fatalistic despair and love of nature.

Gounod - *Roméo et Juliette*

Gounod's *Roméo* is, like *Werther*, a French adaptation of a foreign literary classic (again ending in a tenor suicide!). Like Massenet, Gounod had tried Goethe as a source author (*Faust*) and was in his case criticized for liberties in the retelling. This time, it's Shakespeare's best-known play, and the narrative arc is faithful to the original.

In tonight's duet (one of four between the title characters), Juliet forgives Romeo for having killed her cousin Tybalt in a duel. However, Romeo was banished from Verona for the deed and is risking legal wrath for being with Juliet, not to mention trouble from the famous feud between their families. Their reluctance to part is a theme of the text.