

A Love Potion that Really Works ...

Estonia **Donizetti** *L'Elisir d'amore*. Soloists, Estonian National Opera Chorus and Orchestra, Vello Pähn (conductor). Estonian National Opera, Tallinn 15.5.2014. (Premiere) (GF)

Cast:

Nemorino – Oliver Kuusik
Adina – Kristel Pärtna
Belcore – René Soom
Dulcamara – Rauno Elp
Giannetta – Olga Zaitseva

SEEN AND HEARD
INTERNATIONAL
MAY 2014

Production:

Stage Director: Georg Malvius
Designer: Ellen Cairns
Lighting Designer: Palle Palmé
Choreographer: Adrienne Åbjörn

A cock's crowing and a dog's barking off-stage while the villagers fill the stage before the overture, inform us that we are in a farming area – as we should be in this rural comedy. But things have changed since 1832. One hundred years later the setting is not Basque but Sicily, Adina is no longer a landowner, she runs a shop, Nemorino is no longer a poor farmer, he is a handy-man, and Belcore, when he eventually arrives, is no longer a sergeant, he is a mafia-leader and he arrives in a motor-bike side-car. Dulcamara is certainly the same old quack doctor, seemingly not well-off to judge from his very antique car, and he still sells his Bordeaux wine under the pretext of being a miracle potion. On the other hand the village seems to have remained untouched by the ravages of time. Does this concept work? It does, and miraculously well too. That Belcore can enlist Nemorino as soldier may jar a bit but from a Mafioso one can probably expect anything.

Georg Malvius, Romanian born but domiciled in Sweden, is probably best known as director of musicals and he has applied some freewheeling lightness to this delightful score that brings *L'elisir d'amore* closer to Broadway than La Scala. *Melodramma giacoso* Donizetti called this masterpiece, while *Don Pasquale* is described as *drama buffo*. This difference is significant: In *Don Pasquale* the characters are more burlesque, more caricatures while in *L'elisir d'amore* they are gentler, more human and Malvius's lighter touch empathises this. Of course Belcore is a boor but somewhere behind this façade there beats a human heart – even Mafiosos have hearts.

There is a compelling liveliness about this production with a lot of charming details in the direction, not least in the action of the chorus, which works not as an anonymous crowd but well chiselled out individuals. So much happens in this performance, it oozes with life and the action rolls on in high-spirited tempo – but still relaxed. Giannetta, who has fairly little to sing and in most productions is marginalized, here becomes an equal to the other soloists and more or less steals the show several times. Olga Zaitseva's expressivity is quite enchanting. A true comedienne – and she sings charmingly too.

The rest of the cast is superb in acting as well as singing. Oliver Kuusik, whose beautiful lyric tenor has graced a couple of earlier performances I have seen at the Estonian National Opera, is ideally cast as the simpleton Nemorino, making him a very moving character that everyone should pity. His nuanced singing is

a joy to listen to and *Una furtiva lagrima*, restrained and inward, called forth memories of singers like Leopold Simoneau or Cesare Vallètti from a nowadays distant past. René Soom's foppish Belcore is vocally another representative for bel canto: beauty of tone, perfect legato, elegant phrasing. That Rauno Elp has an extraordinary talent for comedy he has proven several times before. A memorable Don Magnifico in *La cenerentola*, a hilarious Cook in *The Love of Three Oranges*, an over-the-top neurotic Orlovsky in *Die Fledermaus* immediately comes to mind and to those portraits he now adds an uncommonly subtle and sensitive Dulcamara – but he never misses an opportunity to show off in big gestures and his timing is exceptional. A new and utterly agreeable acquaintance is Kristel Pärtna, whose Adina goes well with the three veterans. A brilliant, agile lyric soprano and charming appearance paired with excellent stage presence

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Göran Forsling