



## Mixing an Elixir: A Bubbly Cocktail of "Upper-Attic" Fun

Every good opera deserves a satire, and a great comic opera deserves to be lampooned by a master of wit and wordplay. Such is the happy fate of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. *Elixir of Love* is a concoction of soprano, tenor, baritone and bass. In this iteration of a familiar plot derived from Italy's *commedia dell'arte* tradition the composer and his expert librettist Felice Romani breathed new life into the formulaic characters. The spunky soprano Adina is the love interest of the illiterate love-stuck tenor Nemorino, our hero. His nemesis is the strutting baritone Sargent Belcore, and the plot moves along with the entrance of Dr. Dulcamara, a comic basso-buffo role, the self-important humbug who meets his match in the clever and quick-witted heroine.

As to the lampoon, in December of 1866, thirty-five years after the opera's premier, these characters had an encore performance on the London stage in *Dulcamara; or The Little Duck and the Great Quack*. The little duck was Adina, and the big quack, of course, that outrageous fraud Dr. Dulcamara. The audience would have understood the wordplay. "My little duck" may no longer be a common expression of endearment, but "just ducky" survives in our vocabulary. And the puns continue with the cast of characters: Adina, "the little duck, who, it is hoped, will nevertheless be found to be very long in the bill," - the playbill, that is; Nemorino, "a Neapolitan peasant, of whom you will hear more peasantly." The writer of this affectionate take-off on *L'elisir* added another principal character to the plot: Beppo, Dulcamara's "Jack-pudding - a mystery, whose real nature is concealed by a mysterious *Pike-crust*." 'Jack pudding' was the term used for the sidekick of a huckstering charlatan; his true identity is hidden within a fish pie. It gets worse from there. In the denouement, this rather 'crusty' fellow is revealed to be none other than Dulcamara's long lost mother.

The plot follows that of the opera with certain comic deviations.

You're in a village during harvest time,  
Where all the humblest peasants talk in rhyme,  
And sing about their pleasures and their cares  
In parodies on all the well-known airs.

And so it proceeds in rhymed couplets. The ditties with their excruciating puns were set to popular tunes of the day: *Hot Corn*, *Champagne Charley is My Name*, *Jog Along Boys* and "*La tremenda*

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*ultrice spada.*" This last, used for Belcore's entrance in the parody "For this welcome, unrivalled in story" would have been immediately recognizable to the audience as one of the hit tunes of Vincenzo Bellini's 1830 lyric tragedy *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (*The Capulets and the Montagues*) based on the story of Romeo and Juliet. Other operatic arias are quoted: the song for Dulcamara and Chorus - "Buy my goods, as I'm advising" is set to the tune of that delightful barcarole "*Io son ricco*" from *L'elisir d'amore*; a trio for Nemorino, Belcore, and Adina - "Right away I'll tod-tod-tod-tod-toddle" is sung to the music of "Esulti pur la Barbara," also from *L'elisir*. Clearly the London audience was familiar with Italian opera and happy to hear the music repurposed for comic effect.

In all, *Dulcamara; or The Little Duck and the Great Quack* is a work of ponderful fun and fundable puns - although the funding was decidedly modest for its little-known author, a certain William Schwenck Gilbert. When he wrote it, Mr. Gilbert was a thirty-two year old disenchanted London barrister best known for his humorous weekly column published by *Fun* magazine, complete with his own caricature drawings. As Christmas approached he landed a rush job to write a piece for the holiday entertainment at the St. James's Theatre. The subject was of his own choosing, and he knocked it off in 10 days. The assignment unleashed his imagination and sent him spinning into a world of mischievous but innocent, linguistically playful theater pieces full of topical allusions. *Dulcamara* ran for 120 nights. It was to be the first of his many successes.

Before his name was forever linked with Sir Arthur Sullivan's, the young W.S. Gilbert learned his craft by writing pantomimes and burlesques to entertain the London public. *Dulcamara* was the first of Gilbert's several "Upper-attic" romps. The following year he produced *La Vivandière; or, True to the Corps!*, an affectionate parody of Donizetti's *La fille du régiment* (*The Daughter of the Regiment*). The punning subtitle referred to a popular melodrama, *True to the Core; A Story of the Armada*, and once more Donizetti's music was fitted to entirely incongruous words. This was followed by *Robert the Devil, or The Nun, the Dun, and the Son of a Gun*, a work that successfully deflated the pretensions of Meyerbeer's warhorse *Robert le Diable*. Finally, Bellini's *Norma* got its send up in *The Pretty Druidess; Or, The Mother, The Maid, and The Mistletoe Bough*. In these early pieces W.S. Gilbert first worked out the humor, absurd plot lines and comic characters he would later elaborate in the great Savoy Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan.

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