

# Don Pasquale in a Nutshell by Martin Pollins

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



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The Haywards Heath & District Probus Club has arranged a visit to Glyndebourne on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> October 2021. A group of members, wives, and friends will be enjoying (we hope), *Don Pasquale* the Opera by Gaetano Donizetti.

I thought it would be useful to issue a synopsis. But first, let me tell you that *Don Pasquale* is an opera buffa, or comic opera, by Gaetano Donizetti, in three acts with an Italian libretto completed primarily by *Giovanni Ruffini* as well as the composer. The music is suggestive of a comic opera; bright and lively, it starts with plenty of percussion and brass instruments. After a while, the ambience changes to suggesting a party, and the overture ends with a finale. The opera was first performed in January 1843 by the Théâtre-Italien at the Salle Ventadour in Paris, with great success. It is generally regarded as the high point of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century opera buffa tradition and, in fact, marked its ending. The opera is 'pure, unadulterated farce, set to music that's sparkling, brainy, and jaw-droppingly demanding—and yet it touches on deeper levels of emotion that make it one of the great humane comedies in opera\*.

\* See: [Metropolitan Opera](#), [here](#).



Picture Credit/Attribution: Not identified, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, Staging for the premiere of Donizetti's comic opera *Don Pasquale* as performed by the Théâtre Italien at the Salle Ventadour in Paris, beginning on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1843. File URL: [here](#).

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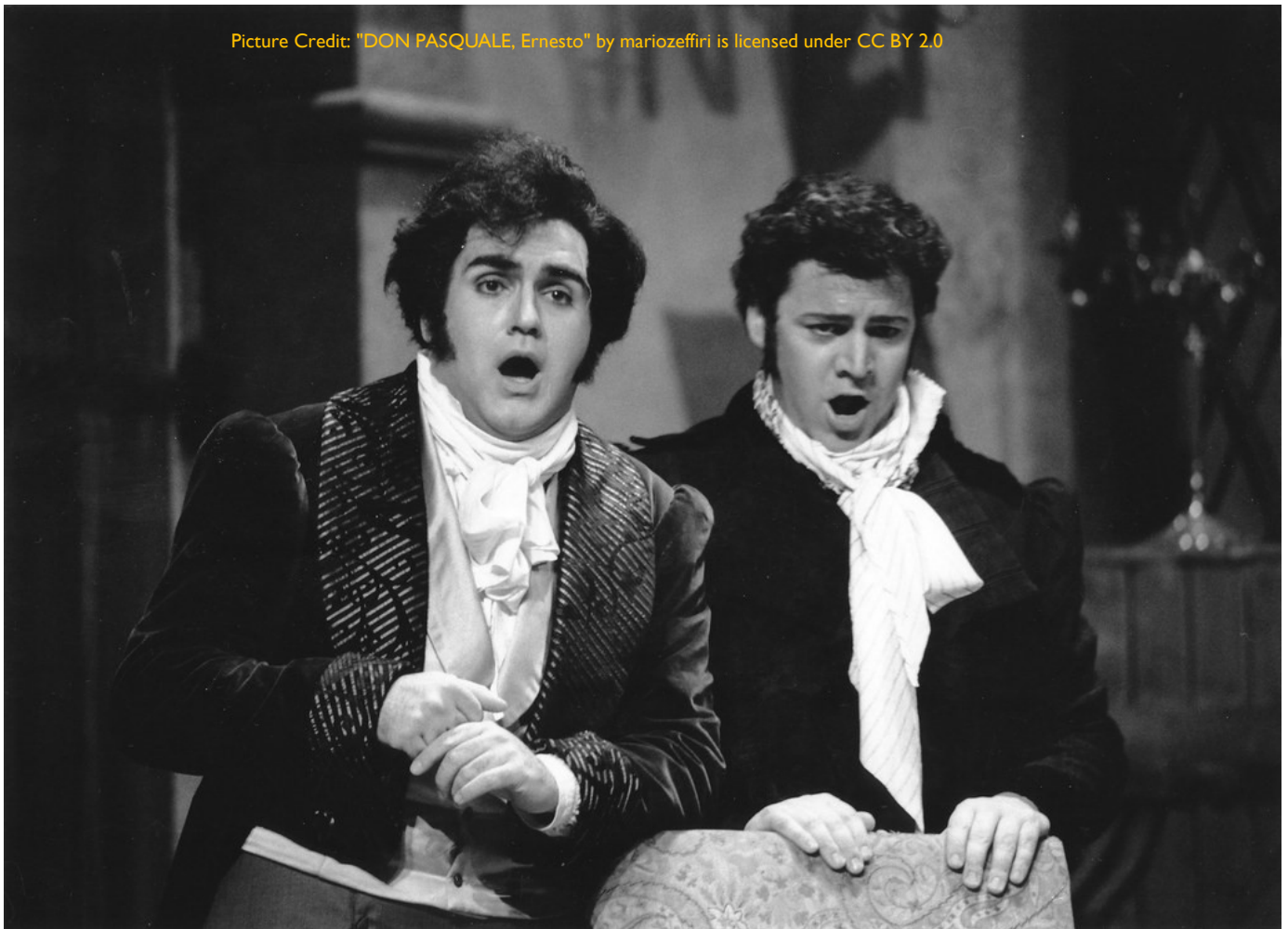
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## Short Version of the Story

Don Pasquale, a wealthy old bachelor, is outraged when he hears his nephew Ernesto wishes to marry the impoverished widow Norina. He decides to get married himself and disinherit Ernesto. Ernesto and Norina despair, but their friend Dr. Malatesta promises to help them – and teach Pasquale a lesson in the process. Malatesta persuades widow Norina to disguise herself as his sister, and then he presents her to Don Pasquale as a potential bride. Pasquale is so delighted with the young woman's docile behaviour that he demands they marry immediately.

The 'marriage' takes place. The witness is a fake notary. Norina becomes overbearing and unpleasant, and torments her new 'husband'. When Pasquale discovers a note from his 'wife' arranging a rendezvous with a lover, he determines to confront her and end his misery. The conspirators are now set to reveal their trickery, but will Don Pasquale forgive them?

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## Fuller Version of the Story

### Act I

Don Pasquale, an elderly and tetchy bachelor, has reminded his nephew Ernesto that he has offered to wed him to a wealthy lady. If Ernesto refuses the arrangement, he will be disinherited. The love-sick Ernesto refuses, as he has done before, saying he is determined to marry the young but poor widow Norina. Don Pasquale, despite his age, decides to marry to produce an heir, and anxiously awaits the arrival of his physician, Dr. Malatesta.

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Norina is at home, reading a romantic novel. Dr. Malatesta arrives and tells her of the scheme he has put together to help her and Ernesto marry. Norina will be introduced to Don Pasquale as Dr. Malatesta's sister Sofronia, fresh from a convent. Dr. Malatesta is determined to teach Don Pasquale how foolish he is, and has been pretending to search for a suitable bride. When Don Pasquale and the bride are 'married' by a false notary, he will be at their mercy.

Don Pasquale, is at his house in Rome. He eagerly awaits his friend Dr. Malatesta, who says he has arranged a marriage for him. The doctor tells Don Pasquale that the bride-to-be is beautiful and innocent and happens to be Dr. Malatesta's sister. It seems just what Don Pasquale needs and he is impatient for the wedding to take place. Dr. Malatesta, confronted with Pasquale's impatience, describes the attributes of the bride-to-be. When pressed, Malatesta reveals she is, in fact, his sister. Overcome with joy, Pasquale demands to meet her at once, and sends Dr. Malatesta to fetch her. Ernesto returns and pleads with the Don to consult with his friend Dr. Malatesta – when he hears that Malatesta supposedly supports Pasquale, he is amazed at this apparent betrayal.

Norina is in cahoots with Dr. Malatesta and impatiently waits for him to come and explain his plan details of which previously he had only hinted. A servant delivers the letter from Ernesto, which she quickly reads and is instantly dismayed. When Dr. Malatesta arrives to explain his plan, Norina cuts him short and hands him the letter, which he reads aloud: Ernesto has announced his intention to leave Rome, and Europe altogether. Malatesta reassures her, saying that he has adapted his plan: Norina shall play the part of Dr. Malatesta's sister. Having arranged for his cousin to act as a notary, they will easily deceive the Don. Norina consents to play her part in the deception, and they discuss her strategies in a lively duet.

## Act 2

Ernesto is alone: lamenting his fate, he considers his decision to leave Rome. Disowned by Don Pasquale, Ernesto feels he cannot ask Norina to share his poverty. He leaves the room just as Don Pasquale enters, dressed in his outdated finery, along with his servants, to whom he gives instructions to admit Dr. Malatesta on his arrival. Don Pasquale parades around in his grand finery, much like a peacock, hoping it will hide his advancing years.

Dr. Malatesta arrives accompanied by Norina and introduces her to Pasquale as his sister, Sofronia, recently having left the convent. Pasquale is smitten, and Norina plays the part of a dutiful, modest and submissive lady – adding to Pasquale's satisfaction. Norina consents to the proposed marriage, which delights Don Pasquale. He wants to summon a notary to conduct the ceremony straightaway – conveniently, the cunning Dr. Malatesta has brought one along, who waits in an adjoining room.

Before Norina can add her signature to the marriage contract, Ernesto bursts into the marriage chamber, intending to say a final farewell. He is amazed to see Norina about to marry Pasquale. Dr. Malatesta persuades him not to say anything, and he agrees to act as the final witness - much to Don Pasquale's delight.

As soon as the contract is signed, Norina abandons her pretence of docility and refuses Pasquale's embrace. She announces her intention to teach him good manners and to have Ernesto escort her on evening strolls. Pasquale is horrified at this transformation, while Dr. Malatesta and Ernesto can barely conceal their amusement.

## Act 3

Don Pasquale sits in a room, surrounded by piles of newly purchased jewels, dresses and more, as the servants bustle in and out of Norina's apartment. Downcast at all the bills and invoices, which he examines with horror, Don Pasquale summons the courage to confront his tyrannical new wife. He plans to take her to task about the money spent on revamping his home.

As she leaves, she deliberately drops a piece of paper. Don Pasquale discovers it is a note from Sofronia's 'lover' arranging a secret meeting in the garden that evening. Pasquale sends for Dr. Malatesta and shows him the note.

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Dr. Malatesta plays along with the charade, and agrees with Don Pasquale to confront the lovers in the garden that night.

Later, Ernesto serenades Norina in the garden, and they sing of their love for each other. Don Pasquale and Dr. Malatesta spy on them and then ambush them, but Ernesto escapes unrecognised. 'Sofronia' denies her guilt and refuses to leave, but Dr. Malatesta persuades her that she cannot stay, as Norina is due to arrive tomorrow as Ernesto's bride. Pasquale is thus forced to accept Ernesto's chosen wife to get rid of his own. When the truth is finally revealed, Pasquale forgives the youngsters and all are reconciled.

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## Sources:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don\\_Pasquale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Pasquale)

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<https://www.metopera.org/user-information/synopses-archive/don-pasquale>

<https://www.liveabout.com/don-pasquale-synopsis-723737>

## Recommended Reading:

The Faber Pocket Guide to Opera by Rupert Christiansen, on Amazon, [here](#).