# **Don Pasquale: Lessons in Character Development from Donizetti's Comic Opera**

*A young bass singer reflects on portraying elderly Don Pasquale, learning to balance humor with authenticity while performing in unconventional positions.*

Lying on a couch in the fetal position, pretending to be an old man, I began to learn to think less and act more.

This realization came during rehearsals for Gaetano Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*, presented by Philadelphia’s Academy of Vocal Arts in February. *Don Pasquale* is a comic opera set in nineteenth-century Rome that revolves around an old wealthy bachelor who wants an heir to carry on his name. I was the titular Don Pasquale. The story reflects on nineteenth-century Italian social mores, but as the plot, AVA’s modern-day staging, and my own experience show, it has a lot to teach us about aging, humor, and fully inhabiting the moment.

In the opera,Ernesto, Don Pasquale’s nephew, falls in love with Norina, a poor widow who Don Pasquale considers to be beneath Ernesto. He wants his nephew to marry a woman he chooses for him, but Ernesto refuses. Don Pasquale decides to disinherit Ernesto and find a wife for himself in order to produce an heir. This plan seems to be working until Dr. Malatesta—a good friend of Don Pasquale, Ernesto, and Norina—develops a new scheme to deceive Don Pasquale into marrying Norina in disguise.

In many ways, this opera captures the period when it was written. Arranged marriages were still common in nineteenth-century Italy, particularly among the upper classes. They were frequently used to strengthen family ties or to improve one’s social or financial standing. *Don Pasquale* satirizes this practice by depicting an older man and a young woman who marry for status rather than love. This period also saw a shift in attitudes toward gender roles and women’s rights. Women were starting to claim their freedom and question traditional notions of femininity. Norina in *Don Pasquale* asserts her independence and refuses to be subservient to men, reflecting these changing attitudes.

There are also some interesting similarities between the composer, Donizetti, and the character of Don Pasquale. Donizetti’s life was marked by ups and downs, professional successes and personal struggles. He was a prolific composer who created over sixty operas, many of which were popular at the time and are still highly regarded today. However, he suffered from mental and physical illness near the end of his life. It is possible that the character of Don Pasquale, depicted as a foolish old man who is deceived and humiliated by others, may reflect Donizetti’s own feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness.

Despite portraying nineteenth-century Italian society, and perhaps his own experience of aging, Donizetti composed *Don Pasquale* in such a way that it could be adapted to any period. In this year’s AVA production, *Don Pasquale* unfolds in the Italian Market in 1960s Philadelphia. The stage is filled with period details sure to evoke nostalgia in much of the audience: there are signs for Pat’s, Geno’s, the old Sarcone’s Bakery, and Claudio’s. There’s plastic-covered furniture, Tastykake, even Philadelphia cheesesteak. But my connection to the opera was less about the local color and more about the character of Don Pasquale himself.

This production is particularly meaningful to me because it gave me the chance to sing in my first-ever lead role. And it was this role that would teach me a number of technical and philosophical lessons about singing and life. As a young opera singer, it was challenging to inhabit and play an old man. I had to maintain his slightly stooped posture while executing virtuosic passages with my voice. Older roles have always been challenging for young opera singers: if the character is subsumed by their youthful energy, the enchantment of the story entirely falls away. So it was challenging to find Don Pasquale’s energy on the stage. Should he walk slowly or move more quickly taking small, careful steps? Should he have a big belly or be a fit old man? These questions kept running through my head during the rehearsals. Many renowned artists have shared with me that the rehearsal process is one of discovery: it is not just the time to refine and reinforce what you learned before going on stage, it is also the time to produce a new idea every minute to try to build your character. This was the role that truly made me understand that. I tried new things each day, approaching the character from different angles, trying to be faithful to the text and tell the story authentically and honestly. And each day I understood him better.

But Don Pasquale presented yet another challenge: he must be both serious and funny. He is the most serious character in this opera, but the comic opera requires a humorous effect. So I pictured him as an old man doing childish things. Capturing that silliness that can come with old age allowed the character to emerge spontaneously, and I began making instinctive choices without even thinking, going with the flow. This childlike quality is introduced in the first scene, where Don Pasquale is sleeping on a couch in the fetal position. From that point on, the audience begins to sympathize and connect with the old bachelor.

That opening scene illustrates a quirk of operatic performance: singers are generally trained to sing standing up, with proper posture, but the reality of opera is much different. Performers must sing lying down, running, and in other contorted positions that are not ideal from a vocal perspective. While this might seem difficult, I think it’s quite the opposite. Proper singing positions can produce overly sophisticated, contrived vocal effects. These uncomfortable situations, on the other hand, give the singer freedom. You can let go and think less about the voice—you simply don’t the time to do be particular when you’re busy acting and moving on the stage. I had a lot of fun singing on the couch in the fetal position! Lying there, I learned not to overthink things, and that understanding took root and grew. Our thoughts often limit us in our daily lives, but when we put them aside and throw ourselves into the sea of the unknown, there is much to explore. I guess I should thank Don Pasquale for teaching me that.