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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Comedy and Charm Shine in Don Pasquale

Vienna State Opera, 18.11.2024 [ENA]

Gaetano Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* is a cornerstone of the opera buffa genre, a delightful comedy infused with wit, romance, and satire. This production, presented by the Wiener Staatsoper, brings together an exceptional cast led by Erwin Schrott, Edgardo Rocha, Davide Luciano, and Pretty Yende. With vibrant performances and meticulous staging, this rendition of *Don Don Pasquale* is a real triumph.

The opera is reminding audiences why this opera remains a beloved classic nearly two centuries after its premiere. At the heart of this production is Erwin Schrott's portrayal of Don Pasquale. Schrott's Pasquale is a finely layered character who balances the buffoonish and the pitiable with remarkable skill. Schrott has an impeccable sense of comedic timing, and he brings a playful charm to the role that immediately endears him to the audience. However, he also captures the more tragic elements of Pasquale's character—the loneliness, the vulnerability, and the desperation for connection.

Schrott's deep, resonant bass-baritone brings a weighty presence to his performance, allowing him to command the stage even in his most ridiculous moments. His vocal delivery is rich and nuanced, blending seamlessly with Donizetti's lively orchestration. Particularly memorable is his performance in Act III, where he faces the consequences of his foolishness and impulsive decisions. Here, Schrott softens Pasquale's bravado, exposing the character's insecurities in a way that is both touching and humorous. The complexity of Schrott's portrayal transforms Pasquale into more than just a comic figure; he becomes a fully realized character whose journey feels surprisingly poignant amidst the laughs.

In the role of Norina, Pretty Yende brings boundless charisma and vocal brilliance. Yende's soprano sparkles with agility and warmth, perfectly suited to the playful, spirited nature of Norina. She embodies the character's cleverness and independence, infusing every gesture and expression with charm and intelligence. From her first entrance, Yende establishes Norina as a force to be reckoned with—a woman who, despite her limited social status, confidently navigates the challenges thrown her way.

Yende's portrayal is especially engaging in her transformation from Norina to the demure "Sofronia," the character she adopts to trick Don Pasquale. This dual role within the opera allows Yende to showcase her versatility as a performer, switching effortlessly from innocent and coy to commanding and assertive. Her duet with Schrott in the fake wedding scene is a highlight of the production; she dominates the stage with a mischievous energy that brings the audience into the joke, amplifying the humor and irony of the situation.

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Vocally, Yende is stunning, with an exquisite bel canto technique that brings out the full beauty of Donizetti's music. Her arias are filled with coloratura passages that she handles with precision and ease, yet she also brings a soulful quality to Norina's interactions with Ernesto, adding depth to their love story. Her performance in the letter scene is particularly moving, as Yende captures Norina's resolve and determination with a sense of grace that lingers long after the scene concludes.

Edgardo Rocha's Ernesto is another standout performance in this production, bringing a romantic intensity that perfectly complements Norina's vivacity. Rocha's lyrical tenor has a sweetness that suits Ernesto's earnestness and youthful passion, especially in the early scenes where he is heartbroken over Pasquale's interference in his love life. His vocal control and phrasing are impeccable, allowing him to deliver Ernesto's arias with a sense of longing and sincerity.

Rocha's chemistry with Yende is palpable, and together, they capture the romance and passion that underpins Don Pasquale's comedy. His performance in the duet with Norina is equally compelling; the two characters' love and loyalty add emotional weight to the otherwise light-hearted plot, reminding the audience of the stakes involved in the elaborate ruse. Rocha's sincerity grounds Ernesto, making him a figure of earnestness and devotion amid the trickery surrounding him.

Davide Luciano's portrayal of Dr. Malatesta is a masterclass in comedic acting. Luciano's baritone is robust and flexible, allowing him to navigate the rapid-fire exchanges and lyrical phrases with ease. Malatesta is the mastermind behind the trick that brings Don Pasquale to his knees, and Luciano performs the role with a wily charm and confidence that make him instantly likable. Luciano's duet with Schrott in "Cheti, cheti, immantimente" is a tour de force of comedic timing and vocal precision. The two singers exchange lines at breakneck speed, their voices weaving together in a display of vocal acrobatics that brings the house down. Luciano's energy and charisma shine throughout, making Malatesta the perfect foil to Don Pasquale.

The set design and costumes, meticulously crafted, evoke a sense of timelessness while allowing for a contemporary twist. Don Pasquale's home, with its lavish but somewhat dated decor, reflects his character—wealthy yet stubbornly clinging to old ideals. The staging cleverly emphasizes the contrasts between characters; Norina's bright costumes set her apart from Pasquale's darker, more subdued attire, mirroring the vitality she brings into his life and the disruption she causes in his orderly world.

Giacomo Sagripanti brings a modern sensibility to the production, allowing the characters' emotions to shine through in a way that resonates with today's audiences. The humor is sharp, the pacing brisk, and the staging dynamic, with scenes fluidly transitioning between comic exchanges and tender moments. This direction accentuates the characters' humanity while maintaining the opera's lighthearted tone, making the

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production both entertaining and emotionally engaging.

The orchestra delivers a spirited, finely tuned performance that captures the sparkle of Donizetti's score. The conductor's pacing is impeccable, moving seamlessly between the buoyant, rollicking overtures and the more delicate moments of introspection. Donizetti's score is brought to life with energy and sensitivity, the orchestration emphasizing the lively, playful nature of the music without overpowering the singers.

The orchestral interludes add depth to the comic scenes, with precise phrasing and articulation that highlight Donizetti's intricate composition. The overture sets the tone for the evening, its lively tempo drawing the audience into Pasquale's world of mischief and romance. The orchestra's contribution is integral to the production's success, providing the foundation on which the singers build their performances.

The supporting cast and ensemble bring additional layers of humor and richness to the performance. Marcus Pelz as the Butler and Waltraud Barton as Gaetano add subtle humor to the household dynamic, enhancing the sense of a close-knit, somewhat eccentric community that surrounds Don Pasquale. Each member of the cast contributes to the overall charm of the production, ensuring that every scene is infused with humor, energy, and warmth.

The ensemble scenes, especially those involving the household staff, create a lively atmosphere that immerses the audience in Don Pasquale's world. The interactions between characters, from conspiratorial whispers to grand gestures, highlight the opera's playful spirit and reinforce its themes of love, loyalty, and deception. This production of Don Pasquale at the Wiener Staatsoper is an absolute delight, blending impeccable vocal performances with innovative staging and a keen understanding of Donizetti's comedic genius. Erwin Schrott's portrayal of Pasquale is both hilarious and moving, capturing the character's folly and his humanity with equal skill.

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