

CALGARY OPERA



DON PASQUALE

STUDY GUIDE

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge that we live, work and play on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut’ina, the Iyârhe Nakoda Nations, the Otipemisiwak Métis Government of the Métis Nation within Alberta Districts 5 & 6, and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.

ABOUT CALGARY OPERA

Founded in 1972, Calgary Opera is one of Canada's most innovative and ambitious professional opera companies. With more than 50 events during the 2024-25 season, curious listeners of all ages can experience the wonder of opera all throughout the school year, whether as grand events at the Jubilee Auditorium or in diverse community experiences throughout our city and beyond.

Since 2007, we've offered an annual school tour production, performing for young audiences around Southern Alberta.

For over 25 years, we've offered the in-school music program Let's Create an Opera, reaching over 60,000 students.

This season, we are thrilled to partner with Elder Saa'kokoto and the teachers and students of Sundance School for Let's Create an Opera, which will culminate in an original children's opera performed in English, French, and Blackfoot.



Throughout its 52-year history, Calgary Opera has championed new works and Canadian artists and stories. We have produced:

- 8 new works, including the internationally acclaimed opera "Filumena"
- 27 new productions (new versions of existing operas), and
- 8 Canadian premieres.

Calgary Opera's mission is to serve its entire community with innovative and inspiring stories told through the bold medium of opera. We're thrilled you'll be joining us!

To stay connected and learn more, sign up for our newsletter [here](#).

DISCOVERING OPERA

Opera is a vibrant and ever-changing artform that combines the dramatic intensity of the theatre, heightened through music and singing.

- Operas can be long or short, with any number of people involved.
- Operas can be sung in any language.
- Operas can tell stories about any time, place, person, or issue.
- Operas are still being written today.

Operas are created by the cast, crew, and artistic production team including:

- composers, who write the music
- librettists, who write the words or “libretto”
- directors
- conductors
- singers
- instrumentalists
- dancers
- set, lighting, special effects designers
- costume and makeup designers
- fight and intimacy coordinators
- choreographers
- stage managers and technical crew
- and the audience



**Each person brings who they are as a person to the creation of an opera.
Their individual contributions shape the performance.**



Operas are not typically autobiographical, although they do use stories and music to express the personal struggles and ideals of the creators. They often also comment on important social concerns of the creators' time.

Sometimes stories from cultures not of the creators' own were used to convey universal themes. In these cases, the creators relied on imagination and empathy to enter the emotional world of someone whose specific experiences they never lived through.

When this is the case, there are also important ideas to reflect on, including:

- Who is telling whose story?
- How are they telling it?
- For what purpose?

In recent years, opera creators prefer to share their own stories or to collaborate with those whose stories they would like to tell. As such, opera also presents an important opportunity to think critically about art, as well as to go beyond the opera itself and learn more about the history, language, traditions, and stories of those represented.



UNDERSTANDING THE MUSIC OF OPERA

We understand music on its own terms by making music! By singing its melodies and harmonies, playing it and especially by improvising, we bring the music into our ears, bodies, and spirits.

To increase our musical understanding, we begin by learning by heart the melodies and rhythms we encounter. As the music of more artists becomes familiar, we begin to encounter unfamiliar music with more musical understanding.

Whether you've heard an opera once or a hundred times, there's always more to discover.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE

Whether you're brand new, or have been a subscriber for years, you're welcome at the opera. Here's how you can get the most out of your visit:

WHAT TIME SHOULD I ARRIVE?

We recommend you plan to arrive at the venue 45 minutes prior to the show start time. This will allow for time to find parking and take your seat without risk of missing any part of the performance.

WHAT TIME DOES THE SHOW START?

Invited Dress Rehearsals at the Jubilee Auditorium start promptly at 7:00 pm.

WHERE IS THE THEATRE?

Visit our [Getting Here](#) page for more information about our venues.

WHERE DO I PARK?

Visit our [Getting Here](#) page for more information about parking at our various venues.

ARE FOOD AND DRINKS ALLOWED INTO THE AUDITORIUM?

Drinks are allowed in the auditorium, provided they are in plastic containers.

Food is available for purchase in the lobby during intermission, although it may not be consumed in the theatre.



WHAT ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE AT THE THEATRE?

The Jubilee Auditorium is fully wheelchair accessible (with the exception of the 2nd balcony) with ramps available at the north entrance. Assisted listening devices are available at the coat check. Please view our [Accessibility](#) page for more detailed information about accessibility features.

WHAT IS A DRESS REHEARSAL?

A dress rehearsal is the final on-stage rehearsal of an opera before it premieres to the public. A dress rehearsal includes nearly full production values (with costumes, sets, lights, orchestra), but the show is still a work in progress.

Some of the seats are blocked off so that the production team (director, stage manager, lighting designer, choreographer, music staff, and others) can watch the show from the theatre, take notes, and communicate with the backstage crew. Should anything need adjusting, the rehearsal might be stopped or a part repeated to make sure that it is perfect.

WHAT DO I WEAR?

You'll find people at the opera wearing a variety of styles, from jeans to jewels. Although many people enjoy dressing up when they go to the opera, there's no mandatory dress code.

HOW WILL I KNOW WHAT THEY'RE SAYING?

Surtitles will be projected above the stage, which translate the Italian words into English as the singers are performing. This is similar to watching a film in a foreign language with subtitles turned on.

DO OPERA SINGERS USE MICROPHONES?

In almost all operas, microphones are not needed. Instead, opera singers use their voices and bodies to naturally amplify the resonance of their vocal folds; they can be heard above the orchestra in large halls without amplification.

To learn more, visit calgaryopera.com/faq.

CHARACTERS

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	ABOUT
Don Pasquale A aging, wealthy bachelor	DAWN pas-KWAH-leh	bass	Although impulsive and short-sighted, he is redeemed by his ability to laugh at his own follies and to forgive others.
Ernesto Don Pasquale's nephew	ehr-NEST-oh	tenor	Ernesto's name plays on the word meaning "earnest." He sincerely loves Norina and hopes to be with her, even if he risks losing his uncle's inheritance.
Dr. Malatesta Pasquale's friend and advisor	Doctor MAHL-ah-TEST-ah	baritone	Dr. Malatesta plays a trick on Don Pasquale, hoping to reveal his own foolishness and bring about a just ending to Ernesto's predicament.
Norina Ernesto's beloved	noh-REE-nah	soprano	Norina, a young widow, is in love with Ernesto and pretends to be "Sofronia" to trick Pasquale.
Carlino Ernesto's cousin	car-LEE-noh	bass	Carlino is a notary, who can issue marriage licenses, and is also in on the trick.

Calgary Opera attracts world class talent to perform for our audience, including local singers and McPhee Artists who apprentice at Calgary Opera. For more information about the performers who bring these characters to life, please visit us [here](#).

KEY IDEAS

- **Calgary Opera’s production of *Don Pasquale* has been adapted** from the original setting to the mid-20th century. Interestingly, the original *Don Pasquale* (premiered in 1843) adapted the words and setting of an earlier opera.
- **The action revolves around Don Pasquale**, an aging silent film actor, who is at odds with **his nephew Ernesto**, an up-and-coming singer, and **Ernesto’s beloved, Norina**, a young actress in sound films. The opera opens with a silent film accompanied by orchestra: this introduces the theme of the film studio and the character relationships.
- **We meet Don Pasquale at a time when he feels he is losing his power.** He tries to find a worldly solution to his distress, only to discover that it must come through acceptance and forgiveness.
- **This opera plays up the boundaries between real life and film scenarios** portrayed by the different performers. At times, the characters are themselves interacting with one another, while at other times, they are being filmed performing roles in the new “talking pictures” of the 1930s-50s.
- **Through the set and costumes, film fans will recognize key moments** from famous films of the past, including: *Roman Holiday*, *La dolce vita*, and *Singing in the Rain*.
- ***Don Pasquale* leans into the playful tradition of Italian comic opera** of the 17th and 18th centuries, opera buffa while also weaving more serious moments for listeners to reflect on. Comedy is a powerful tool to explore human behaviour and challenge assumptions.
- **The story borrows stock characters** from the Italian improvised theatre tradition of commedia dell’arte. These types of characters are found in many different forms, from traditional theatre and opera to comedy sketches like *Saturday Night Live*.



Lucca Opera Festival, Don Pasquale, 2014

THE STORY

For a short video synopsis, check out *Opera in a Nutshell* [here](#). Juno-nominated Chinese-Canadian tenor Spencer Britten plays all the roles in this quick and hilarious video synopsis of *Don Pasquale* created for Vancouver Opera.

ACT I The action of this opera begins *in medias res* (Latin for “in the middle of things”). Don Pasquale is in his dressing room, waiting for his friend Dr. Malatesta, a director-composer, to bring him word of Pasquale’s bride-to-be.

We learn from the two of them that Pasquale’s nephew Ernesto is in love with the young widow Norina, an actress in the new sound films. Pasquale is prepared to leave his vast wealth and estate to Ernesto, but only if he marries a wealthy bride. Unfortunately, Pasquale does not approve of Norina, who is poor, and is angry with Ernesto for insisting on being with her. As punishment, Pasquale has decided to quickly marry someone himself, produce an heir, and disinherit his nephew.

Dr. Malatesta arrives, but decides to play a trick on Pasquale instead of helping him find a bride. Malatesta invents a non-existent sister of his, “Sofronia,” who will agree to “marry” Pasquale. In reality, it will be Norina, whom Pasquale has never met in person. She will pretend to act sweetly and demurely at first, but after the mock wedding, “Sofronia” will drive Pasquale crazy with outrageous demands. In this way, Malatesta hopes to teach Don Pasquale a lesson about marrying for the wrong reasons and convince the old bachelor to allow Ernesto to marry his beloved.

Malatesta arrives at Norina’s home and explains the plan. She is eager to play the role of “Sofronia” if it means she and Ernesto will be together.

ACT II Pasquale is thrilled to meet his bride-to-be while Ernesto is distraught at the tragic turn of events. When Norina arrives in disguise as “Sofronia,” Pasquale is completely smitten and decides to marry her immediately. Conveniently, the notary has already been waiting nearby. Ernesto bursts in on the “wedding,” and accuses Norina of unfaithfulness. Malatesta privately explains the trick to Ernesto, who gleefully agrees to play the role of witness to the wedding.

With the wedding contract signed, “Sofronia” switches tactics as planned. She immediately begins reprimanding Pasquale for his much-too-modest lifestyle, demanding extravagant luxuries with a nasty short temper, and even insisting that Ernesto accompany her on long walks and errands—all to the shock and dismay of Pasquale.

20 minute intermission

ACT III Norina is expertly playing the role of “Sofronia,” steadily amassing an ever increasing list of expensive bills. When Pasquale becomes exasperated and demands a divorce, Norina realizes she has been too harsh in her play-acting, and in truth pities the old gentleman. Together with Malatesta, they invent a scenario to release all parties. Malatesta announces that Ernesto is about to bring his own bride, Norina, to live at the family house. “Sofronia” says she will never live under the same roof with another woman and threatens to leave.

Pasquale is overjoyed at a way out of his “marriage” and allows Ernesto to marry Norina and even receive his inheritance as originally planned. Norina is revealed to be “Sofronia” in disguise. In a final chorus, Pasquale accepts the situation with good humour and gives the young couple his blessing.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

Who is the composer? The person who writes the music of an opera.

Gaetano Donizetti was born in Bergamo (now in Italy) in 1797 and began his musical studies with Giovanni Simone Mayr, a Bavarian priest and composer who became the most important mentor in Donizetti's life. Mayr was the musical director of Santa Maria Maggiore, Bergamo's chief church, the founder of a free music school for youth, as well as a successful composer of opera.



Mayr perceived in Donizetti a musical ability and secured his entry into the Liceo Filarmonico (the music school) at Bologna, where he had a thorough training in the Western classical tradition. Although Donizetti composed a vast quantity of sacred music, his natural instinct was for the theatre.

Donizetti quickly found success as an operatic composer, most prominently with the historical opera *Anna Bolena*, about the former Queen of England who was executed for treason. As Donizetti's reputation grew as a composer of both comic and tragic operas, he also began to write operas in French for Parisian audiences. Some of his best known French operas include: *La fille du régiment*, *La favorite*, and *Linda di Chamounix*.

Donizetti wrote about 75 operas in total. Toward the end of his life, his health was greatly affected by illness (syphilis) and the loss of his beloved wife and infant children. He was described as never being envious of the successes of other composers and was openhearted and generous. His operas were immensely popular with the public during his lifetime. In addition to *Don Pasquale*, other operas of his that are still performed today include *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *L'elisir d'amore*.

Learn more by reading: *Donizetti: The Dickens of Opera* by Roger Parker; *Gaetano Donizetti* by English National Opera; *Gaetano Donizetti* by Dyneley Hussey

ABOUT THE LIBRETTIST

Who is the librettist? The person who writes the words (dialogue and lyrics) of an opera.

What does “libretto” mean? In Italian, libretto means “little book.” Early Italian opera houses printed off “little books” for audience members that had all the words written inside, so that attendees could follow what was being sung.

Giovanni Ruffini was a writer and patriot born in Genoa (now Italy) in 1807. During the 19th century, Italy was partially occupied by other countries, including France and Austria, and ruled as separate kingdoms. A nationalist movement known as the *Risorgimento* was growing, however, and Italians began to consider themselves a nation-state and unify politically.



Ruffini was politically active and condemned to death for participating in revolutionary activities related to the *Risorgimento*. While living in exile in Paris, he was approached by the director of the Parisian Théâtre-Italien, Jules Janin, to collaborate with Donizetti on a new opera, *Don Pasquale*.

Ruffini agreed, although he did not realize that Donizetti wanted to set new text to previously composed music. **Ruffini prepared his libretto, although Donizetti altered it so much that eventually Ruffini refused to have his name listed as the librettist for the opera.** (Ruffini was still paid a competitive fee for his work.)

Ruffini also wrote an important novel, *Doctor Antonio*, which romanticized the story of an Italian revolutionary who fell in love with the daughter of a British aristocrat. It was meant to generate British support for Italian Unification, and spurred a British interest in travel to Italy.

Ruffini died in 1881 at the age of 74 years in Taggia, a small coastal resort town near Genoa. Italy had existed as a unified country for 20 years at the time of Ruffini’s death.

LISTENING TO BEL CANTO

Don Pasquale is filled with hallmarks of Italian opera comedies of the early and mid 19th century—rousing choruses, tuneful arias, martial fanfares, and brisk dances. But it also influenced later composers like Giuseppe Verdi that introduced greater drama into the music through dramatic pauses and sudden shifts of musical character to amplify the theatrical story-telling.

As the music begins, consider sinking into not only the prominent melodies and rhythms, but into the deeper harmonies and sound of each instrument. Our modern ears can use a moment to adjust to the musical language of composer Gaetano Donizetti, where the truth of the message is in the tone itself.

Donizetti had already written 70 operas when *Don Pasquale* was premiered in the heart of what historians now consider the bel canto era. The term was coined later, nostalgically, to mark an era of “beautiful singing.” This vocal style required artfully coordinating breath and vowels to create a beautiful, even, dynamic tone. Florid passages and vocal fireworks were entertaining, and wordy duets like Malatesta and Pasquale’s influenced the lightning-fast patter songs of later composers like Gilbert & Sullivan.

However, the heart of this style lay in legato (“bound”) singing, where one tone binds seamlessly with the next, connected by an emotional truth at the centre of each vowel. To modern ears, strong vowels can feel arresting—a pure “ah”, a pure “oh” are not often heard outside the opera house.



Giulia Grisi premiered the role of Norina in 1843

Ernesto's most ardent expression of love for Norina comes in his serenade *Com'è gentil la notte a mezzo april!* (*How gentle is the mid-April night!*). The chorus sings a lilting chordal accompaniment, like a giant guitar that is gently plucked to accompany Ernesto's entreaty.

As we listen to *Don Pasquale*, we can learn from the music itself by exploring whose music it really is. Is the orchestra conveying:

- the overt feelings of the character singing,
- an insight they might not yet be aware of,
- how they are perceived by others, or
- the emotions of another character who is also influencing the scene?

We can listen to an opera 100 times, and still there is more to discover. Tune in with your ears and your heart, and enjoy the magic of *Don Pasquale*!

ADAPTING OPERA SETTINGS

When Gaetano Donizetti premiered *Don Pasquale* in 1843, public demand for opera was at one of its all-time highs. (A strong comparison could be made to streaming television series today, which some have dubbed “peak TV.”) Composers were writing operas at a dizzying rate, and most operas produced were being performed for the first time with the direct involvement of the composers themselves. By the time the Metropolitan Opera opened in New York City in 1883, however, the list of operas performed included works by composers more than half of whom were no longer living.

As the opera production ecosystem shifted over the 20th century, favouring classics over new works, a new concept arose: presenting the stories of known operas in new dramatic contexts. Stage directors felt a greater freedom to change the location and time period, and therefore scenery and costumes, to present their own interpretation of the opera.

Like revivals of Broadway musicals, resetting opera productions requires a careful understanding of the heart of the opera, what maintains its artistic integrity, and what can destroy it. Puccini’s *Tosca* for instance, is often cited as an opera that is challenging to reset because its intended setting is central to the story. (*Tosca* takes place in Rome between June 17–18, 1800 just as Napoleon is returning to conquer Italy. A resetting would be akin to changing the setting of the Broadway musical *Les Misérables* from the 1832 Paris Uprising, immortalized in Victor Hugo’s novel.)



Canadian Opera Company, *Don Pasquale*, Michael Cooper coopershoots.com/COC, 2024

There are several elements that make *Don Pasquale* conducive to a resetting: a time period is not specified in the original libretto, the stock characters are timeless archetypes, and the comedic setting is flexible to reinterpretation. Moreover, unlike many traditional Italian comic operas that find dramatic tension in conflict between classes of society, *Don Pasquale* plays on outmoded versus modern ways of thinking, which can shift depending on the era. Perhaps most interestingly, however, Donizetti himself adapted the subject of *Don Pasquale* from an earlier opera, updating the setting and costumes to contemporary times. This marked a radical innovation in opera history, which took many more years to be fully realized.

While change for its own sake—or worse, for shock value—is not useful, successful resettings can provide a sparkling adaptation to a beloved classic. And in cases such as *Don Pasquale*, they even mirror the original intentions and forward-looking attitude of the composer. By resetting this 1843 opera, audiences will witness *Don Pasquale* under the same contemporary light in which the composer wanted his opera to be experienced.

Additional learning resources are listed online at Calgary Opera’s [In Context](#).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Use discussion and class activities to explore the questions the opera *Don Pasquale* poses to listeners of all ages:

Don Pasquale explores differences between generations. Choose one topic and interview a person of another generation to learn their perspectives on:

- Arts and culture,
- Technology and communication, and/or
- Financial security and stability

Who has the most to learn?

- How did Don Pasquale change from this experience?
- What did Norina learn, particularly in how she treated Don Pasquale?
- Was Dr. Malatesta right to play a trick on Don Pasquale?

What do we learn about the opera from the overture?

- Close your eyes and listen once more to the opera [overture](#) (the opening instrumental music). Can you hear different characters represented in the instrumental melodies and rhythms?
- Which instruments in the overture carry the drama? Why?

Choose a character that you identify with: Don Pasquale, Malatesta, Norina, or Ernesto:

- Analyze the motivations and repercussions of your character's actions.
- What is an important turning point for your character? Write a letter or speech to another character describing your feelings at this turning point.
- Write an alternate ending based on your character choosing a different path forward from this turning point.

Additional Lesson Plans & Resources:

- Vancouver Opera [Don Pasquale Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans
- Manitoba Opera [Don Pasquale Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans
- Opera Omaha [Don Pasquale Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans
- Minnesota Opera [Don Pasquale Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans

COMING UP NEXT



DRESS REHEARSAL

FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS & EDUCATIONAL GROUPS

Who can attend?

- K-12 students
- Post-secondary students
- Educators
- Music students of any age
- Lifelong learning groups

Bring a friend
or guest for

\$20
each

Thursday, April 3, 2025 at 7 PM

Southern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium, Calgary AB

Tickets (\$20 including GST) by calling 403-262-7286



To purchase tickets for groups or individuals, please call the Calgary Opera Audience Services Team at 403-262-7286, ext 1, or email info@calgaryopera.com.

calgaryopera.com/student-dress-rehearsal

PHOTO CREDITS

Page 3 *Upper right:* Calgary Opera's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*
Lower left: Students participate in Calgary Opera's *Let's Create an Opera*

Page 4 *Right:* Lucia Cesaroni and Talise Trevigne in Calgary Opera's *The Marriage of Figaro*. HarderLee Photography. 2023. *Bottom:* Audience members attending Calgary Opera's WonderLand. 2024.

Page 5 Students participate in Calgary Opera's *Let's Create an Opera*.

Page 6 Canva image used with permission.

Page 9 Lucca Opera Festival, Don Pasquale, 2014

Page 12 Portrait of composer Gaetano Donizetti. DeAgostini/Getty Images.
Retrieved from: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/regular-features/grace-notes/donizetti-the-dickens-of-opera>

Page 13 Portrait of librettist Giovanni Ruffini. Retrieved from:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni_Ruffini

Page 14 Engraved portrait of soprano Giulia Grisi, who premiered the role of Norina in *Don Pasquale*. In this portrait, she is dressed to play Norma in Bellini's opera *Norma*. Retrieved here: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1779135>

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