

Donizetti: The Elixir of Love at Thaxted Festival | Live Review

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Colin Clarke

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An English language version of Donizetti's famous opera shone from Wild Arts at the Thaxted Festival



Tom Elwin as Nemorino in Donizetti's The Elixir of Love at Thaxted Festival | Credit: Bonnie Britain

Part of Wild Arts' second Summer Opera Tour, this production of Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love* at Thaxted Festival was utter delight. Donizetti's 1832 opera is a perennial favourite, funny and chock-full of fine melodies. It is also beautifully structured – Wild Arts' performance honoured all aspects of this miraculous score.

Joseph Morris' translation of Felice Romani's libretto was a work of art in itself, beautifully comedic and in highly idiomatic English. Just as effective was Hamish Brown's 'new orchestration' for chamber ensemble. Brown has a deft ear, reallocating melodies and creating perfectly-judged textures from his band of three violins and two each of violas,

cellos and double-basses, clarinet, trumpet and accordion (this last adding a touch of rusticity to proceedings). Oliver Joplin's conducting was superb, not only in his ability to create pinpoint ensemble, but also to hear – and project – Donizetti's larger structures. Imagination was everything: the 'chorus' comprised Gianetta (Sofia Kirwan-Baez), Lauretta (Rebecca Milford), Claudio (Harry Jacques) and Roberto (Robert Garland) – all Wild Arts Young Artists.



Galina Averina as Adina in Donizetti's The Elixir of Love at Thaxted Festival | Credit: Lucy Toms

Although Donizetti does stipulate an Italian village in the early 19th century, director Guido Martin-Brandis takes us to the seaside – a place of holidays, and a liminal, unreal space divorced from dreary reality, where anything is possible. The costumes place us sometime in the 1950's. Stagings in a church beg for simplicity, and here, a 'blue sky' drop against which the action unfolded sufficed perfectly. Sophie Lincoln's costume designs were impeccable.

The cast was young and talented – the baseline was exceptional, meaning anyone who shone was particularly noteworthy. As Adina, Galina Averina revealed a gleaming, agile soprano, yet in her 'Prendi Per me sei libero' she proved herself in the lyric arena, too.

Her Nemorino was tenor Thomas Elwin, carrying his long lyric lines beautifully and bringing the house down with his 'Una furtiva lagrima'. I enjoyed Elwin's Prince Gvidon (*Golden Cockerel*, ETO, 2022); ditto his Fracasso (*Le Finta semplice*, Mozartists, 2018), but Nemorino is a spotlight role, and he triumphed. The chemistry between the ever-so-shy Nemorino and the lit-from-within Adina was palpable; his delight in being suddenly thrust into the centre of (multiple female) attention in the second act, brilliant.



Sofia Kirwin-Baez as Gianetta in Donizetti's The Elixir of Love at Thaxted Festival | Credit: Lucy Toms

James Atkinson's Sergeant Bellcore took a while to settle, but he launched into the second act with aplomb and is blessed with a fine, resonant baritone (In keeping with the seaside theme, he is a navy captain)

There is no doubting that Alex Jones can hold a stage. If Averina's Adina was the musical highlight of the evening, Jones' assumption of the role of Doctor Dulcamara, a lovable rogue, was the dramatic apex. His stage presence is immense, and his sure way with diction means that a 'patter song' is second nature. The Giannetta of Sofia Kirwan-Baez and the Lauretta of Rebecca Milford were both beings of lightness, balanced by Henry Jacques' Claudio and Robert Garland's Robert.

This *L'elisir* was 100% convincing at all levels. In 2024, Wild Arts will tour with a new translation of Mozart's *Zauberflöte* by Jeremy Sams and in a new arrangement by Music Director Oliver Joplin. I can't wait.

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