

AFTER 200 YEARS *CHIARA E SERAFINA* DEBUTS AGAIN AT BERGAMO'S DONIZETTI FESTIVAL



The 2022 Edition of Bergamo's Donizetti Festival staged three operas by its native son: *La favorite*, the grand opera in French, which has stayed more or less on the edges of the standard repertory since its birth in 1840; the 1824 comedy *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (*The Embarrassed Tutor*), a rarity, but not without productions here and there in our times; and the real rarity of the year, *Chiara e Serafina, ossia i pirati*¹, which was first performed on October 26, 1822, almost exactly 200 years before the opera's first revival anywhere, on Nov. 19, 2022².

In 1822 the twenty-four year old composer had already successfully staged works in the operatic centers of Venice, Naples and Rome and it

¹ The subtitle on the 1822 libretto is singular: "il pirata," referring probably to the central role of Picaro.

² There was an "anteprima" for those under 30 on Nov. 16.

was time to take on Milan, the other center of Italy's operatic universe. The vehicle was to be an *opera semiseria* with a libretto by Felice Romani. Romani, who was 34 in 1822, had started in the libretto business in 1813 with texts for Donizetti's teacher Simone Mayr and by 1822 he had produced over thirty libretti for the major composers of the day, including three for Rossini. Romani was no neophyte, but he had a reputation for dilatoriness, which was the plague of many composers. For Donizetti's Scala debut Romani was so late in getting the text to Donizetti that the latter reportedly had to compose the opera in ten days, leaving scarce time for rehearsals.

Chiara e Serafina was based on René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt's 1809 melodrama *La citerne*. Pixérécourt was a successful practitioner of *théâtre boulevardier*, a popular theater aimed at a bourgeois audience which relied on exaggerated characters, surprising plot turns and mysterious secrets, as well as disguises and misunderstandings, often with a heavy dose of sentimentality. This kind of theatricality remains popular in our day too, in movies like the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise.

It seems likely that Romani was too rushed to reduce Pixérécourt's four act play, full of many characters and complicated plot twists, to a reasonable scope for operatic treatment, and so almost all of Pixérécourt's characters and sub plots remain, albeit with a few name changes. For it to make sense, Romani was constrained to give us the background to the story in a Preface to the libretto; Don Alvaro, the father of Chiara and Serafina, was a sea captain from Majorca whose ship was captured during war between Spain and Algeria; he and Chiara were taken captive and held in Algeria for ten years. Meanwhile, the powerful Don Fernando acted as guardian for his other young daughter Serafina; wanting to marry her for her inheritance when she grew up, he has seen to it that the loss of the ship and the crew were considered a crime, with Alvaro condemned as a traitor by the king. Fernando's plan to marry Serafina has been thwarted, however, since she has fallen in love with Don Ramiro, the son of the Mayor of Minorca. He plans to use deception to marry her himself.

In the end, the libretto contained no less than eleven characters and choruses of villagers and pirates. The action takes place in Majorca. Besides Chiara, Serafina, Alvaro, Ramiro and Fernando, the cast includes Agnese, custodian of the abandoned Castle of Belmonte where much of

the action takes place, her daughter Lisetta and Lisetta's foolish old suitor, Don Meschino. Central to the plot is Picaro, a former servant of Don Fernando who for some time has been working as a pirate; he will be instrumental in bringing the plot threads together—and in the libretto he bears a distinct resemblance to Rossini's Figaro.

Romani deftly introduces all of these characters in the opening pages of the opera and lays out the main plot threads. The central one is Chiara's search for her sister and the restoration of their father Alvaro's good name, along with requisite punishment for Fernando, the villain of the piece. Subsidiary plot threads include Meschino's foolish pursuit of Lisetta and the romantic love of Serafina and Ramiro triumphing over Fernando's nefarious designs. It is a lot to handle for a fast paced work of just over two hours. And none of the above mentions the "pirates" of the subtitle—a male chorus with two leaders (Spalatro and Gennaro) who figure prominently in the action and whose semi-comic text and bumbling predate the equally silly group of pirates found in *Penzance* by Gilbert and Sullivan almost sixty years later.

The 2022 Bergamo production had little to do with the settings or the characterizations in the libretto although it did attempt to follow most of the plot convolutions fairly literally. The following analysis of the opera is based on the libretto and not the farcically absurd interpretation of the production, while my comments on the 2022 production are based on the video stream of the Bergamo production. An in-person review of the 2022 operas including *Chiara* by John Harris is available on the Donizetti Society web site: <https://www.donizettisociety.com/Pastproductions2022/2022%20Donizetti%20Festival.htm>. I would also refer anyone to the many pictures of the production there.

The Opera

1. **Overture.** A pleasant overture about 5 minutes long precedes the opera. It opens with some solemn chords suggesting the "seria" part of story; the first theme is a tuneful allegro which evolves into a Rossinian crescendo. A second theme, more sprightly, builds into a new crescendo with a brief return to the first theme before the final crescendo. Altogether a delightful piece.

Act One

- Scene: Majorca. The romantic ruins of a castle by the rocky seashore.

2. Introduction.

a. The villagers are preparing to go fishing as their catch will be used for the upcoming wedding feast of Serafina and Ramiro (Chorus, “L’alba in cielo appar già chiara”). They comment that the sea is teeming with many “fish,” and indeed the first of many characters to burst on the scene is Agnese, who rapidly provides some background: Serafina’s guardian Don Fernando is responsible for her father’s ruin and now he wants to marry her for her money.

b. The next characters who burst on stage are Agnese’s daughter Lisetta (mezzo) and her older suitor, the wealthy old fool Don Meschino (*basso buffo*), dressed in ridiculous fisherman’s clothes. Their bickering duet, interrupted by Agnese and the Chorus, is in two parts. He protests that he has become a ‘fisherman’ for her sake, but she is clearly not interested in the old dotard. The second cabaletta-like part (“No, non vi voglio”) has a quick melody in the repetition which is a germ for part of the *Introduzione* (“Bel conforto a mietitore”) of *L’elisir d’amore* a decade later.

A sudden change of mood comes with a storm which rises as quickly as it will subside; momentarily it serves to clear the stage (“A riva, compagni”) for...

3. Chiara’s Scena and Cavatina

Chiara (soprano), dressed as a boy, and her father, Don Alvaro, who have been tossed ashore when their ship foundered in the brief storm. They are newly escaped from captivity in Algeria. In Chiara’s cavatina, “Queste romite sponde,” she comforts her father and tells us in an attractive andante accompanied by a plaintive English horn that she is in search of her long lost sister. Her cabaletta (“Periglio non curo”) reaffirms her hope and courage.

Now the villagers return; Meschino is fearful of the two new arrivals, thinking that they are pirates while Lisetta and Agnese take pity on them and offer them refuge. All leave to find temporary lodging for Chiara and Alvaro.

4. Chorus, “Dove siamo noi?”

The next shipwreck victims who are washed ashore are the pirates who curse their luck (“Maladetto il temporale”), but are delighted to discover that the secret entrance to their old hiding place on the island is undisturbed—a sarcophagus. They remove the lid and disappear underground, making way for the next to be washed up...

5. Picaro’s Scena and Cavatina

Picaro (baritone), once a servant of Don Fernando, now turned to piracy. Like Figaro, Picaro is a *picaro*, a sort of amiable rogue-hero. His Figaro-esque **aria** (“Il mestier del corseggiare” — “The job of pirating”) tells us that he would like to find a new, less dangerous line of work, and the allegro gives us his moral: the world offers many job possibilities safer than pirating, but the best jobs are held by those who know how to gull the credulous. In recitative, he tells us that he has found a metal box on the beach, but he doesn’t have time to open it because...

Don Fernando (tenor) arrives and recognizes him. He convinces him to help with his plot to marry Serafina himself by having Picaro pretend to be her long-lost father, Alvaro, whom she has not seen for ten years. He gives Picaro a purse with 1,000 piasters.

- Scene: A garden in Don Fernando’s castle.

6. Don Ramiro and Serafina’s Duet

Now we are introduced to Serafina (mezzo-soprano) and her fiancé Ramiro (tenor), who sing a tender **love duet** (“Come più dolce il zeffiro”) in standard form as found in early Rossini operas. It is pleasant enough, but not particularly memorable.

Fernando interrupts with the news that Serafina’s father (the disguised Picaro) has arrived. She falls for the ruse, unaware that her real father is close by. Now Chiara arrives disguised as a sailor begging alms. Although Chiara is delighted to discover her sister, she does not reveal her identity, while Serafina asks Fernando to let “the poor sailor” stay and he agrees. Chiara wonders who this man pretending to be her father really is; she warns Ramiro that trickery is underfoot, and all leave Serafina and her “father” alone for their...

7. **Serafina and Picaro's Duet**, "Per vederti, o mia figliuola". It follows the standard Rossinian form of a three-part duet. He claims to have been exiled under pain of death while she says they will go to the king to ask for pardon. In the duet's second phase she asks her lover to forgive her for going away in a pretty *andante* ("Deh! perdona, o caro amante") while Picaro finds himself with growing feelings towards her, and not those of a father. The *allegro* ("Oh amore che m'armi") has her hoping for a quick, happy return to her beloved while Picaro, in an *aside*, sings that you won't find a happier pirate if he manages "to catch that jewel." The duet's model would seem to be the Figaro/Rosina duet in Act I of *Il barbiere*, although the music is not similar.

- Scene: An old room in the abandoned Castle of Belmonte. A statue on a pedestal depicts a warrior standing above a conquered African.

A trap door on the pedestal opens and the pirates emerge. It is the secret entrance into the castle from the cistern—the hiding place they earlier entered through a secret passage accessed through a sarcophagus near the shore.

8. Don Meschino's Aria

After a short pirate **chorus** ("Zitti, zitti...entriam bel bello"), Meschino wanders in with a lantern looking for Lisetta, who has eluded him. Hearing a noise, he thinks she is hiding from him and he begins his long, multi-part scene and aria with a little song accompanied with castanets while he searches ("Mi dicea la nonna mia"). The song is in the 'old' style of a composer like Cimarosa and characterizes Meschino as a member of the older generation, in the manner of Bartolo in *Il barbiere*, who sings a similarly antique song in the Lesson Scene. Now, the pirates surprise him and extinguish his candle; terrified, he falls to the ground and cries out. The pirates escape through the trap door, and Meschino's cries bring Agnese, Lisetta, Alvaro and villagers running in. The terrified Meschino tells them that he has been besieged by "Turks"—pirates—but his fear turns to bravado when he realizes they have gone. Why, he has chased them away! The others laugh at him. His aria now continues in typical *buffo* fashion ("Sì signore") with interjections from the others. The "aria" is surprisingly free form, not following the fairly closed forms codified by Rossini, but evolving with the action.

Lisetta explains that Meschino has been afraid of Turks (pirates) ever since Don Alvaro chased them out of the island; the statue commemorates his victory.

9. Act I Finale

Technically, the Act I Finale begins now with a strophic song by Lisetta, but this finale is anything but in the closed style found in many Rossini finales; instead it is strung out over many individual parts.

a.) Lisetta tells the story of how Alvaro had freed the island from the menace of the pirates (“Il castello di Belmonte”). This strange little piece, serious and harp-accompanied in the body of the song, ends each verse with a lively two line refrain repeated by the chorus which is completely at odds, musically speaking, from the narrative part. It is almost as if the two sides of an *opera semiseria* are here in microcosm: the serious recounting of the freeing of Majorca from pirates, followed by a jaunty little *ritornello* which thanks Alvaro for his courage.

The song is interrupted by knocking at the door. “Strangers” have brought a letter from the city. The strangers are, however, Picaro and Serafina, in disguise.

b.) Now everything stops as all the characters wonder what it can mean in a slow, highly syllabic sextet (“Quale inciampo! E qui raccolto”). The Rossinian model is obviously “Questo è un nodo avviluppato” from *La Cenerentola*, but Donizetti’s version lacks the brio and melodic inspiration of Rossini’s, although technically it is quite competent. The lengthy adagio ends in a *tempo di mezzo* when Meschino actually reads the letter, which orders that the “strangers” be well treated and given food and lodging. The attractive *stretta* (“Buona notte, buon riposo”) may recall the “Buona sera” ensemble from *Barbiere* textually, but the melody is distinct.

c.) One might think that the sextet provides the Act One finale, but the action proceeds through several more twists and turns with the music to go with it. When the stage clears, Chiara enters quickly and tells us that she is about to reveal all to Ramiro, save her sister and restore her father. She leaves and Picaro enters, searching for the secret door to the cistern. Now Chiara re-enters with Alvaro and Picaro hides. He overhears that the real Alvaro is alive and that they are awaiting help from Don Ramiro. Chiara launches into a cabaletta-like piece with rapid coloratura expressing her joy that soon the wrongs will be righted (“Alfin di gioia un

raggio”). Picaro quickly hatches a plan and makes himself known; he is “penitent” he tells them and he has “learned” that the edict against Alvaro has been lifted and Fernando holds the proof. It will take guile to get the document exonerating Alvaro away from Fernando.

d.) Next comes a trio where Chiara and Alvaro tell Picaro that if he is tricking them, they will get him (“Se ci manchi, se c’inganni”); Picaro reassures them. In spite of their suspicion, Picaro manages to get rid of Alvaro and lock Chiara in a room, but noises signal that the others are on the way and Serafina enters first. Still believing that Picaro is her father, she follows him through the secret trapdoor leading to the cistern.

e.) As soon as they are gone, the others break down a door and rush in. Alvaro rescues Chiara, and all are enraged that the tricky Picaro has escaped, taking Serafina with him. They swear to follow him and save Serafina in an attractive *stretta* (“Ah! si cerca, si confonda”), which finally brings the act to a turbulent close.

Act Two

- The cistern in the bowels of the castle. Aside from a door, there is a circular stair which leads to the trap door in the statue in the room above.

10. Introduction and Chorus

The pirates are assembled in their hiding place. In a **chorus** (“Capitano!... Che avvenne?”) they realize that their hiding place has been betrayed and soldiers are coming. Most rush out to fend off an assault, leaving Spalatro and Gennaro, pirate leaders. Don Meschino enters with a lantern, explaining that he is following Chiara and Lisetta who disappeared down the trap door in search of Picaro, but he has lost them in the dark. Gennaro and Spalatro go to look for them, leaving Meschino. Chiara appears from the darkness.

11. Chiara and Meschino’s Duet

In a 3-part duet, Chiara tries to rally Meschino to find a way out while he remains rooted to the spot in fear. The first part introduces the idea (“Ah! Signora, l’abbiam fatta!”) while in the second, slower, part Chiara offers a prayer for heaven’s aid (“Deh! Tu guidi il piè smarrito”) over Meschino’s

nervous, rapid patter; an allegro (“Sorte amica all’ardimento”) concludes the duet as they leave to try to find a way out in the dark.

12. **Serafina’s Aria**

Now Picaro and Serafina appear out of the darkness; she still believes him to be her father. He goes in search of a way out, leaving her alone for an extended *scena* and aria, more in the style of opera seria, but once again a multi-part, free-form composition which will be punctuated by other characters and the chorus. In the fairly bland adagio (“Fra quest’ombre, in questo orrore”), accompanied by an obbligato violin, she is fearful and longs for her beloved. Next the pirates enter with Chiara, Meschino and Lisetta, followed by Picaro. Chiara tells Serafina that she is her sister and that Picaro is a traitor, not her father. Picaro gives the pirates the money he has had from Don Fernando, which mollifies them. Now, in a *tempo di mezzo*, Serafina continues her aria with some fiery coloratura expressing her dismay and anger (“Io tua preda! Oh! mio dolore!”). The pirates separate the sisters, but Picaro tells Serafina aside to go along with it and they will all be freed, which is the cue for her hopeful cabaletta (“Saria possibile! O ciel pietoso!”).

13. **Sextet**

Technically, the next number is a sextet since at various times six characters participate (Meschino, Picaro, Chiara, Lisetta, Serafina and Don Ramiro), but once again it is in many parts and the characters come and go, making for different vocal groupings. The pirates give Picaro the box he had found on the shore, which contains letters exonerating Alvaro, and then go off on their “rounds,” leaving Picaro in charge. As soon as they are gone, Picaro tells Chiara and Meschino that he plans to help them escape and brings in Lisetta and Serafina, who have been locked in a room by the pirates. All of this action is related in an attractive trio for Meschino, Chiara and Picaro (“Chiara!...ebbene? questa volta”) which morphs into a quintet when Lisetta and Serafina are brought in (“Presto all’opra...non si tardi”). Meschino goes off to watch for the pirates while Picaro goes to break down a door for their escape and the three women (Chiara, Serafina, Lisetta), watching his attempts which take place offstage, launch into a trio (“Tremante, smarrito”) which is the most attractive piece of music in the opera (and the only one ever previously recorded³). The trio stops the

³ In the Opera Rara anthology “A Hundred Years of Italian Opera—1820-1830,” ORCH 104.

action while they wonder if they will ever escape⁴. It is a very accomplished composition even if it slows down the action and holds back the arrival of Ramiro, followed by soldiers, and then Meschino and Picaro, which finally leads to a sextet of triumph (“Ah! ti rendi il ciel clemente”). Sounds of fighting are heard and the scene shifts to...

- The Seashore, as in Act I.

14. Chorus and Chiara's Rondo Finale

The pirates have been defeated and have fled. Everyone celebrates with a victory chorus and everyone is reunited, Fernando has been arrested and all that is left is for Chiara to sing the *rondo finale*. In the *andante*, she restores her father's good name to him (“Prendi, o padre; il tuo gran nome”). In the *tempo di mezzo* (“Tu che al sentier d'onore”) she assures Picaro that his good actions will keep him from being punished, while the *allegro* “Non più perigli” brings on the *lieto fine*. It is a pleasant enough conclusion and of a piece with the *rondo finale* form firmly established by Rossini from *Elisabetta* on.

The Opera

Musically, *Chiara e Serafina* reflects both Rossini (sometimes in form and sometimes in melodic and rhythmic style) and Donizetti's teacher, Giovanni Mayr in the free-flowing forms. It is Donizetti's first attempt at *opera semiseria*, and if you just listen to the music (as opposed to watching the production) you can clearly hear how Donizetti tried to separate the serious characters (Chiara, Serafina, Alvaro) from the comic characters with the music he composed for them, and how he alternates the comic scenes with the serious ones throughout the opera. Meschino and Picaro are both comic figures—Meschino more the traditional foolish buffo figure, familiar from Rossini operas, while Picaro, the *basso cantante*, is more of a clever, manipulative figure who bears close relationship to Rossini's Figaro and the Poet Prosdocimo in *Il turco in Italia*.

Chiara e Serafina is also reflective of the haste of composition which was forced on the composer by the very late arrival of the libretto. It is remarkable that the opera is musically as good as it is, given the fact that it

⁴ Oddly, the Bergamo revival did not include the repeat of the trio which is clear in the libretto and is on the Opera Rara recording. The three women, watching Picaro's offstage attempts to open the trap door so they can flee describe his actions and sounds of his attempts are heard before they repeat the trio. It is one of the many unusual features of the score.

was composed in about ten days. The more formal pieces are formulaic (Chiara's arias in the first and second acts and Serafina's act two aria) and not particularly distinguished. On the other hand, several scenes show a search for something new (e.g. Lisetta's narrative aria "Il castello di Belmonte"), and the structure of the opera is often very fluid with one structural piece flowing into another one. In other words, the music follows the many turns of the libretto rather than being locked into the set pieces codified by Rossini. It seems to me that this is where the true merit of *Chiara e Serafina* rests—in its ensembles, its trio, quintets and sextets. Here the young composer shows his skill in handling big numbers with flowing and contrasting vocal lines.

Certainly the major problem with the opera is the libretto, which seems to have been composed in as much haste as the music, evidenced by its last minute arrival. Romani wrote five libretti in 1822, and his libretto for Donizetti's La Scala debut shows overwork. He had just completed the libretto for Mercadante's *Il posto abbandonato* for a Scala premiere in September, and he would write *Amleto* for Mercadante for a December premiere. As was usual, he, as librettist, also supervised the productions. Thus *Chiara e Serafina* was squeezed in between the two Mercadante operas—three new operas and three productions over a period of four months.

There are too many characters (and a major one, Don Fernando, the villain, does not even appear in Act 2). The principal romantic lead tenor is hardly central to the action and appears in Act 2 only for the rescue finale. All of those characters mean constant coming and going which confuses the action, and the resolution of the main plot involving Serafina and Chiara is unreasonably delayed. There are too many disguises and hidden identities so that confusion replaces wit and torpedoes our delight in knowing who's who while the characters do not. In other words, there was insufficient paring down of the French play for use as an opera.

Given the haste of composition and the confusion of the libretto, it is no surprise that *Chiara e Serafina* had 11 performances in 1822 and was never heard again—until now. It is no surprise that Donizetti told Mayr to 'bring a requiem' with him when he came to Milano to see the opera, "because they're going to kill me." And it is no surprise that contemporary stage directors would have trouble with it. It is no masterpiece. However,

like all of Donizetti's operas, it has virtues and some moments which clearly show his genius and forecast the major works to come.

The Bergamo Production

The 2022 Bergamo production of *Chiara e Serafina* was part of the Festival's initiative to perform a work each year on the 200th anniversary of its debut. This year the work was entrusted to young apprentice singers who came from the Academy of La Scala, as did the chorus. One veteran singer (Pietro Spagnoli) played the comic role of Picaro while the roles of both Chiara and Serafina were double-cast with apprentice artists. The orchestra Gli Originali was under the baton of Sesto Quatrini; the production (stage direction, sets, costumes) was by Gianluca Falaschi.

These #Donizetti200 productions are the work of scrupulous musicology, although since this opera enjoyed only 11 performances and the autograph score exists, the work of creating a new edition was probably minimal. The level of musical performance among the young singers was variable. One would long to hear an opera like this with experienced singing-actors who could do full justice to the music and to the style, which is often difficult to bring off. Only one performer—Pietro Spagnoli—had the necessary chops to play his buffo role with complete success.

As for the physical production—unit set, costumes, lighting, direction—it was a sad, missed opportunity to offer a work not heard in 200 years in the best light. Falaschi's production had little sense of the opera's *semiseria* genre. Rather it was silly farce almost all the time, with even the serious parts often played for comedy. Before Act I even ended, various characters shed their wigs as if to say, 'we are bored with playing these silly characters'. The heroine's concluding *rondo finale* was treated with boredom and an "oh get it over" attitude by everyone else on stage. Perhaps the director was bored with the opera. Of course by that time, most people watching the video would want it mercifully to end so that this terrible production could be put out of its misery.

Of course there was a directorial "concept." Falaschi took his inspiration from variety shows which were common on Italian television in the 1950s and 1960s. In those there was usually a M.C. dressed formally in a tuxedo while chorus girls in skimpy outfits performed dance routines, and starlets sang while other actors performed silly comedy. (American television had

similar shows with the likes of Jackie Gleason or Milton Berle.) So this production had chorus girls in little sailorette outfits or wearing grass skirts, Ramiro wore a tuxedo, and the others mostly wore silly “pirate” outfits in pastel colors. Perhaps it was meaningful for the four or five people in the world who fondly remember Italian TV variety shows of the 1950s and ‘60s, but the concept had nothing to do with Romani, Donizetti, early nineteenth century opera—or the world in 2022.

Most of the characters wore prosthetic noses and chins and were painted with whiteface makeup which made them look clownish and distorted, and they wore outrageous wigs. For several of the young singers of Asian background, the distortion bordered on racism. The unit set seemed to be the backstage of a theatre with dressing rooms with stars on them. The scenes specified by the libretto were ignored. There was no cistern, no secret passage, no statue, no trapdoor. It all made an already complicated plot almost completely unintelligible.

One could imagine a way in which a clever director could take Donizetti’s youthful stab at *opera semiseria* with a tongue-in-cheek attitude without turning it into absurdity. In 1822 “Turkish” pirates were a real menace in the Mediterranean. “Turkish” meant people in the Ottoman Empire, which included Algeria. Numerous operas of the period dealt with the “Turkish” menace in both a serious and comic manner. Rossini made good use of the trope in both *L’Italiana in Algeri* and in *Il Turco in Italia*. Romani may well have intended to poke fun at the ‘Turkish’ genre in his libretto for Donizetti too, but kidnappings were in the news, and Algiers was not so distant from Italy, and even closer to Majorca. The original audience might have understood the serious side of the plight of Chiara, Serafina and Alvaro in the hands of pirates, including the trickster Picaro. But they could also delight in the triumph of the serious characters while laughing at the familiar comic turns of Don Meschino.

One presumes that the production was part of the Festival’s announced aim to make these operas meaningful to the current generation, but alas, Mr. Falaschi’s attempt to translate this lost context of the 1820s to our world via ‘50s Italian television shows did not work. Realism would not work for an opera like *Chiara* in our day either, but we should understand what drives the characters so that we can care about their plights. I can imagine an experienced cast of great singing actors bringing *Chiara e Serafina* off, but not apprentice singers in a silly production.

The cast we saw in the video was:

Don Meschino Pietro Spagnoli
Don Alvaro/Don Fernando Matias Moncada
Serafina Fan Zhou
Chiara Greta Doveri
Don Ramiro Hyun-Se Davide Park
Picaro Sung-Hwan Damien Park
Lisetta Valentina Pluzhnikova
Agnese Mara Gaudenzi
Spalato Andrea Tanzillo
Gennaro Giuseppe De Luca

In the main roles, the ladies held their own—Zhou, Doveri and Pluzhnikova—and were vocally promising. Spagnoli was an old pro. The other principal men were not up to their roles—Ramiro vocally and Picaro because he is too young and inexperienced for the picaresque character at the center of the action, named, appropriately enough, Picaro. It is worth noting that the original cast of 1822 included Rosa Morandi as Serafina; she had sung in the premiere of Rossini's *La cambiale di matrimonio* and *Eduardo e Cristina*. Antonio Tamburini sang the role of Picaro. Tamburini, then at the start of his career, would become the quintessential Donizetti baritone, premiering no fewer than ten of his operas, all the way to Malatesta in *Don Pasquale*. The young singers in Bergamo had remarkably illustrious predecessors; as their careers mature, may they live up to their illustrious forebears.

The orchestra Gli Originali under Sesto Quatrini used original instruments typical of Donizetti's time. They were not as smooth as they might have been.

Chiara e Serafina is certainly of interest to lovers of Donizetti like myself, but it is unlikely to grace the stage of the Metropolitan or Covent Garden any time soon.



A scene from the 1822 production



The unit set from the 2022 production with sailors, sailorettes and girls in grass skirts

Sources:

Video stream of the opera *Chiara e Serafina* from the 2022 Donizetti Festival, Bergamo on donizettitv.uscreen.io

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"Presentation of the Opera" from *Chiara e Serafina, Quaderno della Fondazione Teatro Donizetti*, 65. Bergamo, 2022.

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