

Nightingale Opera Theatre to produce Donizetti's *Elixir* in Hudson June 13

by Daniel Hathaway



Hudson's Nightingale Opera Theatre will mark its move into a new venue at Western Reserve Academy on Saturday, June 13 at 7:30 pm with a production of Gaetano Donizetti's "melodramma giocoso," *The Elixir of Love*.

One of the top comic operas of all time, *Elixir* was the most-performed opera in Europe during the decade following its premiere in 1832, and unlike many titles, has never fallen off the charts.

In a telephone conversation, we asked Melissa Davis, Nightingale's artistic director, why she chose the piece for the company's summer production. "We wanted to do a show with a smaller principal cast this year," she said. "Tim Culver, the tenor who will be singing the role of Nemorino, told me, 'I just really love *Elixir*. Have you thought about doing that?' I've performed the opera three times in my career and remember it so fondly. It has such great music and such a fun plot. We decided to go with it."

That plot can take several paragraphs to explain — or only a few sentences, as Jennifer Williams does in her ["Cheat Sheet"](#) for *The Elixir of Love* in the Opera Australia blog:

Nemorino is in love with Adina, but she's rich and he's poor, and Adina won't give him the time of day. After hearing the legend of Tristan and Isolde, Nemorino wonders if a love potion might do the trick.

Cue the arrival in town of Dulcamara, travelling larrikin [Aussiespeak for a scallywag — ed.] and purveyor of a bottled cure-all that might just do the trick.

But time is running out — Adina has agreed to marry the pompous Sergeant Belcore. Will the potion work? Will Dulcamara get out of town before anyone discovers it doesn't? Will Nemorino get his girl?

(Those who can't wait until Saturday to see how it all turns out can read the whole synopsis [here](#).)

Why is *Elixir* so popular? “The music is very accessible to everyone — you don't need a trained ear,” Davis said. “And there are so many beautiful and memorable tunes that you leave the theater humming. It's also not too long. It's not an opera where you find yourself thinking, ‘if they could just cut an hour out of this.’ It's only two and a half hours including an intermission, and the stories and characters are so much fun.”

Nightingale's production will feature Marian Vogel as Adina, Tim Culver as Nemorino (“Little Nobody” in Italian), Brian Keith Johnson as Belcore, Jonathan Stuckey as Dulcamara (in Italian, “Sweet” plus “Sour”), and Anne Giancola as Giannetta. “Marian sounds absolutely beautiful,” Davis said. “The end of the opera is very demanding for the soprano, but she seems to have no technical difficulties at all.”

Davis is delighted to have last year's designer of *Hansel and Gretel* return for *Elixir*. “The concept is very interesting. The show is set in New Orleans,” she said. “Adina's house is an old plantation house, and Dulcamara is a voodoo doctor. It works really well.”

The production, directed by Marla Berg, will be staged in the Knight Fine Arts Center at Western Reserve Academy. “We're really excited about that,” Davis said. “The Academy has started a summer program called ‘Beyond Reserve’ that offers students exposure to professional careers in science, math, and other disciplines. We decided to create a program with their students so they could be part of our production. We still have our Young Artists program for college students who cover principal roles in our mainstage production. The Academy students will sing in the chorus and participate in master classes with Robin Rice from Ohio University.”

Although the Knight Center, a 400-seat facility, has an orchestra pit, Davis and the company chose to rent a Steinway for *Elixir*. John Simmons is music director, and

the orchestra parts will be covered by pianist Richard Jeric. The chorus will include the WRA students, the Young Artists, and about a dozen college students who have auditioned for the production.

Why only a single performance? “We decided to fill our 400 seats for *Elixir* this summer while working on audience development for the future,” Davis said. “We hope to build our audience to the point where we can give two performances of next summer’s opera.”

Perhaps by this time next year, Melissa Davis will be back onstage herself — she’s sitting this production out while expecting her second child. I ended our conversation by asking her why she chose ‘Nightingale’ as the name of her company. “I have always been interested in the Nightingale, as it has great significance in literature and poetry,” she said. “This bird, known for its beautiful voice, represents beauty and love, but also melancholy and sorrow.”

That would seem to include most of the elements that make opera so appealing to the human spirit.

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