

Information Serendipity, Pseudo-Serendipity, Zemblanity, Disruptive Discovery and Nemorinity

Revisiting Donizetti's and Romani's Opera Buffa *L'elisir d'Amore*

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Abstract. We report on an investigation designed to identify human information behaviour in Gaetano Donizetti's and Felice Romani's nineteenth-century opera buffa '*L'elisir d'amore*' ('Elixir of Love'). An intrinsic study was utilised using a hermeneutic reading of the opera libretto, through a human information-behavioural perspective. This research presents an original and novel layer of analysis to the operatic work and provides valuable insight into information behaviour in a past time and context. In particular, the study shows that the libretto holds evidence of information serendipity, pseudo-serendipity, zemblanity, disruptive discovery, and a novel information behaviour that we designated 'nemorinity', in the temporal culture of the early nineteenth-century Italian countryside. Opera is hence found to be a meaningful scholastic resource for information researchers.

Keywords: Human Information Behaviour, Opera, Information Studies in Arts.

1 Introduction

Opera – a plural of '*opus*', the Latin for 'work', is a complex theatrical-set, performing art form that combines literature, drama, orchestral music and characters who sing most or all of the time [2, 8]. Opera offers a multifaceted and expressive platform for bringing into dialogue an abundance of affairs, values and ideas from different disciplines [1].

Even though different aspects of human information behaviour can be found in operatic pieces in a variety of common and exceptional life-contexts, this content-rich, creative corpus, which spans over 400 years, remains practically un(der)studied in the information science discipline. This study is a first attempt at bridging this research gap by examining *L'elisir d'amore*, a nineteenth-century opera buffa (comic opera) in two acts by composer Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) and librettist Felice Romani (1788-1865), which premiered on 12 May, 1832 at the *Teatro della Canobbiana*, Milan.

L'elisir d'amore deals with the mundane lifestyle of ordinary people and reflects on their casual conduct; as such, it maintains social relevance that enables a delineated view, through this melodramatic work, into the information behaviour of people on the early nineteenth century Italian peninsula – the composer's and librettist's domicile, and when and where (the marks of period and society) the plot takes place [6].

2 Research approach and methodology

This paper is part of the emergent *Information Studies in the Arts* research framework that examines, in wide context, the possible relevance of literature, films, sung and performed works, as well as other artistic expressions, to the development of information studies. This research approach suggests that opera, and works of art in general, may be an important scholastic resource for information researchers. The epistemological treatment of operatic characters as if they were real people is broadly argued and defended [7], and pertinent also to *L'elisir d'amore* and its characters [13].

This intrinsic study explores a particular, pre-selected operatic work. The study uses a hermeneutic reading from an information-behavioural perspective, of *L'elisir d'amore* libretto's 1885 Oliver Ditson edition with Italian and English text [6], through which several information-behavioural "central themes" [9: p. 237] were identified. All choices and sense-making are subjective, thus situating this work as a qualitative study.

3 Preliminary results

The reviewed libretto was found to convey five types of human information behaviour: serendipity, pseudo-serendipity, zemblanity, disruptive discovery, and an additional one we designate 'nemorinity'. Next, we present a short explanation of each of these information-related behaviours, with references to their expression in the operatic plot.

(Perceptual) Pseudo-serendipity: "an accidental discovery of a way to achieve an end sought for" [14: p.x]. While reading a book, Adina (soprano; a literate and wealthy landowner) finds out about the love potion that helped Tristan make the cold Isolde fall in love with him. While observing Adina and listening to the tale, Nemorino (tenor; a young peasant in love with Adina) is surprised to find a possible solution to his 'love concern'. Just moments before, Nemorino thought he would never stand a chance of Adina returning his love, but now he has happened on a surprising way to gain his heart's desire: Adina's love. The music serves the pseudo-serendipity by keeping a light mood and a festive atmosphere. Yet, Nemorino has no clue how to obtain this potion.

Disruptive discovery: an accidental discovery of information that has a *troublesome influence* [15]. Belcore (baritone; an arrogant, handsome sergeant) arrives in the village. He boldly courts Adina and shortly after wants to wed her. It is an unpleasant shock for Nemorino when he hears of Belcore's intentions and Adina's response, asking for time to consider it. The librettist efficiently revealed the disruptive nature of this discovery in Nemorino's simple statement: "*Oh, mio dispetto!*"—"Oh, my despair!" [6: Act.I.ii].

(Realised) Pseudo-serendipity: *actually* discovering something one was looking for, *in a surprising way* [5, 10]. With great spectacle, Dulcamara (bass; a travelling quack doctor who offers bottled, cure-all medicines) arrives in the village, presenting himself as the world-famous "*gran medico, Dottore enciclopedico*" [6: Act.I.v]. Nemorino approaches Dulcamara and asks about Queen Isolde's love potion. Cunning Dulcamara deceitfully brags about being the only mixer of this brew, and sells the supposed elixir (actually only a Bordeaux) to Nemorino. Nemorino is grateful and excited, since he has just discovered and obtained, by way of chance, the sought-after miraculous

elixir that can solve his love distress. The realised pseudo-serendipity episode is musically expressed through an up-tempo melody with much ornamentation and high notes.

(Perceptual) Nemorinity: the *notion* of a pleasant *un-surprise*: the subjective certainty of an *inevitable forthcoming discovery* of something valuable. According to Dulcamara, it takes twenty-four hours for the elixir to be effective. Nemorino drinks the elixir (...Bordeaux) and under its spell he feels confident and happy with the idea that Adina will fall in love with him the next day, “*Si, si, si, domani m'amerà*” [6: Act.I.viii].

Zemblanity: the opposite of serendipity, “unhappy, unlucky and expected discoveries by design” [3: pp. 234-235]; *i.e.*, an *unpleasant un-surprise* [4]. Belcore renews the marriage proposal and Adina consents to marry Belcore in six days' time, offering him the romantic victory he sought. Suddenly, Belcore receives an urgent order to leave the next morning, so he urges Adina to marry him without delay. While scrutinising the now-disturbed Nemorino, Adina agrees to marry Belcore “*quest'oggi*,”—“*today be it*.” [6: Act.I.x]. Nemorino then pleads with Adina to wait another day, but he is mocked. Adina gives orders to summon the notary, and leaves with Belcore. Nemorino cries “*dottore! Soccorso! riparo!*”—“*oh doctor, assist me! help, help!*” [6: Act.I.x], as Adina's marriage that same day seems unavoidable, and thinking that the elixir will only take effect the next day. The musical density sustains the growing tension and the zemblanitous mood: the orchestra uses its full resources, the choir sings, and the soloists sing.

Act II opens directly with merry dancing and singing. Nemorino asks Dulcamara to speed up the effect of the elixir and Dulcamara offers an additional dose. To pay for it, Nemorino volunteers, then and there, for military service and instantly earns the enlistment payment. Excited, he buys and drinks another dose of the (same...) ‘love elixir’.

Serendipity: making a discovery, by accident and sagacity, of something one is *not in quest of* [12]. Info-serendipity may occur by chance “when looking for information on a different topic, when looking for information with no particular aim or when not looking for information at all” [11: n.p]. Nemorino's uncle dies, leaving him heir to a fortune. The word of mouth circulates, yet Nemorino and Adina are unaware of the news. Although it is a ‘negative for one, positive for other’ information (*cf.* [16]), with only partial unexpectedness as to the uncle's condition [6: Act.I.iii] – this accidentally-discovered information has a great personal value to the village girls, as it makes Nemorino “*Un uom di vaglia, un buon partito*”—“*a worthy man, a good match*” [6: Act.II.iv]. It is also valuable to Dulcamara, who knows what the bottle really contains and is thus surprised to discover its unexpected, wealth-generating virtue [6: Act.II.x]. The new discovery is accentuated via the narrative part, almost a recitative, and as the narration develops, the leaps in the melodic line grow, denoting the surprise and projected value.

(Realised) Nemorinity: an *inevitable, actual discovery* of something valuable, by design; the *accomplishment* of a pleasant *un-surprise*. Drunk Nemorino, still unaware of his great wealth, enjoys all the village girls wooing him and is deeply confident their courtship is the effect of the magical love elixir – “*è questa l' opera del magico liquor*” [6: Act.II.v]. Adina becomes jealous, and Dulcamara boasts he can distil love in a bottle. Before long, Adina learns that Nemorino sold his liberty to buy a love potion to win her heart. She then realises she loves Nemorino and buys back his army contract. Nemorino thinks this is a natural act of affection, “*E naturale: opra è d'amore*” [6: Act.II.ix]. Finally, Adina admits her love to him and joyful Nemorino is sure the elixir has worked.

The realisation of Nemorino's subjective 'expected and inevitable' discovery of Adina falling in love with him, fully and vividly completes the nemorinity episode.

Defeated in love, Belcore leaves; while Dulcamara sells potions of "*mirth, fortune, health, and wealth*" [6: Act-II.x] and then departs, marking the conclusion of the opera.

4 Conclusion

L'elisir d'amore is regarded as an operatic masterpiece. Our study extends this thought, and shows that in terms of information serendipity, pseudo-serendipity, zemblanity, disruptive discovery, and nemorinity – this opera buffa provides valuable insight and an abundance of noteworthy examples of these human information behaviours, in the temporal culture of the early nineteenth-century Italian countryside. This insight is achieved even within the concise and meticulous libretto, common in the opera genre due to the need to combine poetics with musical and dramatic performance [8]. Opera may foster novel research paths and elicit new knowledge; hence, the operatic oeuvre is suggested as a scholastic resource for developing information research and discourse.

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