

*Donizetti's
Lucia di Lammermoor*

*Lucia's madness in a tragic love story
which echoes the delicate state of mind of its composer*

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Lucia di Lammermoor

Dramma tragico in three acts

Music by Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano, after

Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*

- Donizetti, the man and the composer
- *Bel Canto* in opera
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Donizetti, the man and the composer

- Born in Bergamo in 1797
- Studied in Bologna
- Suffered of cerebral-spinal syphilis
- Married to Virginia Vasselli in 1828
- By 1831 he had lost his wife, three children and his parents
- Composed 75 operas in 28 years
- Suffered of depression and bipolar disorder
- Died in 1848 of a stroke and dementia at the age of 51

Donizetti was born in 1797 to a poor family in Bergamo; at a young age he showed great musical talent and was sent to Bologna to study in the footsteps of Rossini, who was already a well acclaimed composer. While studying in Bologna, the young and handsome Donizetti also enjoyed the attractions and the delights of the big city and had several relationships with loose women. This lifestyle of his youth will later affect his health and his mental state.

In fact, it is believed that during his years in Bologna Donizetti contracted syphilis, a disease which caused him much suffering, and death 30 years later. By 1843 the symptoms of this cerebral-spinal syphilis were so evident and his condition so deteriorated that he was institutionalized in an asylum due to his mental health condition.

***Bel Canto* in Opera**

Donizetti, Bellini and Rossini,
the three great masters of this opera style

In his career Donizetti composed 75 operas and like Bellini and Rossini he has been recognized as a great master of *Bel Canto Operas* or operas with set numbers of arias or ensembles that featured florid vocal techniques to show off the human voice to its maximum effect. By most critics Donizetti may not rank as high as Verdi or Puccini, but the musical and dramatic qualities of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and its profound

melodies will always give Donizetti a special place in the history of opera. Composed in one month in 1835, *Lucia di Lammermoor* is a *dramma tragico* and a showpiece of *Bel Canto*. A dark tragedy illuminated by radiant songs and by beautiful, tuneful and sumptuous music which the critics define a 'massage for the vocal cords'. In this opera it is difficult to choose and separate the arias because *Lucia* must be played uncut and in

its entirety in order to build the proper dramatic tension. Tonight instead of individual arias, we will play without interruption four separate sets of arias, each highlighting the dramatic development of the story, and this will help us appreciate the musical qualities of the whole opera. We will also enjoy a truly glorious and impressive performance of Anna Netrebko in this difficult and demanding title role of *Lucia*.

- **Lucia's madness**

This opera has been defined as a 'test case of exquisite psychopathology of 19th century opera'; to day we would call it a 'real case of mental abuse of 21st century life'.

As we meet this young girl, Lucia, we realize that she is vulnerable and her mental state is very fragile from the very beginning. Like Donizetti, Lucia's life is one of degeneration into hopeless insanity.

We must note that in Europe in the 19th century there was great interest in the costumes, the history and the folklore of Scotland and in themes of madness. So when Donizetti adopted the historical novel by Sir Walter Scott, where Lucia's madness is a bit mysterious and ambiguous, he put Lucia at the forefront of all mad-scene heroines in opera. We meet Lucia by a fountain near the castle. Emotional and free spirited; she is a dreamer who likes to read romantic novels,

who is drawn to the supernatural and has a tendency to fantasize. It all begins in a quiet scene in the countryside where she tells Alisa that she has been visited by the ghost of a girl who had been killed by an ancestor of Edgardo, the man she loves madly, but who is hated by her family. This vision is interpreted by Alisa as a warning and an evil omen, as she tells Lucia to give up Edgardo. (Act One 8,9,10)

Edgardo arrives; he and Lucia realize that her brother Enrico will never approve of their marriage, so they engage in a divine duet and they exchange rings, as a sign of their forever love pledging eternal fidelity to each other. In these next four arias sung between Lucia and Edgardo, we recognize a girl who is mad, but mad with a delirium of love that becomes her only reality as she progresses into an impossible situation of which she has no control.

Edgardo loves her, listens to her and is very supportive of this euphoric togetherness. This love scene is highly romantic, forbidden and dangerous. They are still outside surrounded by nature which encourages a sense of freedom, desire and possibility, later the interior scenes inside the castle will have a different tone, as we hear the music flow beautifully from one location to another. Act One (11,12,13,14)

Months have gone by; Enrico, Lucia's brother has arranged for Lucia to marry Lord Arturo for the good of the family and has had a letter forged to prove to Lucia Edgardo's infidelity. Enrico, the villain, is a symbol of human savagery as he slithers inside Lucia's mind causing her psychological and emotional suffocation. The duet between Enrico and Lucia in Act Two reveals Lucia's gradual falling apart as she is mentally manipulated by her brother and shut down by society.

After the false accusations made by Enrico about Edgardo's infidelity, Lucia, reluctantly has to sign a marriage contract to Arturo and so he is joyously welcomed into the family. Her response to her brother's plotting is a mounting anxiety which the music portrays in a glorious and progressive fragmentation. Inside the castle, in a world of deceit and betrayal, Lucia has no voice, no one listens to her, and as she begins to display signs of strange behavior, her brother explains that this

is because she is mourning the death of her mother. But the stranger and more unhinged Lucia becomes, the more beautiful the music, all the way to the luminous, almost divinely inspired delirium at the end in the *Mad Scene*. Act Two (16,17,18,19,20,24,25) In the finale of Act Two there is the famous and unforgettable sextet "Chi mi frena in tal momento?" where Edgardo arrives to claim his bride, but instead he is presented

with the marriage contract and where everyone reacts to the unexpected turn of events.

Act Two Finale

In the hall of the castle, where the mood is very festive and everyone is celebrating the marriage, Raimondo makes an announcement to the fact that Lucia has killed Arturo. Lucia now appears, disheveled and with her gown stained with blood, she imagines to be reunited with Edgardo, she sees Edgardo in her brother Enrico, she sees again the ghost by the fountain and this illusion becomes in her mind the altar where

she and Edgardo will be married.

It is the famous *Mad Scene* of Lucia, with the arias “Il dolce suono” and “ Spargi d’amaro pianto”. This technically and expressively demanding piece has historically been a vehicle for several coloratura sopranos; and in this Met Production Anna Netrebko gives an impressive and glamorous performance of the *Mad Scene*. Powerless to control her fate, Lucia resorts to murder. With her speedy and dramatic

descent into insanity she reaches her final mental disintegration. In a swirling and acrobatic high wire act for the voice; with flute obbligato, she literally and vocally drifts away from us. As her world grows darker, her madness grows more lucid and the music more divine. But as she is drifting away, it is in the *Mad Scene* where Lucia recaptures her audience; her madness is now her reality, not only she is fulfilling her dream of reuniting with Edgardo, but she has everyone finally listening to her, on stage and in the audience.