

# LUCIA DI COLORADO

Charles Jernigan, May 15, 2017

Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* has been a staple of the opera stage for going on two centuries (it premiered in Naples in 1835). The libretto by Salvatore Cammarano was based on Walter Scott's once wildly popular Romantic novel, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, itself based on a true incident in Scottish history dating from the late seventeenth century. The real Lucia was an unfortunate woman named Janet Dalrymple; Scott changed the name to the more euphonious (and Romantic) Lucy Lammermoor and Camaranno added "di" for good measure. The story's background is a feud between Lucia's family (the Ashtons) and Edgardo's Ravenswoods. The Ravenswood property has been taken by the Ashtons, and Edgardo is the only Ravenswood left. Now the Ashtons have fallen on hard times, and Lucia's brother Enrico wants her to marry Arturo for money and politics, but Lucia and Edgardo Ravenswood have fallen madly in love....

Anyone who has carefully examined the libretto will have noticed that spectres occupy a fairly important position in Lucia's story. In the second scene of the opera, we are in a park where the libretto tells us "one sees the so called fountain of the Sirena, a fountain which in other times was covered by a beautiful edifice adorned with gothic ironwork, but which now is only surrounded by the ruins. It is dusk." Lucia and Alisa enter, and Lucia soon tells us that the fountain is haunted:

That fountain...

I never see it without trembling... Ah you know:  
A Ravenswood, burning with jealous fury  
Killed his beloved woman there;  
The unfortunate one fell into the waters,  
And there she remains buried....  
Her ghost appeared to me...

Then begins Lucia's aria, "Regnava nel silenzio," which tells the tale of how the ghostly specter appeared to Lucia by the fountain and it seemed that her lips moved and her "bloodless hand" seemed to beckon her. She "stood for a moment immobile,/ then suddenly disappeared/and the water so limpid before/was stained red with blood." Soon Edgardo himself arrives and announces that he must depart for France. When Lucia is horrified by his plan to offer the hand of peace to her brother Enrico Ashton before he goes, knowing that it won't work, he launches into a tirade against the Ashton family which has deprived him of his father and usurped his inheritance. In the arioso which follows, the dead once again intervene with the living:

Upon the tomb which locks in  
My betrayed father,  
In my fury, I swore eternal war  
Against your blood kin.

Lucia calms Edgardo and they go on to pledge their faith to each other and exchange rings<sup>1</sup> while singing the memorable "Verranno a te sull'aure" to end Act I. As for ghosts, the whole love relationship, complete with its pledge of faith and passionate love duet is bound up with the ghost of an unnamed woman whom a Ravenswood in the past has killed as well as with the Edgardo's oath over his dead father's tomb and the whole scene takes place by the haunted fountain. This is not the

---

<sup>1</sup> Cammarano has an interesting footnote at this point in the original libretto: "At the time of these events, there was in Scotland a common belief that the violator of an oath made with certain ceremonies would suffer an exemplary divine punishment on this earth almost simultaneous to the breaking of the oath. Thus the oath of the lovers, far from being regarded as a matter of little consequence, had at the very least the importance of a marriage contract. The most common of these ceremonies was that the lovers would break and divide a coin. The exchange of rings is substituted here, as being better adapted for the stage."

end of the ghostly connections either. In the Sturm und Drang Wolfscrag Scene (omitted in Denver), Enrico challenges Edgardo to a duel, and when Edgardo asks him when and where, he says that they should meet at dawn "by the cold urns of the Ravenswoods." That is of course why Edgardo is in the family graveyard in the opera's final scene. Edgardo's first words in that scene are "Tombs of my ancestors" and his gloomy aria tells us that his neglected grave will soon be here too. We should also note that the "fantasma" of the fountain rears its head in Lucia's Mad Scene over and over again: "Alas! ...the terrible phantom arises and separates us!" And in the slow (moderato giusto) cabaletta "Spargi d'amaro pianto" she imagines herself in heaven, where "your (Edgardo's) coming alone/will make heaven beautiful for me!" She will beckon him from above, and in his final cabaletta (moderato, like Lucia's) Edgardo seems to answer her call: "Your faithful lover ascends with you...." Now it is her ghostly hand that calls him, and "if the anger of mortals/has made a long war for us,/if we were divided on earth,/God will join us in heaven." And of course it is death that unites the lovers in true Romantic fashion.

Whatever the case may be, Donizetti certainly rose to the spirit of the spirits musically in *Lucia*. "Regnava nel silenzio" and the mad scene both contain music which can be described as "haunting" if not "haunted." The lovely harp prelude to the fountain scene is not only Romantic, it admirably sets the scene for the ghosts and phantoms to come. But most of all the ghostly music comes from the glass harmonica that Donizetti wanted to accompany Lucia in the mad scene, an instrument that produces the edgy and moody 'spectral' tone which is so especially appropriate for a woman who has already joined the phantoms of her imagination. It is a shame that Opera Colorado (and most other companies) substitute the flute that Donizetti himself was forced to use at the first performance (because the glass harmonica player was in a dispute with the Naples opera house management). The glass harmonica comes very close to producing an eerie sound that we may associate with madness, but which we surely associate with ghosts. If you want to hear it done that way, go to Santa Fe this summer, where we are promised a glass harmonica (an invention of Benjamin Franklin's, no less).

Even with the absence of the glass harmonica, ghosts provided a unifying focal point for Opera Colorado's production directed by Keturah Stickann and designed originally for Florida Grand Opera by Robert R. O'Hearn. A beckoning ghost dressed in white appeared during the harp prelude to the fountain scene and was seen again in the mad scene. Played by a mime, this ghost was a platinum blond, and it would have been more appropriate if the "ghost" that appeared in the final scene had been dark-haired Lucia herself, but it was the blonde again, leading Edgardo off into the afterlife. This ghost, always accompanied by dry-ice fog, was effective, I suppose, as long as you knew who she was (the lady sitting next to me was confused as to who that blonde was).



The peripatetic set, designed for Florida Grand Opera then went to Utah Opera before coming to Denver. It was completely traditional and would have been right at home in Naples in 1835 when the opera premiered. Costumes, by Susan Memmott Allred for Utah Opera, were also in the period of the original story, i.e. circa 1660. The audience seemed well-pleased to have an opera set, increasingly rarely, in the time and place that the composer and librettist intended.

The edition used by Opera Colorado did allow some unfortunate cuts--especially the whole Wolfscrag Scene, but also the repeats of some of the cabalettas. Raimondo was however given his frequently cut aria and cabaletta (without the *da capo*). Most surprising was the inclusion of the brief scene of recitative following the mad scene when Enrico asks Alisa and Raimondo to take care of Lucia as he is "not himself" and Raimondo blames Normanno for the tragedy that has befallen the house of Ashton. Although this scene has been recorded (in the Sutherland-Bonyng recording for instance), I have seen it staged only once before (in Seattle). Most prima donnas do not want anything to deflect from their hoped-for glory at the conclusion of the mad scene (and earlier in the twentieth century the whole opera sometimes ended there). The short scene works on stage however. It puts what has happened in the context of the whole tragedy and we see the mad scene as more than a showpiece for a coloratura soprano. Its inclusion also allowed for carrying Lucia slowly offstage rather than a collapse, wild applause and a curtain. It brings us "down" and Cammarano and Donizetti knew what they were doing by including it in my opinion.

The singers were mostly impressive. Anna Christy, our Lucia, is a world-class singer who lives locally near Denver. She is petite and youthful looking, a very girlish Lucia and her voice has an almost a child-like quality that I find hard to describe. We will see how that quality of voice works for Melissa, the role she is to sing in Handel's *Alcina* next summer in Santa Fe. She is a decent actress and her coloratura is sound. Curiously, she cut off two high notes in the mad scene a bit before she should have, but the notes were solid and right on. There is a lot of "ping" to her voice too.



Anna Christy's Lucia

I liked the tenor (Edgardo), Eric Barry, equally as well. Barry is a big man and not quite as adept on stage as Ms. Christy, but his voice is dulcet, firm and he has beautiful high notes. The final scene (his) did not seem an afterthought at all, coming as it does after the climactic mad scene. Timothy Mix, a young baritone whom I have heard several times recently, sang the bad guy, Lucia's brother Enrico and Matthew Treviño was the hypocritical minister Raimondo (he convinces Lucia to marry Arturo and then blames the tragedy that results on Enrico's retainer Normanno). Both were perfectly

adequate, and I appreciated OC allowing Mix to sing the slower, cantabile parts of his cabaletta which are often cut. Brett Sprague as Arturo was just fine in his short arioso and beloved local trouper Marcia Ragonetti had the hand-ringing duties of Lucia's companion Alisa. Omar Najmi was Normanno.



Eric Barry as Edgardo

I thought that this *Lucia* was relatively routine—well sung but with a lot of stand and deliver singing (the lady next to me asked if opera was always so “stylized”)—until we got to the sextet. The opening words, “Che mi frena in tal momento” (“What restrains me in this moment”), seemed to work on a metatheatrical level and release the principals from their “stylized” presentation. The action took off and the opera got exciting (I wish they had allowed the frenzied repeat of the sextet’s stretta). The excitement continued into the Mad Scene in the next act and did not abate in the final, sorrowful scene when Edgardo commits suicide.

Ari Pelto conducted the Opera Colorado Orchestra tautly and with concern for the singers; the chorus sounded good, but was pretty much of the come-on-stand-and-sing-while-looking-at-the-conductor variety. Before the performances in Denver, I had read an article that suggested that Donizetti’s score is not difficult vocally. Maybe when compared to an extremely ornate Vivaldi opera or one of Rossini’s most difficult bel canto works, but I think that most singers would say that *Lucia* is no piece of cake. The secret is to make it sound easy—like a great athletic feat, it is not as good if it looks really difficult. This cast made it look simple, and kudos to them.