

**LUCREZIA BORGIA**

**Opera Manhattan**

**June 14 and 18, 1996**

Opera Manhattan, a New York City opera company which has been active for four years, has so far distinguished itself thanks to performances of long forgotten or rarely heard operas, mostly from the French repertoire. Their only attempts at Italian opera have been so far have been the productions of Handel's *Amadigi* and now Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Once again (and I am referring to *Amadigi*), one could appreciate the integrity shown tackling the textual problems inherent in a score like *Lucrezia Borgia*, which Donizetti wrote in 1833 for Teatro alla Scala, but which he also subjected to cuts, additions and modifications during the following years. The creator of the title role, the French primadonna Enrichetta Méric Lalande, played a decisive (albeit mostly negative) role in the shaping of the opera's first version. Although she was just 35 years old, Lalande was already a declining diva at the end of a glorious career during which she had heralded Bellini's first successes by creating such

roles as Imogene in *Il Pirata* and Alaide in *La Straniera*. Despite her vocal trouble she was still a primadonna assoluta, and as such she requested that the opera Donizetti was composing should focus on her (the opera could count another famous diva, the *musico* Marietta Brambilla as Maffio Orsini, a role which Felice Romani and Donizetti expanded in her honor from its relatively minor function in Victor Hugo's tragedy, on which the opera is based). Hence her demand for the final aria *Era desso il figlio mio*, a solution which the composer accepted reluctantly<sup>1</sup>, and which he did not fail to eliminate for a new Scala production in 1840. At that time, on the other hand, perhaps to compensate the new diva, la Frezzolini, for the loss of the final rondó, he composed a cabaletta for her, *Si voli il primo a cogliere*, to be inserted right after Lucrezia's Prologue entrance aria *Quanto è bello! Quale incanto!*, which thus became a formal aria composed of cavatina and cabaletta. Once he had excised the protagonist's virtuoso aria, Donizetti composed an arioso for the new finale to be sung by the dying tenor, followed by the grieving exclamations of Lucrezia, who faints onto her son's corpse with a climactic and harrowing B natural. The first Gennaro, tenor Francesco Pedrazzi, does not appear to have been a first-rate singer, nor did he enjoy Donizetti's high esteem; this explains why the 1833 Gennaro was allotted no formal arias to sing, just the arioso *Di pescatore ignobile*, which leads naturally into his duet with Lucrezia. When tenors of higher quality and prestige decided to tackle the role, Donizetti had no problems in rewarding them, writing no less than two arias to insert in the beginning of the last act (sometimes in place of the Orsini-Gennaro duet), the first one, *Anch'io provai le tenere smanie*, for Mario, and the other, *Amo siccome s'ama un angelo*, for Nicola Ivanoff.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, once it is decided to perform *Lucrezia Borgia*, one must immediately confront textual problems. Since the performances of this opera in modern times have mostly been built around the presence of great divas, almost inevitably the original version with the final rondó has been chosen; however, the splendid tenor arioso has often been inserted before it, too. And this is the solution adopted by the current mise-en-scene by Opera Manhattan, whose artistic director and conductor, Gabriel Guimaraes, has also assigned the Ivanoff aria to Gennaro, whereas in my opinion Mario's aria, with its more pertinent text and more sinuous melody, would have been a more appropriate choice.

Stylistically, this *Lucrezia Borgia* was a perfect example of how an early 19th century Italian opera ought to be approached. With full respect for the rules of belcanto and proto-romantic opera, not only were the daccapos repeated (in America, *Met docet*, it is still customary to cut them), but also imaginatively varied, and this procedure was also applied to the duets cabalettas, a rarely performed but totally appropriate practice. The cuts were minimal and related only to the chorus' interventions. Guimaraes, responsible also for the new orchestration for only 19 instruments, conducted with emotional participation reflecting in an appropriate choice of tempi.

Two casts alternated in the four performances, and in both cases the best singing was offered by the two protagonists. Sopranos Rosemarie Barenz and Maureen Tye both gave generally praiseworthy performances, each availing herself of completely different, if not antithetical, means. Barenz' voice, albeit technically solid and secure, revealed itself to be too light for a role requiring a true soprano spinto completely at her ease in the middle-low regions of the staff, where Lucrezia's tessitura so often lies. Indeed, Barenz gave her vocal best in the higher and more florid passages such as the cabaletta *Si voli il primo a cogliere*, which she rendered with accuracy and smoothness. This soprano is however gifted with remarkable stage presence and dramatic flair, which allowed one to overlook - in part, at least - a certain lack of vocal depth. Maureen Tye's soprano, on the other hand, more lyric and meaty, sounded better suited to the role of Lucrezia, but as an actress she seemed more inhibited than her colleague. Both sopranos revealed a first-rate technique, with beautiful pianos and a secure top (Tye in particular chose to perform the higher variant of *M'odi, ah m'odi*, showing off a gorgeous C sharp in alt).

<sup>1</sup> It is highly unlikely, however, that Donizetti wanted to take his revenge composing a virtuoso aria to the sole purpose of placing Lalande in a difficult situation, as reported by Emilia Branca Romani, a notoriously unreliable source. Ultimately, what counted for Donizetti was his opera's success, and he would have hardly obtained it with a primadonna in difficulty.

<sup>2</sup> Other tenors used to interpolate other Donizetti arias like *Deserto in terra* from *Don Sebastiano*, or, as was Beniamino Gigli's custom, *Angelo casto e bel* from *Il Duca d'Alba*.

Unfortunately the remainder of the two casts was not at the same level. The decision to engage two baritones for the role of Alfonso d'Este, which lies on a basso cantante tessitura, proved fatally wrong, in as much as both Richard Estelita and Timothy Truschel are light and tenorish baritones (especially the former, who launches tenor-like high Fs and Gs, while the latter seems to be equipped with a more solid vocal technique). Neal Harrelson's tenor (he sang in both the performances I attended because the second cast Gennaro was indisposed) is a very pleasant voice in the middle range, not supported, however, by a sufficiently refined technique; as a consequence, the *passaggio* notes and his very first high notes were constantly strained and unfocused. This is too bad, as this young tenor seems to have an incredible range and facility to produce most pleasant high notes in falsettone, which would make him ideal for this repertoire. Once we have described the performances of the two Maffio Orsinis, Keren Bernbaum and Marion Capriotti, as not exactly memorable, it remains only to underline the inadequacy of most of the comprimarios, among whom only David Robinson's fresh tenor as Rustighello stood out. He was furthermore the only one in the entire cast (including the protagonists - - unfortunately many American singers consider good Italian to be no more than an optional) to boast a clear and comprehensible Italian pronunciation.

Claudia Zahn's production was scant and "poor", reduced to the mere essentials, a bench, an armchair, a table and a couple of lanterns. The decision to dress Alfonso and Lucrezia in vaguely Renaissance-style costumes, while all the others were wearing decidedly twentieth century waistcoats and trousers was frankly incomprehensible.

Ultimately, despite the abovementioned vocal deficiencies, the two performances were after all enjoyable and notable from several points of view, chiefly the two Lucrezias and Guimaraes' approach to the text. It is important to remember that Opera Manhattan donates half of its proceeds to charity, in particular to AIDS care and research