

The Donizetti Festival, Bergamo (part 2) Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*

Charles Jernigan, November 2019

Lucrezia Borgia is not one of Donizetti's best-known titles today, but it should be. Coming between *L'elisir d'amore* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, this 1833 opera, based on a Romantic play by Victor Hugo, broke new ground as both drama and music. Listening to it today, one feels that Donizetti had composed his own *Rigoletto* (an opera also based on a revolutionary Hugo play) some twenty years before Verdi got around to his. Verdi was a young student in Milan when *Lucrezia* debuted at La Scala, and he obviously took Donizetti's work to heart.

The *Lucrezia Borgia* of legend and the opera is a shocking character, far away from the virtuous victim we see in *Lucia*. The daughter of the corrupt Pope Alexander II Borgia, she was rumored to have had incestuous unions and to be a serial poisoner, some of her husbands among the victims. In real life she was an accomplished ruler and fluent in several languages—as well as the mother of over 10 children. Hugo chose to center his play on the femme fatale of legend, the infamous poisoner, whom he humanizes by giving her a child whom she loves. (It is possible that the real *Lucrezia* did give birth secretly to a child when she was very young—whose father *may* have been her own father.) Just as the vicious *Rigoletto* is redeemed by his love for his innocent daughter *Gilda*, so *Lucrezia* is made human, if not redeemed, by her love for her son *Gennaro*, who is modeled on the “love child” the real *Lucrezia* probably bore.

The librettist, Felice Romani accepted the commission to write the libretto before he had read Hugo's brand new play. In a Preface, he confessed that had he read the play, he would not have accepted the commission. Still, he gave it his best, and as always, did a fine job with the poetry and dramatic situations. He even gave Donizetti the opportunity to experiment musically within the Italian operatic tradition. For instance, instead of singing a traditional entrance aria, the tenor-hero *Gennaro*, falls asleep near the beginning while *Orsini* sings the narrative “*Nella fatal di Rimini.*” *Lucrezia* enters and sings “*Com'è bello*”—‘How handsome he is’—while gazing at her son as he sleeps. The lyrics are ambivalent. If we have not read the synopsis and did not know that this is her son, we might think it is a lover whom she admires—as her husband *Alfonso* believes.

In the opera, *Lucrezia* has done and will do terrible things. and her husband, *Alfonso*, Duke of Ferrara, is worse. Their corruption is opposed by an unusually large group of untethered young men, including *Gennaro*, who is unaware that *Lucrezia* is his mother. The opera proceeds in a Prologue and two acts. In the Prologue *Lucrezia* is unmasked and humiliated by these young men in front of her beloved *Gennaro*, whom she has followed to Venice. In Act I she saves *Gennaro* from her husband *Alfonso*, who has seen to it that he drinks poisoned wine with an antidote. In the last act she takes revenge on the youths who have humiliated her by poisoning all of them at a party without knowing that her own son is among the guests. He too drinks the poisoned wine, and this time he refuses to take the antidote she bears. When he dies, *Lucrezia* falls prostrate on his body. It is a story filled with violence and unsavory characters, but

Gennaro's innocence and her motherly love make us ambivalent in our views of Lucrezia, an ambivalence only amplified by her final rondo—slow and tragic and so unlike the rondo finales in most operas of the period. “He was my son,” she sings in the agony of realizing that she has slain the only light in her life.



Company, Bergamo, 2019

Donizetti evidently thought very highly of the music, and he kept adjusting the score over a period of almost ten years, trying to make the story comply with the censors of various Italian cities or improving the dramatics or adding new music to please new singers—which brings us to the new critical edition by Roger Parker and Rosie Ward. Parker argues that there were actually ten different versions of the score done with Donizetti's participation or blessing, including the original, which debuted at La Scala on December 26, 1833. The version performed in Bergamo this year was essentially the one performed at the Théâtre Italien in Paris in 1840, when Donizetti had a superb cast of singers. The Paris edition includes an extensive cabaletta that the composer wrote to accompany Lucrezia's beautiful two-verse cavatina, “Com'è bello.” Donizetti advised that if the cabaletta were performed, the aria should be cut to one verse, and so it was in Bergamo. This piece, “Si voli il primo a cogliere,” is ornate in traditional bel canto fashion, and may have been added to appease the Parisian melomanes who expected a florid showpiece for the soprano—in this case Giulia Grisi. The second major change is a new tenor aria in Act II, written for the great tenor Mario, who sang the role in Paris, “Anch'io provai le tenere.” Although this alternate aria has been recorded (by Juan Diego Florez among others), until now it was thought that Donizetti's orchestration was lost, so orchestration had to be improvised. Now the original has turned up in Geneva, and we heard it in Bergamo. It is first rate Donizetti, a gorgeous, harp-accompanied *romanza*. The Gennaro-Orsini duet in the last act, cut by Donizetti himself in earlier editions, was restored here too (“Minacciata è la mia vita”) as well as a brief solo for Gennaro (“Madre se oignor lontano”) in the finale. The soprano sang the tragic rondo finale “Era desso il mio figlio,” but with only one verse as Donizetti had also recommended, changing it from a soprano show piece to a dramatically appropriate ending. It is taut, riveting drama with a most unusual title character—a murderer who ironically has the capacity for maternal love.

The stage director, Andrea Bernard, seems to have seized on that maternal aspect since his production used two symbolic visual elements—a baby’s cradle and the female breast, as both nurture and erotic body part. Before the music began, we saw Lucrezia as a young mother nursing her infant by a white cradle. Soon the cradle was broken into pieces and by the end of the opera we were offered a half dozen broken cradles. As for breasts, the image of a nursing mother opened the opera, and during the performance we saw Lucrezia’s breasts pawed by her husband and petted by Gennaro, who is erotically attracted to her before he knows she is his mother. In the end, Lucrezia was supposed to stab herself in the breast (in this production, not in the libretto). Unfortunately our Lucrezia, Carmela Remigio, could not get the pouch of stage blood hidden in her dress to break, so she kept daintily poking her breast with a poignard. She died a bloodless death, but her white dress was covered with blood when she took her bows. Breasts, however, were intact. I found the cradle/breast concept a bit juvenile.

Bernard’s stage direction also gave us a Renaissance full of violence, fights, threats, blood and sex: it was very active, the opposite of park and bark opera. The singers (including the chorus) acted well and Bernard managed to distinguish various characters through mannerisms or movements. Besides maternal love, Bernard suggested incest (between Lucrezia and both Pope Alexander, who appeared as a silent character and Gennaro, whose interactions with his mother were definitely on the erotic side) and also homoerotic love (Gennaro-Orsini). Gennaro may be innocent, but in this production he certainly touched all the sexual bases. There was even a pole dancer—apparently the Princess Negroni, who hosts the fatal party in Act II. Who knew that there was pole dancing in the Renaissance?



Toughs in Ferrara

The stage set, by Alberto Beltrame, was dark and ugly. Bodies protruded from the earth in Act I—Lucrezia’s victims, one supposes. A coffered ceiling turned over to become a wall of the Borgia palace, and for some reason it dumped a bucketful of dirt as it turned. The set did nothing for the opera. Costumes, by Elena Beccaro, were more or less Renaissance, with doublets and cod pieces, but they were gray and dull. Only Lucrezia was allowed some color.

The singing was always adequate, in some cases outstanding. Particularly good was Xabier Anduaga as Gennaro. His tenor is strong, even and lovely up to the highest notes and he was capable of singing softly and dreamily in his first aria, “Di pescatore ignobile.” He could sing forcefully too, and he was superb in the “Mario” aria in Act II. I thought that Remigio’s voice was too light for Lucrezia, but she sang it with such musicianship and fine acting that in the end it did not matter. She was a young Lucrezia, hardly older than her son, but given that family, she was probably 12 when he was born. Marko Mimica did not much impress as Don Alfonso, but Varduhi Abrahamyan was very good as Gennaro’s friend Maffio Orsini (a pants role). She conquered the famous brindisi, “Il segreto per esser felice,” easily and she sent frissons down the spine leading off the Prologue finale as she/he confronts Lucrezia. Donizetti wrote that the “minor” characters were not minor at all and should not be doubled. Here we had Manuel Pierattelli as Jeppo Liveerotto, Alex Martini as Don Apostolo Gazella, Roberto Maietta as Ascanio Petrucci, Daniele Lettieri as Oloferno Vitellozzo, Rocco Cavalluzzi as Gubetta and Edoardo Miletta as Rustighello



Xabier Anduaga

Credit should go to Marta Negrini as Choreographer. There was a lot of movement to manage—fights to stage, stomping to attend to, kicks in the teeth to oversee and sword play to work out. She did a good job.

Best of all on the musical side was Riccardo Frizza, who whipped the Orchestra Giovanile Luigi Cherubini into a white fury for the exciting climaxes, but gave ample space to breathe for the long cantilenas. There was a stage band, and the chorus under Corrado Casati was excellent.

All in all, this *Lucrezia Borgia* was musically taut and convincing, and with very good (although perhaps overly violent and cruel) stage direction and acting. The scenery was downright ugly, however. As an opera, *Lucrezia Borgia* rates an A+; it is one of Donizetti’s finest. We saw it on November 23.