

# Synopsis

## Act I

*Scotland, mid-19th century.* An intruder has been spotted at night on the grounds of Lammermoor Castle, home of Enrico Ashton. Normanno, the captain of the guard, sends Enrico's men off in search of the stranger. Enrico arrives, troubled. His family's fortunes are in danger, and only the arranged marriage of his sister, Lucia, with Lord Arturo Bucklaw can save them. The chaplain Raimondo, Lucia's tutor, reminds Enrico that the girl is still mourning the death of her mother. But Normanno reveals that Lucia is concealing a great love for Edgardo of Ravenswood, leader of the Ashtons' political enemies. Enrico is furious and swears vengeance. The men return and explain that they have seen and identified the intruder as Edgardo. Enrico's fury increases.

Just before dawn at a fountain in the woods nearby, Lucia and her companion Alisa are waiting for Edgardo. Lucia relates that, in this very spot, she has seen the ghost of a girl who was stabbed by a jealous lover. Alisa urges her to forget Edgardo, but Lucia insists that her love for Edgardo brings her great joy and may overcome all. Edgardo arrives and explains that he must go to France on a political mission. Before he leaves, he wants to make peace with Enrico. Lucia, however, asks Edgardo to keep their love a secret. Edgardo agrees, and they exchange rings and vows of devotion.

## Act II

It is some months later, on the day that Lucia is to marry Arturo. Normanno assures Enrico that he has successfully intercepted all correspondence between the lovers and has in addition procured a forged letter, supposedly from Edgardo, that indicates he is involved with another woman. As the captain goes off to welcome the groom, Lucia enters, continuing to defy her brother. Enrico shows her the forged letter. Lucia is heartbroken, but Enrico insists that she marry Arturo to save the family. He leaves, and Raimondo, convinced no hope remains for Lucia's love, reminds her of her late mother and urges her to do a sister's duty. She finally agrees.

As the wedding guests arrive in the Great Hall, Enrico explains to Arturo that Lucia is still in a state of melancholy because of her mother's death. The girl enters and reluctantly signs the marriage contract. Suddenly, Edgardo bursts in, claiming his bride. The entire company is overcome by shock. Arturo and Enrico order Edgardo to leave, but he insists that he and Lucia are engaged. When Raimondo shows him the contract with Lucia's signature, Edgardo curses her and tears his ring from her finger before finally leaving in despair and rage.

## Act III

Enrico visits Edgardo at his dilapidated home and taunts him with the news that Lucia and Arturo have just been married. The two men agree to meet at dawn by the tombs of the Ravenswoods for a duel.

Back at Lammermoor, Raimondo interrupts the wedding festivities with the news that Lucia has gone mad and killed Arturo. Lucia enters, covered in blood. Moving between tenderness, joy, and terror, she recalls her meetings with Edgardo and imagines she is with him on their wedding night. She vows she will never be happy in heaven without her lover and that she will see him there. When Enrico returns, he is enraged at Lucia's behavior but soon realizes that she has lost her senses. After a confused and violent exchange with her brother, Lucia collapses.

In the graveyard, Edgardo laments that he has to live without Lucia and awaits his duel with Enrico, which he hopes will end his own life. Guests coming from Lammermoor Castle tell him that the dying Lucia has called his name. As he is about to rush to her, Raimondo announces that she has died. Determined to join Lucia in heaven, Edgardo stabs himself.

*Gaetano Donizetti*

# Lucia di Lammermoor

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*Premiere: Teatro di San Carlo, Naples, 1835*

The title role of *Lucia di Lammermoor* has become an icon in opera and beyond, an archetype of the constrained woman asserting herself in society. She reappears as a touchstone for such diverse later characters as Flaubert's adulterous Madame Bovary and the repressed Englishmen in the novels of E. M. Forster. The insanity that overtakes and destroys Lucia, depicted in opera's most celebrated mad scene, has especially captured the public imagination. Donizetti's handling of this fragile woman's state of mind remains seductively beautiful, thoroughly compelling, and deeply disturbing. Madness, as explored in this opera, is not merely something that happens as a plot function: It is at once a personal tragedy, a political statement, and a healing ritual.

### *The Creators*

Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) composed about 75 operas, in addition to orchestral and chamber music, in a career abbreviated by mental illness and an early death. Most of his works, with the exceptions of the ever-popular *Lucia* and the comic gems *L'Elisir d'Amore* and *Don Pasquale*, disappeared from the public eye after he died, but critical and popular opinion of his huge oeuvre has grown considerably over the past 50 years. The Neapolitan librettist Salvatore Cammarano (1801–1852) also provided libretti for Verdi (*Luisa Miller* and *Il Trovatore*). The source for this opera was *The Bride of Lammermoor*, a novel by Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), which the author set in the years immediately preceding the union of Scotland and England in 1707. Scott's novels of adventure and intrigue in a largely mythical old Scotland were wildly popular with European audiences.

### *The Setting*

The tale is set in Scotland, which, to artists of the Romantic era, signified a wild landscape on the fringe of Europe, with a culture burdened by a French-derived code of chivalry and an ancient tribal system. Civil war and tribal strife are recurring features of Scottish history, creating a background of fragmentation reflected in both Lucia's family situation and her own fragile psyche. The Met's current production, by Mary Zimmerman, suggests a 19th-century setting, inspired by classic Victorian ghost stories, and some of its visual elements are based on actual places in Scotland.

## *The Music*

Donizetti's operas and those of his Italian contemporaries came to be classified under the heading of bel canto (from the Italian for "beautiful singing"), a genre that focused on vocal agility and lyrical beauty to express drama. Today, the great challenge in performing this music lies in finding the right balance between elegant but athletic vocalism and dramatic insight. Individual moments from the score that can be charming on their own (for example, Lucia's Act I aria "Regnava nel silenzio ... Quando rapito in estasi" and the celebrated sextet in Act II) take on increased dramatic force when heard within the context of the piece. This is perhaps most apparent in the soprano's extended mad scene in Act III. The beauty of the melodic line throughout this long scene, as well as the graceful agility needed simply to hit the notes, could fool someone who heard it in concert into believing that this is just an exercise in vocal pyrotechnics. In its place in the opera, however, with its musical allusions to past events and with the dramatic interpretation of the soprano, the mad scene is transformed. Within the context of the drama, it is a shattering depiction of desperation, while the beauty of the music becomes an ironic commentary on the ugliness of "real" life. The tomb scene, built around two tremendously difficult arias for the tenor, is another example of dramatic context augmenting great melody and provides a cathartic contrast to the disciplined tension of the preceding mad scene.

## *Met History*

*Lucia di Lammermoor* had its company premiere on October 24, 1883, two days after the first performance by the brand new Metropolitan Opera Company. The versatile Marcella Sembrich, who would become a New York favorite during the Met's first two and a half decades, tackled the challenging title role. For a long time, Lucia was the domain of lyric sopranos who dazzled audiences with their coloratura techniques: French soprano Lily Pons debuted in the role in 1931 and sang it a record 92 more times until 1958; the colorful Australian Nellie Melba sang it 31 times between 1893 and 1901 (often dispensing with the final tomb scene so the diva's great mad scene would conclude the opera). In the second half of the century and into recent seasons, many different kinds of sopranos have taken the role, including, notably, Maria Callas for seven performances in 1956 and 1958. Other sopranos of diverse styles who have made marks on the role include Roberta Peters (29 performances between 1956 and 1971), Joan Sutherland (37 performances from her impressive Met debut in 1961 until 1982), Renata Scottò (20 performances from 1965 to 1973), Beverly Sills (seven performances in the 1976–77 season), and Ruth Ann Swenson (20 performances from 1989 to 2002). Mary Zimmerman's production had its premiere when it opened the 2007–08 season, with Natalie Dessay as Lucia and Marcello Giordani as Edgardo. In subsequent revivals, both Diana Damrau and Anna Netrebko have sung the title role.

## A Note from the Director

The opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* is based on Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*, which in turn was inspired by a true story that haunted Scott in childhood. In 1669, Janet Dalrymple, a Scottish girl from a noble family, fell in love with a certain Lord Rutherford. Between them they broke a piece of gold and vowed on pain of eternal damnation to be true to each other. But Janet's family objected to the union and insisted that she marry David Dunbar, heir of the wealthy Sir David Dunbar of Baldoon. On their wedding night, with hundreds of guests assembled, the couple retired to the bridal chamber. What happened next has been in dispute ever since. Violent screaming was heard, and when the door was broken down, David Dunbar lay bleeding on the floor, and Janet, maddened, was found crouched in the fireplace, covered with soot and gore. The only words she spoke were "Take up your bonny bridegroom." Within two weeks, Janet was dead and the groom had left Scotland. For the remainder of his short life, he refused to speak about what had happened in that room.

In the opera, Lucia's description of the ghost at the fountain is taken by many as pure delusion and as evidence of an already fragile psyche. But the ghosts of Sir Walter Scott's novel (with which Donizetti was very familiar) are quite real. They are seen not only by Lucia but also by other characters, including Edgardo, and are even described to the reader independent of any character's eye. The two versions need not exclude each other. There is a way to interpret the ghost that does not establish it as either absolutely imagined or absolutely literal: She is the manifestation of madness itself, and this madness represents, in part, the unreasonable, selfish, prideful spirit of revenge, a spirit that has very real and tragic consequences for the Ravenswoods and Ashtons. The ghost is the image of the Ravenswood curse: jealousy, fury, and the wild desire to have and to hold even unto death. Killed by a jealous lover, the spirit of the lost girl haunts the grounds of Ravenswood and beckons Lucia, conquering her and passing through her to overcome Edgardo as well, dragging all with her to the grave.

The ghost of Janet Dalrymple is persistent. She moved through Scott to Donizetti, who began to experience the first symptoms of his own madness during his engagement with the text. She then passed on to Flaubert and to his *Madame Bovary*, who, after being taken to see *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the novel, is driven almost crazy with desire for a young lover and starts on a path similar to Lucia's that will lead her to her doom. She has continued to move on through dozens of manifestations in popular culture, haunting such films as *The Fifth Element*, wherein the mad scene is sung by a many-tentacled blue creature, and Scorsese's *The Departed*, wherein one of the villains experiences a less elevated pleasure than *Madame Bovary* to the accompaniment of the famous sextet. Janet Dalrymple, crouched in the fireplace, clings to us still, an emblem of every thwarted love, and finds herself today in her maddened sorrow in the midst of a glittering modern metropolis, still longing and burning with love.

—Mary Zimmerman

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## Program Note

In 1835, Donizetti found himself in the middle of a contretemps over the mismanagement of Naples's many theaters; even the venerable San Carlo was bankrupt. There was mass protest, and on May 3, Donizetti wrote to his publisher Giovanni Ricordi, calling the Neapolitan authorities "a cage of madmen" and predicting that it would all "end in a brawl." What was particularly galling to the composer was that final approval of his new opera (his 55th!)—*Lucia di Lammermoor*, with a libretto by Salvatore Cammarano, based on Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*—was not forthcoming, even though the libretto had passed through all of the other administrative hurdles, including the censors. Despite the lack of response, Donizetti continued working and completed the score on July 6 in the hope that it would be produced by the end of the summer. But theater managers had not yet solved their organizational and financial problems. As Donizetti wrote to his friend Gaetano Cobianchi on July 26, "Our theaters go from bad to worse ... the operas fail, the public hisses, the attendance is poor ... Now at the San Carlo we will have [Giuseppe] Persiani's *Danao*, then my *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which is now finished ... The crisis is near, the public has indigestion, the Società teatrale is about to be dissolved, Vesuvius is smoking, and the eruption is near." That eruption was to be from the singers themselves, who had not yet been paid and threatened to quit.

Fortunately, King Ferdinand II stepped in, and the production of *Lucia* went into rehearsal and premiered at the Teatro di San Carlo on September 26 with two stellar singers in the roles of Lucia and Edgardo: soprano Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani and tenor Gilbert Duprez. The performance was an immense success, as Donizetti wrote to Ricordi on September 29: "*Lucia di Lammermoor* has been performed, and kindly permit me to shame myself and tell you the truth. It has pleased and pleased very much, if I can believe in the applause and the compliments I have received. I was called out many times and a great many times the singers, too." There were 22 performances in Naples alone, and the opera became a universal audience favorite, not least for its mad scene and memorable Act II sextet, "Chi mi frena in tal momento." Both Flaubert and Tolstoy immortalized *Lucia* in the romantic fantasies of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, and, as musicologist John Black observed, "not a year passed without a production somewhere in the world."

One important way to understand *Lucia* is in the context of a wave of so-called Ossianic works that began in the 1760s when Scottish poet James Macpherson published translations of poetry by the "rediscovered" ancient Celtic bard, Ossian, Son of Fingal. It didn't matter that the authenticity of the find was questionable: For at least 100 years, writers and composers reflected upon the Bard's eerie moonbeams, nostalgic mists, invocations to the harp, horns echoing in the distance, and clattering hooves, often setting their works in an uncorrupted Scottish landscape. Well known examples include Mendelssohn's *Hebrides* overture (1830–32, also known as *Fingal's Cave*) and Rossini's 1819 opera *La Donna del Lago*, based on Sir Walter Scott's narrative poem *The Lady of the Lake*. Even Wagner first conceived a Scottish setting for *Der Fliegende Holländer* before changing it to Norway.

Donizetti's interest in defining Scotland musically in *Lucia* is most evident in the short prelude, which begins with timpani and bass drum articulating the soft cadence of a funeral march that hints at a mournful and distant past. They are soon joined by a quartet of closely voiced horns, followed by a reedy ensemble of bassoons, clarinets, and oboes leading to a passage for full orchestra, and the curtain opens on ancient woodlands, punctuated by ruins. There is, indeed, a hunt, but the prey is a different kind of fox—Edgardo of Ravenswood, despised rival of the Ashtons and lover of Lucia. The second scene of Act I completes the exposition, with a magnificent harp solo evoking a fountain in a moonlit glade, where Lucia narrates a tragic and eerie tale concerning a Ravenswood ancestor who murdered his true love in a fit of jealous rage. The pale young woman then sank into the blood-soaked pool of the fountain and is said to have haunted the grounds ever since:

The night, deep and dark,  
reigned in the silence ...  
A pale ray from the gloomy moon  
shone on the fountain ...  
When a low sigh  
was heard throughout the air;  
and there on the fountain's edge  
the shadow appeared to me!

Lucia's vision is an omen, and the arc of the opera unfolds with tragic inevitability. Lucia, betrayed by her brother Enrico, commits murder, and sinks into madness. This trajectory follows Scott's original, although Cammarano changed one important detail: Scott's villain was not Lucy's brother, as in the opera, but rather her mother, Lady Ashton. According to Scott, she was beautiful and gracious, but neither loving nor affectionate. The most practical reason for Cammarano's change may be that there simply was no singer available to sing the part (something composers and librettists often knew in advance). It seems equally likely, however, that a second significant soprano role would have given Lucia unnecessary competition. It is, after all, the coloratura role of Lucia that defines *Lucia di Lammermoor* as a quintessential bel canto opera, complete with memorable melodies and vocal pyrotechnics, brought to spectacular heights in the widely anticipated centerpiece of the opera, the mad scene.

Scott offered a vivid account of the crazed Lucia in his novel: "Here they found the unfortunate girl seated, or rather couched like a hare upon its form—her head-gear disheveled, her night-clothes torn and dabbled with blood, her eyes glazed, and her features convulsed into a wild paroxysm of insanity. When she saw herself discovered, she gibbered, made mouths, and pointed at them with her bloody fingers, with the frantic gestures of an exulting demoniac." Cammarano's

transformation of Scott's description in his stage directions captures the same physicality and horror: "Lucia is dressed simply, in white: Her disheveled hair and the pallor of death on her face give her the appearance more of a ghost than of a living creature. Her stony gaze, her convulsive movements, and her malevolent smile disclose not only a frightening insanity, but the signs that her life is approaching its end."

The mad scene has a long legacy in both spoken drama and opera, notably in Shakespeare's Ophelia, who exhibits her madness by singing songs and giving out flowers. In 1835, remarkably, there were two operatic heroines who drew on the same model: Elvira, who garlands herself with flowers and imagines hearing her lover's voice in Act II of Bellini's *I Puritani*, which premiered in Paris on January 24, and, of course, Lucia in the eponymous opera that premiered only nine months later. Lucia has similar delusions about Edgardo and their wedding: "I hear the sweet sound of his voice! Ah, that voice! ... The rose petals are scattered! Do you hear that exquisite music?" Paralleling the soprano's range and agility, this "music" is performed on a glass harmonica, an instrument consisting of a series of differently sized glass bowls or tubes that speak when the player rubs moistened fingers across the rims, creating an otherworldly sonority.

The form of Lucia's mad scene is actually conventional, a cantabile and a cabaletta introduced and connected by accompanied recitatives. Within that framework, however, Donizetti follows Lucia's spontaneous and erratic behavior note for note, as she alternately recalls the ghostly dead woman at the fountain and her love duet with Edgardo. The more her mind spins from one fragmented episode to the next, the farther she retreats from reality. The voice is unleashed, but the body cannot bear it; Lucia collapses.

The death of the heroine is the most common cue for the final curtain, but not so in *Lucia*, where Edgardo has the last word. In tenor Gilbert Duprez, Donizetti had a magnificent vehicle, and he rewarded him with a ravishing aria that features a gorgeous cello duet. Nonetheless, in later performances, the scene was sometimes cut so that the opera ended with the mad scene. In a twist that may surprise modern audiences, Parisians, hearing the French version of the opera in 1837, gave little critical attention to the mad scene, apparently preferring Edgardo to Lucia. One critic, however, treated the ending of the work in matter-of-fact terms, as an expected event: "He stabs himself as any operatic hero is wont to do." Yet librettist Cammarano did not simply cave to tradition by putting a dagger in his hero's hand. Rather, he was forced to find a solution beyond that of his literary source, in which Scott's Edgar comes to a distinctly non-operatic end in a pit of quicksand.

—Helen M. Greenwald

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