Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) completed Lucia di Lammermoor at the height of his fame, having already written some 50 operas. He selected Sir Walter Scott’s classic novel The Bride of Lammermoor as the basis of the libretto, which was created by Salvatore Cammarano. The opera had its successful premiere in Naples on September 26, 1835.

Lucia belongs to the great Romantic era of Italian bel canto (“beautiful singing”) opera. Works in this style feature richly-decorated melodies, spectacular singing, and breath-taking drama. They were created by such 19th-century Italian composers as Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti for operagoers who enjoyed the beautiful sounds of controlled, smooth-toned singing by both soloists and ensembles. The display of vocal virtuosity brought spine-tingling thrills to such audiences.

Sir Walter Scott’s Gothic tale is set in the Lammermoor district of 16th-century Scotland, a haunting region of rugged cliffs, misty moors, and ancient feuds. Against this dark backdrop a passionate story of tempestuous love and family honor unfolds. Lucia (Lucy) Ashton secretly pledges her love to the impetuous Edgardo (Edgar) Ravenswood, the last survivor of her family’s sworn enemies. Lucia’s brother, Enrico (Henry), plans at the same time to arrange a marriage for his sister that will be politically and economically beneficial to the family.

After Enrico deviously convinces Lucia that Edgardo has been unfaithful to her, she agrees to marry Arturo Bucklaw, according to her brother’s wishes. Edgardo interrupts the wedding scene, however, returns the ring Lucia has given him as a token of their eternal faith, and then curses her. According to Scottish belief, a person who broke any vows taken before God, such as those Lucia had exchanged with Edgardo, was subject to swift divine punishment, usually carried out at the time the vows were broken.

The scene includes a famous sextet, that is, six soloists perform an ensemble piece in which each expresses his thoughts directly to the audience, and all blend together beautifully. Edgardo sings of his love for Lucia and sense of betrayal by her. The swooning Lucia expresses her helplessness and despair at having been deceived and forced to marry against her will. Enrico reveals his guilt for having treated his sister so dishonorably. Raimondo, Lucia’s spiritual adviser, adds, “Whoever is not moved by Lucia’s plight has a tiger’s heart!” Two other soloists sing of their sympathy for Lucia’s miserable situation. The voices of the chorus also blend with the six soloists and echo their lines. This extraordinary explosion of Romantic sentiment inspired generations of composers following Donizetti.
Scene 1  
Locale: a ruined park near Ravenswood Castle  
While Enrico’s guards search the estate for a mysterious trespasser, Normanno, captain of the guard, greets Enrico, who complains that his sister, Lucia, has refused to cooperate in a marriage he has arranged for her with Lord Arturo Bucklaw. Enrico becomes enraged when he learns that Lucia has, in fact, fallen in love with his mortal enemy, Sir Edgardo di Ravenswood, after he saved her from a raging bull. The couple have for some time been meeting clandestinely. Enrico swears that he will destroy Lucia and Edgardo.

Scene 2  
Locale: a well near the tomb of Lucia and Enrico’s mother  
Lucia, with her companion Alisa, impatiently awaits a rendezvous with Edgardo. She fearfully tells Alisa the tale of a woman who was killed on this very spot by her enraged lover and then thrown into the well, which is now haunted by her ghost. Alisa warns Lucia that the apparition’s appearance is an omen of tragic destiny for her love. Still, Lucia laments, she cannot bring the secret relationship to an end.

Edgardo arrives, Alisa withdraws, and the couple hastily make plans for their marriage before Edgardo must leave on a political mission to France. Lucia convinces Edgardo that their wedding must be performed covertly because Enrico will never consent. Before parting, the lovers exchange rings and make vows to seal their union in the sight of heaven.

Scene 3  
Locale: small chamber at Lammermoor Castle  
Time: several months later on Lucia’s wedding day  
Motivated by greed and the desire for vengeance, Enrico plots with Normanno to force Lucia to marry the wealthy Arturo. Lucia later joins her brother but will not be persuaded to accept his plan because she has plighted her faith to Edgardo.

Enrico produces a forged letter to trick his sister into believing that Edgardo has been unfaithful. Lucia trembles and expresses a wish to die.

Enrico insists that she marry Arturo to avert the ruin of their family. He not only has lost his fortune but also has been involved in treasonable acts against the crown. Raimondo, the family chaplain, urges Lucia to comply for the sake of her dead mother and the promise of heavenly reward for her sacrifice. He also assures her that the vows she and Edgardo took when they exchanged rings are not recognized by heaven because they were not blessed by a minister.

Scene 4  
Locale: the Great Hall in Lammermoor Castle  
Guests celebrate the union of two great Scottish families. Enrico prepares Arturo for the arrival of a melancholy bride, explaining that Lucia still mourns her mother’s death.

Lucia enters and under duress signs the marriage contract after Arturo, whispering, “I have signed my death warrant!” just before Edgardo bursts in to claim her as his bride. After Raimondo persuades Enrico, Arturo, and Edgardo to put up their swords, he shows Edgardo Lucia’s signature on the marriage contract. Edgardo then gives Lucia back her ring, demands the return of his own, curses her, and charges, “You have betrayed both heaven and love.” As Lucia collapses, Edgardo entreats Enrico and Arturo to kill him. They urge him instead to flee.

Scene 5  
Locale: Great Hall in Lammermoor Castle  
As the wedding guests continue their celebration, Raimondo announces that Lucia has gone mad and murdered her groom in the bridal chamber. The insane Lucia wanders in, dressed in a blood-splattered gown and carrying a bloody dagger. She relates a crazed vision of her marrying Edgardo, not Arturo, and then falls dying before her remorseful brother.

Scene 6  
Locale: Ravenswood family cemetery  
Time: very late the same night  
The dejected Edgardo awaits Enrico’s arrival for a duel they have agreed to fight at dawn. After he learns of Lucia’s death, he commits suicide in hopes of a heavenly reunion with his beloved.
University Opera Association designer Jeffrey Stegall has incorporated in his set design for the *Lucia* wedding scenes a large semblance of a marriage stone at Cairnbulg Castle in Scotland. The crest joins the coats of arms of the Master of Saltoun and Amelia Fraser, 18th-century cousins who were engaged to be married for financial benefit. When the wedding was called off, Amelia’s coat of arms (right) was chiseled off the stone. The motto at the bottom of the stone reads, “In God Is All.”
Arias and Ailments: Mad Scenes in Opera

Some of the world’s oldest references to mental illness are found in the Bible. The Old Testament book of Daniel, for example, depicts God’s punishing Nebuchadnezzar with madness. Because of his arrogance, this Babylonian king was afflicted with seven years of insanity, driven out to eat the grass of the field like a beast.

Madness is a common theme in Greek tragedy, from which centuries later it passed into Renaissance English literature and stage plays. In the theater it proved to be a very effective dramatic element, serving to focus the audience’s attention on the character’s plight and to increase the sense of suspense and unpredictability.

During the 19th-century mad scenes gained great popularity on the operatic stage, reflecting a general attraction to melancholy, mental illness, and the workings of the psyche. Operatic mad scenes usually serve two important purposes: drama and vocal display. They feature a deranged character, usually the soprano in the title role, who meanders about the stage in a hallucinatory state, singing an otherworldly aria that shows off her spectacular high notes. Her madness, usually caused by unrequited love, gives her license to sing of subjects a polite woman would regard as unmentionable.

The most famous of all mad scenes is in Act III of Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor. Lucia appears onstage in a crazed condition, wearing a blood-splattered gown and carrying a dagger. She has just killed her bridegroom. Then in a state of morbid euphoria, Lucia envisions marriage to Edgardo, the man she truly loves, rather than Arturo, the man her brother has forced her to wed. Her extravagant aria is unequalled in both the vocal skill and histrionics it requires.

The aria is accompanied by a solo flute played from the orchestra pit. Because the flute, like the coloratura soprano, is high-pitched and light-sounding, it provides the perfect “partner” for Lucia, whose tortured psyche has lost all contact with reality. Donizetti scores a beautiful duet, resembling a bird song, for his “flighty” heroine and the flute. Lucia’s vocal coloratura, marked by high-pitched trills and runs, symbolizes the fragility of her mind and, indeed, her very life. At the end of the aria Lucia falls into a swoon and within a few hours dies. The scene is regarded as one of the most dramatic and vocally exciting moments in all of opera.

Seven years after Lucia premiered, Donizetti created a new opera with a mad scene, Linda di Chamounix. In this work as the distraught heroine hurls off high notes in quick succession, she is interrupted by the unexpected appearance of the hero. He sings a theme song which jars her into her right mind, and the song becomes a love duet.

Ironically, Donizetti himself suffered from a mental deterioration that began several years after he composed Lucia. By 1846 he was unable to speak or respond to anyone. He died in Bergamo, the city of his birth, on April 8, 1848.

Not all operatic mad scenes are scored for sopranos. Rossini, Donizetti’s contemporary and composer of The Barber of Seville (1816), wrote a mad scene for a bass in his opera Semiramide (1823). More recently, Benjamin Britten gave the tenor a mad scene in Peter Grimes (1945). In every case, composers make certain that the singers who are fortunate enough to be cast in a mad scene are tested to the ultimate.