

Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*

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These study materials are produced for use with the
Bob Jones University Opera Association production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

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LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR

An Introduction to the Story & Music

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 breathtaking 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.

University Opera Association's 2002 production of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*

Sir Walter Scott's Gothic tale is set in the Lammermoor district of 17th-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.

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Setting:

17th-century Scotland

Background: Through murder and illegal seizure, Lord Enrico Ashton has claimed the title and estates of his neighbor Edgardo, sole survivor of the rival clan Ravenswood. Enrico's fortunes have begun to decline, however, through political disfavor. To insure his family's future, he therefore determines to force upon his sister Lucia an opportunistic marriage to Lord Arturo Bucklaw.

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: the 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.



What's What at the Opera?

Bravo!

At the end of each scene the soloists may come out in front of the curtain to be recognized (i.e., applauded) by the audience. At this time it is appropriate to acknowledge an exceptionally good performance by a male singer by shouting the Italian word “Bravo!”

Brava! This is the Italian word of appreciation for an exceptionally good female performance.

Bravi! This is the plural form of the Italian word of appreciation for exceptional performances. Use it if you regard more than one of the singers as exceptionally good.

Etiquette

Please remain quiet from the time the orchestra begins the opera so everyone around you can enjoy the performance. Avoid opening gum or candy wrappers, talking, or making other sounds. Read and discuss the program before the opera begins or during the intermissions. Also don't forget to turn off your cellphone, pager and watch alarm.

Dress: Most people still enjoy dressing up when they go to the opera. It's considered part of the pleasure of attending such a special event.

Punctuality: If you are late to the opera, you may not be admitted to the auditorium until the first scene ends.

Applause: It's good manners to applaud after the orchestra finishes the prelude or overture, after arias (big solo performances) and prominent ensemble pieces, and at the end of each scene.

Chorus members are usually recognized for their good performance after the last scene in which they appear. The curtain closes at the end of the scene and then opens again to reveal the chorus “frozen” in a “picture curtain,” awaiting your applause.

After the last intermission the conductor usually signals the orchestra to stand for applause before he begins the next scene of the opera.

If you're not sure when to applaud, wait and follow the lead of other audience members.

Supertitles

This is the term for the visual translations (“titles”) of the libretto (opera text) into English when they are projected above the stage simultaneously with the singing onstage. Supertitles are a major technical innovation, developed over the past 25 years, that has unraveled the mysteries of opera in a foreign language for audiences around the world.

Imprinted on individual slides or generated by computer, they are projected a line or two at a time on a screen suspended just below the stage's proscenium arch. They are not intended to be literal translations, nor do they include every line sung onstage. Instead, they are paraphrases of enough of the libretto to clarify the action without intruding upon the music or drama.

Even experienced operagoers get a clearer understanding of the performance by reading the supertitles. These foreign language aids have become so popular with audiences and performers alike that many companies are now providing supertitles with operas in English as well.

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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.

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



The celebrated Swedish soprano **Jenny Lind** (1820–1887) first appeared onstage as Lucia when she was only 20 years old. This drawing from the *Illustrated News* depicts her 1848 London performance of the “mad scene.” Queen Victoria wrote of Miss Lind, “She has a most exquisite, powerful and really quite peculiar voice, so round, soft and flexible and her acting is charming, touching and very natural.”

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 that 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.



ABOVE: Dwight Gustafson, conductor, poses with guest artists for the 1955 *Lucia* production: bass Jan Rubes (Raimondo), soprano Barbara Gibson (Lucia), and tenor Jim Hawthorne (Edgardo).



LEFT: Brad Baughman (right front) as Normanno in University Opera Association’s 2002 production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

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