

Call Me Crazy, But...

Gaetano Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor" is one of the most popular operas of all time, and the poignancy of her plight strikes more deeply than we realize.



A good mad scene makes the gut flutter, fixes the gaze—we can't turn away from it. The afflicted one becomes oblivious, and that sad oblivion distances us, protecting everyone. Lunacy becomes an invisible "fourth wall," that allows us to take in our voyeuristic fill, as we do in the darkened theater. It allows us access to veiled and dangerous regions—regions of emotion and behavior, strange and yet piercingly familiar. Access which we indulge unapologetically, never quite feeling that our fixed stare desecrates a private suffering. We witness it, whether it's shock-talk TV, a stranger's public meltdown, or a lunatic scena set to sky-high coloratura (the fast, florid, sometimes improvisational singing executed by skilled singers of every vocal range). We are riveted by madness. Despite all we know, by instinct or experience, about its terrible human toll, one fact persists. Madness makes great theater.

The Romantics of the nineteenth century understood this. In the bel canto style of Italian opera, the mad scene (along with scenes of murder and suicide) was common currency. Gioachino Rossini snatched up Sir Walter Scott's 1810 novel of madness and perfidy, *The Lady of the Lake*, for his opera, *La donna del lago* (1819). Vincenzo Bellini's meteoric career offered an early mad scene in *Il pirata* (1827) and ended with another, in *I puritani* (1835). Gaetano Donizetti's masterpiece of bel canto tragedy, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835, also from Scott), includes one of the most spectacular mad scenes of all time. It worked like a charm to seduce eager audiences—then, as now.

The mad scene in particular was a tried and true crowd-pleaser. The classics of antiquity are full of mad scenes. Drawing upon those classics in the seventeenth century, William Shakespeare effectively wrote the book on the mad scene as a theatrical device. The Shakespearean characters Ophelia and Lady Macbeth together made a model for virtually every madwoman of the nineteenth century canon.

But the phenomenon of the bel canto mad scene owes its success to a particular contingency. Mid-nineteenth century audiences were ravenously eager to be seduced. In a short-lived hiatus following the revolutionary upheavals of the previous century, and preceding the sullen late-Romantic passions to come, exhausted Europeans wanted emotional exercise without exertion. In England, sentimental ballads unleashed tides of bittersweet tears, generated hundreds of maudlin spin-offs, and made their authors rich. In Italy, where beautiful singing was a cherished tradition, opera was the preferred diversion. Libretti were specifically designed not to distract from the beautiful singing—the "*bel canto*". *Bel canto* opera offered sensory indulgence—floral confection teeming with highly stylized characters, who sing—resplendently. Donizetti produced some seventy operas, mostly in this tightly formulaic boilerplate of arias and ensembles, featuring ravishing melodies for handpicked voices, and almost interchangeable texts. Such bel canto conventions were determined in large part by the demands of a vigorous market. Facilitated by a predictable paradigm, composers were able rapidly to turn out abundant supply to meet voracious demand. It must be said, as well, that in the works of the most gifted *bel canto* composers, the same paradigm yielded profoundly stirring musical drama. Lucia's long lovelorn dementia, for example, drenches the senses in violence and loveliness alike, accessibly bitter and poignant—a virtuosic emotional transport, free of dreary polemics. So, bel canto was a formula for success, all around.

For source material, continental Europe turned toward the lugubrious, mist-shrouded British Isles, where lunacy, murder and suicide were à la mode. Shakespeare's works were in revival, and Sir Walter Scott was the most popular writer of the age. Although one anonymous reviewer observed, accurately, that Scott had "...ministered immensely to the diseased craving for mere amusement...", no writer surpassed Scott for sweeping, fancy-dress history and scenic opulence. Writing in 1838, historian Thomas Carlyle called Scott "...the universal reading...by all ranks, in all European countries," in an age that was "altogether languid, without any skepticism or faith."

English melodrama was perfectly suited to Italian opera. "Scott was a stranger to the struggles of his time," writes critic Gary Schmidgall, "and so, too, was the world of *bel canto*." Donizetti, for one, recommended to librettists the works of "Saksperre, Bayron, Bulwer Litton or Valter Scott," and the ambrosial result is what James Robinson, director of NYCO's new production of Lucia, refers to as "the beauty trap." Any coloratura

soprano who can successfully negotiate Lucia's vocal flight from sanity need not plumb psychological depths to mesmerize her listeners. Donizetti's music lifts her—and us—out of reality, up off the stage, into the clouds. We still surrender willingly to these showers of easy sensation, and new productions must resist the beauty trap, says Robinson, to find new relevance—and rediscover old beauties.

For there's more to this madness than good box-office. As a cultural document of the time in which it is created, any work of art signifies more than the sum of its parts. The sheer abandon of a bel canto mad scene, for example, allows madwomen to say things they wouldn't dare say in their right minds, onstage or off. They can shimmy and shake, and make scandalous suggestions—throbbingly ordinary suggestions—about things that secretly drive everyone else crazy, too. That is, they can speak for us. Victorian audiences would find suggestive, indeed, a disheveled woman trembling in a bloody nightgown—all the while attending to her performance in rapt propriety, virtue intact, because the character is nominally "mad," and the trembling woman is "acting." Expressed in Donizetti's dazzling coloratura, Lucia's teetering sanity—along with her quivering desire—would strike the heart directly, bypassing moral checkpoints. For coloratura is the musical essence of a fluttering heart, furious rage, breathless anticipation—anything that quickens the pulse. And the quickening is worth looking into.

Operagoers might thrill to the snappy succession of Arturo's murder, Lucia's madness and death, and Edgardo's suicide, while outside the theater, they grappled badly with the same issues. Punitive laws dating from the tenth century regarding lunacy, murder, even suicide, had begun to seem "revolting to every natural feeling." But only gradually did madness come to be regarded as illness (rather than as demonic possession or moral failing), and then principally as an observable precursor of suicide.

Then, unexpectedly—thunderously—the new science of statistics revealed the incidence of suicide to be lower among women ("the weaker sex") than among men. The acrobatic scramble to explain those numbers away carried well beyond the Romantics, and has always been in vain. This period was harried by a two-tiered frenzy about gender and sexuality. One tier was foreseeably moral. The other was an emerging "science" of medical sexology. Both converged in "the woman question", which nobody really understood, and which frightened everyone. The century's long discourse included

French neurologist Jean-Pierre Charcot's famous public examinations of the "performative hysterical" female body. Englishman Havelock Ellis wrote, "Whenever a woman commits a deed of criminal violence, it is extremely probable that she is at her monthly period...." Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso observed, "...women are big children: their evil tendencies are more numerous and more varied than men's....when they are awakened and excited, they produce results proportionately greater...volatile, capricious, even rampaging...inherently dysfunctional, dangerous even."

We do well to consider the extent to which a character like Lucia grew out of such a culture, and the uses to which she may be put. For, as long as these operatic treasures are performed, we are subject to their power. As recently as 1971, conductor Richard Bonyngue wrote, "The whole tragedy stems from the passivity of Lucia herself—not once did she exert her will to stay the impending catastrophe and inevitable doom...."

There is now a solid body of feminist criticism that aspires to rehabilitate the unfortunate females of the standard operatic canon, by recasting hysteria as a form of resistance, and death as a means of escape. Critic Catherine Clément reimagines Lucia's mad scene in neurologist Charcot's amphitheater, packed with gawking onlookers who "...craned their necks and their eyes bugged out, all the better to see...the woman spread out, gone wild; to see her breasts bared by madness, her disheveled hair, her lifeless arms hanging, and her faraway gaze....the hysteric turns her body over to anyone who wants to see it, she is somewhere else, in the infinite expansiveness she longs for." The word "hysteria" itself derives from the Greek word for "womb." This is odd coinage for neurological or psychological impairment, as this condition was understood to be, by the nineteenth century. But, descended from a time when "disturbances of the womb" were thought to cause disturbed behaviors, the word "hysteria" perfectly connotes the ancient prejudice that lingers to this day, against women especially, and otherness generally. Feminist historian Elaine Showalter shows how one simple fact—that the Victorian doctor was always a man—influenced not only the treatments for hysteria, but also the medical conclusion that hysteria was the potential condition of all women.

Nevertheless, the Italian psychiatric journal, *Archivio di Psicologia, Neurologia e Psichiatria*, in 1989 reported that the mad scenes in *Puritani* and *Lucia* have "...both

narrative and psychological credibility, and fit into the symptomology of the pathological work of mourning for a lost love object, according to Freud....This mourning involves not only depressive, but also maniacal manifestations...." No mention is made of gender.

Donizetti himself battled debilitating mood disorders throughout his astonishingly productive life. That is, Signor Donizetti may have understood Lucia and her dementia better than Victorian audiences could have imagined, and more than he would have wanted audiences to know. Certainly this *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the *bel canto* style, transcends any limitations of melodrama, virtuosic self-indulgence, or predictable paradigm. And this Lucia's plight continues to stir audiences throughout a wider world, even in the twenty-first century.

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