

The psychiatry of opera

Lucia di Lammermoor

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In the third of this occasional series, Mark Jones looks at Donizetti's 1835 masterpiece *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Some 40 years had passed since the death of Mozart, and Donizetti had made a name for himself with *Anna Bolena* and *L'Elisir d'Amore*. His music is certainly more fragile than Mozart's and his originality lies in his use of melody which is masterfully constructed to evoke humour, sentimentality and tragedy. In *Lucia* his musical canvass is, perhaps, the greatest he ever painted. Based on a story by Sir Walter Scott, it tells of the love of Lucia for Edgar of Ravenswood, who is the last of a rival household. In order that the Lammermoors' fortunes can be retrieved, Lucia's brother, Lord Henry Ashton, arranges for her to marry a politically influential figure, Lord Arturo Bucklaw. Ashton arranges that a forged paper indicating the infidelity of Lucia's lover is passed to her. She believes herself deserted and unwillingly consents to marriage with Bucklaw. On sealing the contract with her signature at the wedding, Edgar appears, having returned from France to claim his Lucia. Convinced that she has betrayed his love he damns her and throws the ring she gave him at her feet. The effect of this is to drive Lucia insane, she slays her husband and dies of her sorrows. Edgar waits to duel with Lord Ashton outside the castle. But Ashton flees, leaving Edgar in solitude. Edgar is then told by a procession of Lucia's death. He kills himself in sorrow.

Late 18th century ideas on madness and murder

To what extent the original author or the librettist, Cammarano, knew of the causation of madness we do not know. The first psychiatric journal, Moritz's *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* was in press from 1783, and Sir Alexander Crichton (1763–1856), having little use for other 18th century classifications, published his own two volume work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Mental Derangement*. He looked to continental literature for some

case histories. Crichton was the first writer in English on the forensic aspects of psychiatry and observed that murder was often committed from despair and, he thought, hid the bid for suicide. He drew the important conclusion that not even "... a madman commits a voluntary act without a motive". Although madness was more public at the turn of the 19th century than it is now, the understanding of it was more obviously rudimentary. Public awareness must have been such that people were aware of irrational acts being committed by individuals in a state of mental derangement. Donizetti's music for the 'mad scene' in *Lucia* is extraordinary and clearly is meant to be a statement relating to Lucia's mental state. What this actually could be is difficult to say precisely, but first I need to draw attention to Crichton's insightful thoughts on murder.

"Another very common termination of despair is murder. A person may be determined to this act by a variety of thoughts; a melancholic person may falsely imagine that his relations and friends are combined to ruin him, or kill him; his fears and anger point them out as objects of revenge; if it proceeds from poverty, he may consider the destruction of his wife and children as a means of liberating them from pain. A person driven to despair by disappointment, or persecution, is stimulated to murder, in general, from a kind of passion approaching to the nature of revenge, as in the case of disappointed lovers. *But there is another very frequent cause of murder in such people. I mean a strong inclination which they have to terminate their own existence.*" (My italics.)

Lucia's madness – an understandable reaction to stress?

The internal evidence in *Lucia di Lammermoor* is all we have to go on when considering the heroine's fate. Her environment is claustrophobic, caught as she is

in an isolated castle with only a handmaid to confide in. Her brother's hatred of Edgar is known to Lucia, who in turn has her singular hope crushed by a false letter. She is now abandoned and alone. Her suffering, however, does not go unnoticed by the chaplain, Raimondo, as she signs the marriage contract. The librettist in his instructions says that as she signs she is beside herself with misery and fear, and Lucia sings "I have signed my death warrant". We can sympathise with her dilemma through the music and what she sings. The structure of opera allows characters to step outside their social context and make a direct statement from the heart. When Edgar bursts in Lucia "falls unconscious" and on regaining her senses sings "I had hoped my fright and horror might have cut short my life, but death has not come to my aid, I live still, and to my sorrow . . . I would weep but cannot, even tears forsake me." The libretto and the music give us access to her secret thoughts.

Any production of this opera should attempt to create a feeling of oppression and effectively show the nightmarish catastrophe with which this young woman is confronted. The recent Opera 80 touring production was a fine solution in this respect, using a small raised space and evocative foot-lighting. The mental anguish must be put across in a way that makes her subsequent behaviour understandable; we must see that recourse to madness is better than continuing to face an emotionally violent reality.

The mad scene

Act II scene ii takes place in the Great Hall of Ravenswood Castle. Raimondo enters and informs the party guests that Lucia has murdered her husband. He says, "She fixed her eyes upon me . . . 'Where is my husband?' she asked. And a smile flashed across her white face! Unhappy girl she has lost her wits." Lucia then appears, dishevelled and distraught. Her nightdress is covered with blood. In the florid coloratura aria which follows Lucia sings of recent events, imagining her true lover with her and anticipating marriage. She relives the rejection and asks to die. Her mental state with its deranged thoughts is given vocal presence by the use of florid musical language, accompanied at times with flute, which doubles the vocal line. It needs a highly accomplished soprano to give the music the emotional intensity it needs if it is not simply to become an empty vocal display. Lucia moves as if in a dream-like state through the crowd, apparently oblivious to it, then collapses.

Lucia and ICD-10

If I were to hazard a guess as to what is happening to Lucia, she is, perhaps, experiencing a post-traumatic



Lucia di Lammermoor: Linda Clemens as Lucia in the 'mad scene' (Opera 80).

stress disorder or acute stress reaction. She certainly appears dazed and disorientated and shows impaired ability to comprehend and answer questions. There is purposeless overactivity and agitation, and finally she lapses into stupor. Characteristically, the symptoms followed two catastrophic events, i.e. her denouncement by Edgar and the murder of her new husband. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is a new category in ICD-10, although previously present in DSM-III. The major difference from ASR is that it is usually delayed, as in American Vietnam veterans. Typically the syndrome involves reliving the trauma, intrusive memories or 'flashbacks', and vivid nightmares. Emotionally the patient feels numb and he is hyperaroused. Fugue-like states can occur in both.

Whatever Lucia's late 18th century model for her operatic behaviour Donizetti's creation is a striking portrayal of someone in mental torment which has resonances in both past and present psychiatric literature. Lucia, for all her 19th century melodrama, is an understandable case history with modern parallels.