Study Guide

LUCIA DI LAMMERMoor

A Tragic Drama in Three Acts

by

Gaetano Donizetti

Libretto by

Salvatore Cammarano

Based on the novel by Sir Walter Scott

The Bride of Lammermoor

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THE CAST

Enrico Ashton, Lord of Lammermoor......................................................... Baritone
Lucia Ashton, his sister................................................................. Soprano
Edgardo, Master of Ravenswood......................................................... Tenor
Lord Arturo Bucklaw, Lucia’s bridegroom........................................ Tenor
Raimondo Bidebent, a priest and Lucia’s tutor...................................... Bass
Alisa, Lucia’s companion................................................................. Mezzo-Soprano
Normanno, Head of Lammermoor Guard............................................. Baritone

Retainers and Servants, Wedding Guests................................................. Chorus

SETTING

The grounds and halls of Lammermoor estate and the graveyard of the Ravenswoods, Scotland.
Set during the reign of William and Mary in the late 17th century.
THE STORY

ACT I

Enrico's men search his castle grounds for a trespasser. Enrico decries his sister Lucia's refusal to marry the wealthy Arturo to save the family’s fortune. Lucia's elderly tutor, Raimondo, suggests that grief over her mother's death has made her unable to love, but Normanno, captain of the guard, reveals that Lucia has been discovered in a tryst. He suspects the trespasser is none other than Enrico’s mortal enemy Edgardo. Near her mother's tomb Lucia awaits a rendezvous with Edgardo. Edgardo arrives and explains that he wishes to reconcile with Enrico so he and Lucia may marry. Lucia, knowing her brother will not agree, begs Edgardo to keep silent. He agrees and the lovers seal their vows by exchanging rings.

ACT II

Enrico plots with Normanno to force Lucia to marry Arturo. Lucia is shown a forged letter stating that Edgardo is pledged to another. Crushed, she longs for death, but Enrico insists upon her marrying. As Lucia signs the marriage contract, Edgardo bursts in to claim his bride. Seeing Lucia's signature on the contract, he curses her and rushes from the hall.

ACT III

Enrico confronts Edgardo, and they agree to duel. The wedding festivities halt when Raimondo announces that Lucia, insane, has stabbed and killed Arturo. Disheveled and unaware of what she has done, Lucia wanders in imagining herself married to Edgardo, then collapses. Guests leaving Lammermoor Castle tell Edgardo the dying Lucia has called his name, but as he rushes to her side Raimondo arrives to tell of her death. Resolving to join Lucia in heaven, Edgardo stabs himself.

THE END
Gaetano Donizetti was born in 1797 in the town of Bergamo in Northern Italy. He had the great fortune to be the student of Johann Simon Mayr, a Bavarian composer and teacher who was a leading figure in the development of serious opera in Italy. After this strong compositional foundation, he attended the conservatory in Bologna and studied with teachers that Rossini had worked with just a few years before. And, like Rossini, he ended up in Naples working for the Teatro San Carlo after proving himself with the success of one of his early operas in Rome. His work in Naples included a professorship at the Naples conservatory, but during these years he frequently had the opportunity to write operas for various theatres throughout Italy: in Milan, Palermo, Florence and Rome. It was his opera Anna Bolena, about the second wife of Henry VIII that shot him to fame with its production at the Teatro Carcano in Milan. The opera was so well thought of that it was repeated in Paris and London and generated in those cities a demand for more of the composer’s works. By the early 1830s Donizetti was an international figure.

This brings us to the period immediately prior to the composition of Lucia. At this time Donizetti was associating himself with the greatest singers of the age: the sopranos Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran, the tenor Giovanni Rubini, the baritone Giorgio Ronconi and the bass Filippo Galli. These singers were the true operatic superstars of their day. In 1835 he was invited to Paris where he had the opportunity to write his first opera for a French audience. While there he absorbed the international flavor of that city, meeting some of the greatest composers and artists of the day, including Frederic Chopin.

Returning from Paris to Naples, he embarked on the score for Lucia di Lammermoor, intended for the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, the center of most of his activity. For this opera he was going to have two more great singers in the cast: the soprano Fanny Persiani and the tenor Gilbert Duprez. But the management of the theatre was badly run, there were delays in the promised libretto, and Donizetti was getting increasingly impatient. He was finally paired with the great librettist Salvatore Cammarano, with whom he wrote a number of further operas and who himself became one of the important early librettists for Giuseppe Verdi. Cammarano took Donizetti’s chosen subject, The Bride of Lammermoor, and reduced it to its most basic plot. In the process some important characters in the Scott original were lost, but the story was tightened and made far more dramatic in its overall impact. Donizetti completed the score in six weeks getting it ready for the stage in time for its premiere on September 26, 1835. In the midst of the flurry of compositional activity during that summer, the King of Naples fired the entire management of the theatre and funding for the company was lost and then mysteriously restored. But all went well on opening night, and Lucia was an instant success.

Success was probably due as much to the greatness of the singers as it was to Donizetti’s brilliant score. Persiani was in fine voice and her performance of the famous mad scene brought the audience to near frenzy. Duprez was similarly well received, as it was this tenor who began
taking high Cs from the chest voice rather than from the weaker, ethereal head voice preferred by earlier tenors. The excitement and drama of the sound was hard to resist and by the 1840s every Italian tenor was copying him, making it possible for Verdi to write some of his most demanding tenor roles.

The opera captured the imagination of the Romantic audience, fulfilling their demand for gothic stories, supernatural chills and fine singing all at the same time. And although the opera went through a period of nearly fatal cuts by well-meaning producers, it has survived intact and is performed today to universal acclaim by singers who can meet Donizetti’s vocal and dramatic demands.

After the success of Lucia his operas continued to conquer Europe, with one great opera house after another producing his ever popular works. But in 1835 his life took a personal turn towards tragedy, with both his parents dying within weeks of each other, and his wife Virginia dying of cholera during a frightening epidemic. On top of that, none of his three children lived beyond a few days after birth and he himself was diagnosed with syphilis. We notice that he set himself a frantic pace for work during his last years before the effects of the disease began to interrupt his daily life in 1844. In that time he composed Roberto Devereux, La favorite, La fille du régiment, Maria Padilla, Linda di Chamounix, Dom Sebastien and Don Pasquale. He lasted four long and painfully tragic years suffering terribly with the effects of his illness, in and out of sanitariums until 1848 when he finally died.
THE BRIDE OF LAMMERMOOR: SIR WALTER SCOTT

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was the most influential novelist of his time. His works inspired such disparate artists as the Brontë sisters, Victor Hugo and Alexander Pushkin. It seems that during his lifetime, everyone was reading his novels. Scott was so prolific and so universally read in his own time that he made quite a living for himself. From his teenage years he was fascinated with the lore, ballads and legends of his native Scotland and he, like his contemporaries the Grimm Brothers in Germany, collected these materials with great enthusiasm. He was especially drawn to stories of the Middle Ages, stories of knights in shining armor, ladies in distress and tales of the crusades. He was also fascinated by the Reformation era in Scotland, the deposing of the last Stuart King, James II and the accession of William and Mary in the 17th century. The bloody feuds of this period, the attempt by James to force England back to Catholicism and the last gasp attempt of Scotland to have its own identity apart from England were all part of the history and atmosphere of The Bride of Lammermoor, published in 1819.

In this novel Scott seems to have made a conscious effort to write something quite different from other of his novels like Ivanhoe, published at about the same time. The Bride of Lammermoor is dark and Gothic with supernatural elements and bizarre turns of events that stimulated the imaginations of 19th century readers. Scott is at his best dealing with these more grotesque elements of the novel, especially in his descriptions of the brooding Scottish landscape and the ruined family castle of the Ravenswoods, Wolf’s Crag. These elements are all part and parcel of the Romantic spirit, of which Scott was both purveyor and wide-eyed consumer. Here is the description of the funeral of the Lord of Ravenswood at the moment that his son Edgar, the hero of the novel, gives his father over to the grave:

In the countenance of the young man alone, resentment seemed for the moment overpowered by the deep agony with which he beheld his nearest, and almost his only, friend consigned to the tomb of his ancestry. A relative observed him turn deadly pale, when, all rites being now duly observed, it became the duty of the chief mourner to lower down into the charnel vault, where mouldering coffins showed their tattered velvet and decayed plating, the head of the corpse which was to be their partner in corruption. He stept to the youth and offered his assistance, which, by a mute motion, Edgar Ravenswood rejected. Firmly, and without a tear, he performed that last duty. The stone was laid on the sepulchre, the door of the aisle was locked, and the youth took possession of its massive key.

Such atmospheric weren’t lost on contemporary readers and not just in the British Isles. The whole of Europe was reading Scott’s novels in translation and he was particularly inspiring to Italian composers of opera, whose essentially Romantic art form was starving for such scenarios. Other works by Scott which have been used as a source for opera are: The Lady of the Lake (Rossini, 1819), Guy Mannering (Boildieu, 1825, as La dame blanche), Rob Roy (Flotow, 1836), The Heart of Midlothian (Carafa, 1829), Ivanhoe (Marschner, 1829; Pacini, 1832; Nicolai, 1840; Sullivan, 1891), Kenilworth (Auber, 1823; Donizetti, 1829) and The Fair Maid of Perth (Bizet, 1867).

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MADNESS: AN OPERATIC EPIDEMIC

There has always been a fascination from opera audiences with the affliction of ‘madness,’ where the hero or heroine of the opera loses all sense and retreats into their own mind. From the torment of losing one’s own true love to suffering bouts of illness, these situations of madness in opera most often come in the form of vocal fireworks and a theatrical showcase for the protagonist.

The first Mad Scene to exist in opera came from Orlando (1733) by George Fredrick Händel, wherein the protagonist, King Orlando, goes mad with love for a shepherdess. When she returns his love, he ends up returning to sanity. From this first example, there are other composers and authors alike that took madness as a trait popular with audiences. It was not until the 19th century that it would come to be a perfected art.

Gaetano Donizetti became the master of mad scenes, having written no less than five operas that featured such scenes. It was Lucia di Lammermoor that would come to crown them all, a mad soprano singing a breath-taking coloratura aria in her blood soaked wedding dress, just having killed her betrothed only moments before. Her lost sanity is portrayed by a lone flute, which she sings to as though it were a real person. During Donizetti’s time, there was a glass harmonica used to also portray her madness.
STUDENT/CLASS ACTIVITIES

Before the Opera

Music/History Classes

Donizetti composed *Lucia di Lammermoor* during what is now known as the Bel Canto period. Research this period in operatic history, what type of singing it entailed, and other famous composers that created work in this style.

Class Discussion after the Opera

1. What did you like about the opera? What did you dislike?
2. What did you think about the sets, props, and costumes?
3. If you were the stage director, would you have done anything differently? Why?
4. What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations? Was it better or worse than you expected?
5. What did you think of the singers’ portrayal of their characters?
6. Which singer was your favorite? Why? Describe him/her.
7. What did you think about the characters? Did you like or dislike them? Explain.
8. What was your personal favorite character? Why?
9. What is the plot line of the opera?
10. What would be your summary of the opera?
11. Did you understand the performance? Explain any aspects that were hard for you to understand?
12. What is your favorite part of the opera?
13. *Lucia di Lammermoor* is a story that tells of love denied between Lucia and Edgardo. What other stories can you think of that focus heavily on unrequited love? Why are these so popular?
14. The most famous of all operatic mad scenes appears in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. What elements (musical and otherwise) were used to portray the loss of Lucia’s senses? Is there anything you would have added to the portrayal?
15. Rate the opera from 1-10.
WHAT IS OPERA?

In many ways an opera is like a play or a movie. Actors tell an audience a story by pretending to be characters in a situation, often with costumes, props, and scenery to help define the time and place of what is happening. The big difference is in an opera the words are sung, often accompanied by one or more instruments, like a piano or even a whole orchestra.

What’s the difference between opera and musicals?

There are two big differences between opera and musicals. Firstly, in musicals actors frequently have scenes without singing where lines are spoken. In opera, however, nearly all the lines are sung. Secondly, the style of singing is different. In a musical, singers work with microphones and speakers to amplify or make their voices louder so they can be heard easily in large theaters, like they do in pop recordings or in church. But in an opera, singers have to fill large theaters with their voices without amplification, and they often have to singing louder, over large group of instruments, and for longer periods of time in one breath than would be required in a musical. As a result, opera singers tend to sing louder, and with a different tone, or sound, than you’re used to hearing or could do yourself without years of special training. Despite these differences, operas and musical theater shows have a lot in common, and the two art forms have existed side-by-side throughout history.

How is an opera made?

Creating operas is done through lots of teamwork, with many people working hard to create one work of art.

The Composer and Librettist

First, a librettist will identify a story he or she wants to tell, and write a libretto (Italian for “little book”), like the script in a play, containing all the words that will be sung in the opera. Often this libretto will adapt a story that is very popular among audiences in another genre, like a play, a book, a piece of mythology, or a historical event. Just like adapting a book to a movie, the librettist has to make choices about what to include and what to leave out so that the story will work well in a theater. Most importantly, however, he or she has to come up with words that work as lyrics, not just as sentences. This includes devices like rhyming, alliteration, and lines with similar numbers of syllables.

A composer will then take the words and start setting them to music, deciding what notes the singers will sing and what the instrumentalists will play, using the music to enhance the drama of the words and situation. Once the score (a book containing all the musical notes and words together) is finished it gets handed off to a creative team that make the composer and librettists’ ideas a reality.
The Theatre Team

A director, set, costume, lighting, and makeup designers decide how the action will happen across the stage, what the scenery and costumes will be, what colors and types of lights to use in different scenes, and how the appearance of the actors will be altered to make them look like their characters, all to draw the audience into the story. Carpenters, painters, seamstresses build the sets and costumes, electricians hang and connect lights above and on the sides of the stage.

The Performers and Audience

Finally, all these elements come together with singers (who have to memorize their parts, just like actors), a conductor, and instrumentalists working together to present the opera. The team rehearses for weeks, making sure all the actors know their parts individually and together, coordinating and balancing the sound from the singers and the instrumentalists, and practicing the changes of scenery, costumes, and lighting. Finally, after much work, the opera gets enjoyed by an audience who may find themselves rapt with attention or cheering.