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MDLLE. TITIENS, OF HER MAJESTY'S OPERA.



# LUCREZIA BORGIA

## various versions and performance history

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LUCREZIA BORGIA was the third of five operas that Donizetti composed for La Scala. Since two other operas had been composed for lesser houses, ANNA BOLENA for the Teatro Carcano, and L'ELISIR D'AMORE for the Teatro Canobbiana, it was also the fifth of seven that he composed for Milan. The others were CHIARA E SERAFINA in 1822, UGO CONTE DI PARIGI in 1832, GEMMA DI VERGY in 1834 and MARIA PADILLA in 1841.(1) With the exception of the delightful and ever popular ELISIR, LUCREZIA BORGIA was easily the most successful of these works. It long rivalled both LUCIA and LA FAVORITE in popularity, had literally thousands of productions and probably over 20,000 performances. Yet it almost never came to pass, since the management of La Scala had orginally contracted with Saverio Mercadante for the composition of the opening opera of the Carnival season of 1833-34. However, Teodoro Gottardi, the manager of La Scala who had signed the contract with Mercadante, was shortly thereafter fired for incompetence by the Director of the theatre, Duke Carlo Visconti. The Duke took over the management of the theatre personally and signed Donizetti to another contract to compose the opening work of the coming season without telling him, perhaps because he did not know about the previous contract. Donizetti soon found out, and also learned that the librettist, Felice Romani, was working on an entirely different text for the rival composer. Mercadante had originally planned to write an opera about Sappho, the poetess from the Greek island of Lesbos. Unfortunately for him,Henriette Meric-Lalande, the prima donna who would have created the title role, did not like the subject, and an alternate plot had to be found. This turned out to be Victor Hugo's 'Lucrèce Borgia', which had been quite successful in Paris earlier that year. This situation, with two subjects under consideration, and two rival composers under contract, both to write an opera for the same evening would seem to have been enough of an imbroglio to become the subject of an'opera buffa'.

Yet it seems to have been settled amicably, although the reasons for a happy ending to such a touchy and difficult situation are unclear. One possibility is that Mercadante dropped out willingly because he had recently been appointed 'maestro di cappella' at the Cathdral of Novara. This was then considered one of the most important musical posts in Italy and Mercadante may well

have felt that the composition of a new work would interfere with this assignment. Alternatively, he may simply not have been interested in the story of Lucrezia Borgia, especially since his preference for Sappho was well known. Perhaps, and most likely of all, Visconti initiated the change, pointing out that the libretto of choice was of greater interest to Donizetti than it was to Mercadante, and further suggesting that he postpone his engagement till the following autumn. Mercadante probably had no objection to this for the previously stated reasons.

Strangely he never did set Sappho, which subject was set some years later by another leading composer of the period, Giovanni Pacini, and SAFFO turned out to be one of the most successful and popular operas of the mid-nineteenth century.

Romani learned of the change of composer and subject on October 10, 1833 and was less than enthusiastic, since it meant that he would have written two texts and got paid for only one. This problem was also straightened out by the diplomatic Duke - apparently to Romani's satisfaction as he proceeded with his task. The libretto and the score must have been worked on concurrently, since the former was only finished on November 26 and rehearsals started on December 3, and not even Donizetti could have finished an opera in a week.

As the rehearsals began, a whole new set of problems began to surface. Some were due to the strict Milanese censorship, but the tactful and influential Duke had little trouble settling them. More difficult, and more lasting, were those caused by the prima donna who did everything she could to live up to the reputation for intransigence that had been earned by similar stars. Specifically, she was most upset about not having been provided with the customary final bravura aria. It had been an operatic tradition for a number of years to include such an aria for the prima donna (on rare occasions another singer would get this aria) and Méric-Lalande insisted on her prerogatives. Donizetti and Romani had wanted to end the opera with Gennaro's death, feeling that it would be repellent and dramatically ineffective to have a mother sing a bravura aria over the body of her son, killed by a poison she had administered. Needless to say, Méric-Lalande won, and it was to be a few more years before it was possible to write a successful serious opera in Italy without such an aria.

In spite of all the problems, the great day arrived on schedule, but everything did not go off smoothly. The "Barbiere di Siviglia", one of the leading Milanese theatrical journals of the period, described the performance as "un naufragio"(a shipwreck - a term that was then in common use for failures) and laid the blame entirely on the cast rather than the music. The paper suggested that only Marietta Brambilla - the creator of Maffio Orsini - acquitted herself honourably. As it was, the rest of the premiere cast did leave quite a bit to be desired. Méric-Lalande's voice was already in decline, the tenor Francesco Pedrazzi - although generally respected - was not in the same league as Gilbert-Louis Duprez, Giovan-Battista Rubini,



Domenico Donzelli or Giovanni Basadonna. The bass, Luciano Mariani, was a fine singer, but no Antonio Tamburini or Luigi Lablache. Yet, as the season progressed, the opera began to fare somewhat better and eventually reached a total of 33 performances by the time it came to an end on March 21, 1834. In spite, in fact, of its 33 performances, LUCREZIA BORGIA apparently did not please enough in Milan to warrant an early re-hearing elsewhere in Italy (2) and lay buried for nearly three years before it was given again (apparently still as LUCREZIA BORGIA) (3) at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence on October 13, 1836. This time it pleased, and it was given at Livorno, Brescia and Genoa in 1837.

Its first production under a new title took place in Trieste on October 2, 1838 when it was given as ALFONSO, DUCA DI FERRARA, but without a change in the names of the characters or the locale. Censorship problems seem to have begun at about this time, since there is a libretto of the opera in the Library of Congress with the title EUSTORGIA DA ROMANO, stating that it was printed in 1838, but, unfortunately without giving the name of a city or theatre. There is, however, no indication of any performances taking place under this name until 1841 (the performance at the Teatro Alfieri in Florence on November 12, 1838 that Loewenberg states as having been EUSTORGIA is reviewed by the theatrical journals as LUCREZIA BORGIA (4)). Other titles that were used in later years include GIOVANNA I DI NAPOLI, ELISA DA FOSCO, LA RINNEGATA, DALINDA, and NIZZA DE GRENADE. This same libretto of EUSTORGIA DA ROMANO also suggests that the first revisions to the score were made as early as 1838. While the libretto does not give a city or a theatre it does give the following cast:

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| Eustorgia (Lucrezia) | Fanny Maray |
| Mario Oldini (Maffio Orsini) | Teresa Cresci |
| Gennaro | Nicola Ivanoff |
| Ezzelino Tiranno di Padova (Alfonso) | Sebastiano Ronconi |

Ivanoff was in Paris during the 1837-38 and 1838-39 seasons, but may well have sung in Italy during the spring and summer of 1838. Sebastiano Ronconi sang in Novara during the Carnival of 1838, and in Verona and Venice during the spring, leaving the summer as a possible time for this production, if, in fact, it did take place. The three principal changes in this Library of Congress libretto are as follows:

1. The replacement of the duet for Gennaro and Orsini at the beginning of the second act by an aria for Gennaro "T'amo qual s'ama un angelo" (note that the text "T'amo qual dama un angelo" used in the Bonynge version is probably due either to a typographical error or an illegible letter in the score. Incidentally, Jeremy Commons' liner notes to this recording identify the aria as having been sung by Ivanoff.)

2. The addition of Gennaro's "Madre se ognor lontano" just before the end of the opera.

3. The replacement of Lucrezia's cabaletta finale "Era desso il figlio mio" by an ensemble starting with the words "Ah Sole ti vela".

The text of this ensemble is as follows:

Tutti
Ah Sole ti vela,
Di tenebre oscure
Al guardo mi cela
L'Amor di mie cure.
Se il barbaro lato
Mio figlio ha involato,
D'angoscia d'affanno
D'orrore morrò *

Coro
Oh caso terribile
Oh eccesso funesto
Mistero incredibile,
Che sento è mai questo,
Al duol che l'opprime
Più regger non sà.

These were not the last of the changes to be made to the score. The cabaletta "Si voli il primo a cogliere" was added for the Milan revival in 1840, and additional changes were made for the Paris premiere that same year. As it turned out, the opera was rarely performed in any of Donizetti's several versions during the nineteenth century. Gennaro's new act II aria and the closing ensemble disappeared from view, and most tenors replaced the Gennaro/Orsini duet with an aria of their choice. Mario, who particularly liked the role, usually sang an aria composed for him by Lillo. Many other singers inserted "Deserto in terra" from Donizetti's DON SEBASTIANO; still others (Angelo Masini, another famous Gennaro in particular) used an aria from Mercadante's LE DUE ILLUSTRI RIVALI. The closing "Era desso il figlio mio" was usually reinstated, being sung after Gennaro's "Madre se ognor lontano".

Vicenza and Rome also heard LUCREZIA BORGIA in 1838. Then, in 1839, the opera was finally heard outside Italy, with productions in Vienna, London, Budapest, Madrid, Berlin and Seville. Nevertheless, LUCREZIA BORGIA had been off to an unusually slow start during the first six years of its life, being heard in fewer than a dozen Italian cities between 1833 and 1839. In comparison, IL FURIOSO, which also dates from this period (1833), had been heard in well over 70 Italian cities in an equivalent six year span. But LUCREZIA BORGIA made up for what it had missed during the 1830's in the 1840's and the several decades thereafter. Having served for Mario's London debut on June 6, 1839, it was his second role at the Théâtre-Italien on October 31, 1840 (not



October 27, as is frequently stated). It was also given in Barcelona, Bratislava and Lisbon that same year. Bologna, Lyon, Valencia, Odessa, Mexico City and Copenhagen all heard it in 1841.

Its U.S. premiere took place in New Orleans on April 27, 1844, and was followed six months later, on November 25, by its New York City premiere. This was at Palmo's Theatre with Euphrosine Borghese, the original Marie in LA FILLE DU REGIMENT, singing Lucrezia. With her in the cast were Pico-Vietti as Orsini, Perozzi as Gennaro and Valtellina as the Duke. It proved to be one of New York City's favourite operas for the next 30 or so years, being sung virtually every year in one theatre or another. Some of the prime donne who sang it in New York during this period include Angiolina Bosio, Rosa Devriees, Henriette Sontag, Marietta Gazzaniga, Giulia Grisi (her U.S. debut at Castle Garden on November 4, 1854 with Mario as Gennaro), Erminia Frezzolini, Teresa Parodi, Balbina Steffenone, Anna De la Grange, Maria Piccolomini. Giuseppina Medori, Therese Tietjens and several others. It was just as popular elsewhere in the United States during this period as it was in New York. By 1863 it had been heard in Boston, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Rochester, Buffalo, Cincinatti, Chicago, St. Louis, Louisville, Charleston, and many other cities in the U.S. as well as in Canada. During the 1860's and 1870's touring companies began to visit India and the Far East, and introduced the work to Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore, Hong Kong, Batavia, Manila and other distant places. Each of these cities, once it heard the opera, took it to its heart, and heard it again and again. Unfortunately annals are available for very few of the world's major operatic centres, but for those where annals in one form or another exist, it is obvious that it was one of the twelve or more most popular operas during the middle of the nineteenth century. This statement is as true of London as it is of Paris, Vienna or St. Petersburg, or, for that matter, of Madrid, Lisbon and Barcelona as it is of Bucharest, Odessa or Constantinople.

This tremendous popularity will come as no surprise to anyone who is familiar with LUCREZIA BORGIA and who enjoys bel canto opera. If there is a mystery it is why the work suddenly dropped out of sight towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the beginning of the twentieth century. But perhaps this can be explained, especially since the opera disappeared in New York, London and Paris well before it disappeared in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Russia. Although it had one solitary performance at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City on December 5, 1904 with Maria de Macchi, Enrico Caruso and Antonio Scotti, it had actually vanished from the New York City repertory about twenty years earlier. Its last production at Covent Garden in London took place in 1888 while Paris last heard it in 1884. On the other hand it was still being given in Lisbon and Madrid until 1903, and in Barcelona until 1904. From 1834 until 1861 Giulia Grisi had been the reigning prima donna in London. Lucrezia Borgia was not only one of her favourite roles, but one of her greatest as well. Nor could the fact that her husband, Mario, liked the role of Gennaro have hurt. Most other leading sopranos

of the day also specialised in the dramatic coluratura repertory, and while they were unable to displace Grisi from her position at Covent Garden, singers like Marianna Barbieri-Nini, Erminia Frezzolini, Rosina Penco, Carlotta Marchisio and Giuseppina Medori were all well known for their interpretation of Lucrezia Borgia and enjoyed singing the role. Even after Grisi's retirement, Therese Tietjens sang the role regularly in London; in fact it was the last opera in which both she and Grisi ever sang. But while Grisi had been regarded as the world's reigning diva up to 1861, the supreme diva for the next 40 years was Adelina Patti, who never sang the role at all - prefering lighter works such as LA SONNAMBULA, IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA, LUCIA, LINDA, LA TRAVIATA and FAUST. Most of the principal prima donnas who followed Patti, especially those with major English careers also tended to emulate her roles. Thus Emma Albani, Nellie Melba, Christine Nilsson, Marcella Sembrich and Luisa Tetrazzini rarely, if ever, sang Lucrezia Borgia, but were famous Aminas, Lucias, Dinorahs or Violettas. The more dramatic voices which sang in London tended towards the Wagnerian repertory, while those singers who continued to sing Lucrezia Borgia, such as Erminia Borghi-Mamo, Carolina de Cepeda, Elena Theodorini, Ericlea Darclée and Carmen Bonaplata-Bau, rarely, if ever, sang in London or Paris. It is interesting to note that, during these years, the opera was given as much for tenors like Julian Gayarre, Roberto Stagno, Angelo Masini, or Francesco Marconi as it was for the previously mentioned sopranos. Then, during and shortly after the First World War, there was a brief series of revivals in Italy and South America with Esther Mazzoleni as Lucrezia and Gigli or Bonci as Gennaro. In fact, between 1890 and 1920, works like LINDA DI CHAMOUNIX, MARIA DI ROHAN and POLIUTO - which had long trailed LUCREZIA BORGIA in popularity - began to approach or surpass it in that respect. The same picture held true until recently, and works like ANNA BOLENA, MARIA STUARDA and ROBERTO DEVEREUX all tended to be given more frequently during the first phase of the bel canto revival.

But the tide seems to be turning, and LUCREZIA BORGIA has shown strong signs of coming back into its own during the last two or three years. It may well be that it will soon resume its erstwhile popularity and well-deserved place in the regular repertory.

NOTES

(1) GIANNI DI PARIGI had its prima at La Scala in 1839, but was not composed for that house.

(2) See TEATRI, ARTI E LETTERATURA of October 25, 1838, p62, which states that the opera did not please in Milan, laid buried for two years and then was revived very successfully in Florence, and was just as successful wherever it was subsequently given.

(3) See TEATRI, ARTI E LETTERATURA of October 20, 1836, p52.

(4) See TEATRI, ARTI E LETTERATURA of November 22, 1838, p94.



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*It will be obvious that these lines are paraphrased from the aria-finale of IL PIRATA, Bellini/Romani, 1827. Ed.

APPENDIX

The following tables will serve to illustrate both the popularity of LUCREZIA BORGIA and its wide diffusion in opera houses all over the world.

Table I gives a list of early performances of the opera in chronological order. It is not complete, but probably includes over 90% of the productions involved.

Table II gives the premiere dates and casts of LUCREZIA BORGIA in a large number of countries, cities and theatres. Again it is incomplete. The work was given in a much larger number of countries and cities than are indicated here. For example, it is almost certain that it was also given in many Caribbean and Central American countries such as Costa Rica, Salvador, Panama, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Trinidad, Haiti and the Dominican Republic; and in South American countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay. Unfortunately, there are no adequate books available on the history of opera in those places, nor did I have access to local newspapers. The theatrical journals only mention seasons there in passing, if at all.

Table III gives runs of LUCREZIA BORGIA in a number of important cities and theatres. These, again, are not necessarily complete. They were selected based both on the importance of the city or theatre and on the availability of enough information to make its inclusion interesting. In some cases, such as for Milan only one theatre (La Scala) is included although the work was given just as often in other houses (such as the Carcano). In other cases, especially where no single theatre in a given city dominated its operatic life, all or most theatres are included. This is particularly true of Sydney, and somewhat less so of Rio de Janeiro. Depending on circumstances they may be arranged either chronologically by city, or chronologically by house. It would have been interesting to be able to include more cities, especially Melbourne, Santiago de Chile and Lima - but the data is not yet available.