AN *IRISH* LUCIA

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Castleward is a mid-eighteenth century "Big House", now owned by the National Trust, situate about thirty miles south of Belfast in beautiful wooded grounds on the shores of Strangford Lough. An opera season is held in June each year within its former stables, a part of which is converted for the occasion into a 200 seat theatre. This ninth Castleward season saw the third appearance on its stage of a Donizetti opera, in this case that *"tragic drama in a Prologue and two acts by Salvadore Cammarano"* (to quote the programme book) which is *Lucia di Lammermoor.*

Castleward Opera receives no state subsidy, and is thus dependent upon the largely voluntary efforts of a group of enthusiasts led by its chief "mover and shaker" Mrs Hilda Logan. In that enthusiasm lies its chief charm, of feeling that one is the guest of someone else, of being made to feel more than welcome by one's hosts, as augmented by the stylish "ambiente" created by fellow guests all in that formal attire which is here the norm.

The Castleward stage is, to say the least, not the most practicable space for either producer or performer, with a narrow front stage platform leading – via a three foot step – up to an equally narrow rear platform. This notwithstanding, a dominant memory of this evening is of Adam O'Neill's costumes and stage sets, in the spirit of the libretto and visually beautiful (not least the opening scene, complete with a running fountain and equisite starry-night effect, which so perfectly encapsulated the mood of "decline and fall" at that scene's dramaturgical heart).

The work of the Director, Seamus McGrenera, bore his characteristic signature in its respect for the exigent demands of the Donizetti vocal line, naturalness of stage movement, and a capacity to pack that tiny unwieldy stage to limits which at times reached the point of genius – the evident fruits of meticulous research. One discerned in this staging a seriousness of purpose and a culture that was "equisitely" Italianate (in the most complimentary sense).

The Castleward orchestra was directed by Michael McGuffin in a "prova" that could not but merit respect. It was not just in the professionalism of this small group of thirty-three freelance musicians put together for the occasion, but also the sensitive orchestral reading, bespeaking a refined sensibility for this early Romantic repertoire which at times brought tears of pure musical joy to these cynical eyes. One felt that here is a directorial talent which deserves a wider diffusion within these islands and, perhaps, in fields further away still...

This writer was attending an evening on 11 June 1993 listening to anglophone singers performing in Italian. Long years of study of singing, both practical and theoretical, had seemingly immunised him to the possibility of ever taking pleasure in hearing the sound of a human voice essay a Donizetti role again. And then, on came a Lucia (Nicola Sharkey) of perfect Italian diction, evidently fully at home both in the language and the vocal style and who was quite excellent in her opening scena. She was joined by an Edgardo (Gavin Sayers), and in due course by an Arturo (Niall Morris), who this amateur tenor had to admit were first-class. The Raimondo (Andrew Hammond) seemed a bit nervous at the start but got better and better as the evening wore on. The Enrico would have benefited both his voice and his interpretation by less consistently wearying loud singing. The local comprimari and the amateur chorus were very fine. And there was still the "Mad Scene" which was staged and interpreted, both singing and acting, to perfection and in the most exquisite good taste. It *should* have brought the house down in the humble but correct view of this listener...

This was an evening when artists had perforce to play within limitations of space, funds and time. Limitations so stringent as to be cruel. It is with sincere pleasure and gratitude that one recognises the extent of their achievement in the pure pleasure which they gave to this Donizettiano, and the reader will forgive him if he feels a modest glow of patriotic pride in the realisation that the source of so much of that achievement was home grown.

Appendix

TALKING ABOUT LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR, OR THE ENLIGHTENING OF A DONIZETTI DEBUTANTE

"You mean to tell me that Lucia di Lammermoor is not by Gaetano Donizetti?"

– Yes, quite true. The libretto (the "little book" of the text, if you like) defines *Lucia* as a

"Tragic drama in (the form of) *a Prologue* * *and two Acts by Salvadore Cammarano with music by Gaetano Donizetti"*. Salvadore Cammarano was the man who wrote the libretto.

"But why should we attach so much importance to the author of the lyrics?"

–Because Cammarano's duties and input were far more than merely writing the book. He was resident poet of the Royal San Carlo Theatre of Naples. His obligations (strictly enforceable in law at the foot of the contract for the production of *Lucia* which bound together Cammarano, Donizetti and the Commission which was responsible for the management of the San Carlo) were many. To wit:

1. To get the sketch–plan of *Lucia* approved by the Neapolitan censors, and having obtained that

2. To prepare the poem and to get it also authorised by the censors, and having obtained that

3. To deliver the authorised version of the poem to the composer by the date laid down in the tripartite production contract; and having delivered which

4. To assume responsibility for the staging of *Lucia* at the theatre, a staging which duly took place on 26 September 1835.

"Ah, yes, the censors. I suppose they were something like those notoriously sensitive Dublin one's of the 1950's who would regularly cut out bleeding chunks of a film, say, because of the naughty bits, and who invariably managed at the same time to cut out any sense of dramatic logic from the film that was their victim?"

–It *is* true, I will admit, that the Neapolitan censorship was just as sensitive to naughty bits as their Dublin successors were to be. But they also perceived a more positive "pro–active" aspect to their role, as "quality controllers" if you like, for the Royal Theatres of Naples. For the Opera House was the recognised venue of the Neapolitans who "counted". When the élite frequented the theatre they could all the more easily be kept under surveillance. So there was a political hidden agenda in ensuring a high performance standard. The Neapolitans saw their role in a more positive light, as promoters of high literary and artistic standards. Positive indeed they were, but they did not entirely lose their zeal for sparing audiences the trauma of disloyalty to *"Their Majesties happily/gloriously reigning"*, to *"Holy Religion"* and so on. Indeed, reading the Codes of Censorship and the veritable litany of "prohibited" and "severely prohibited" items it is a miracle that any opera reached the stage at all, still less one of any artistic merit!

"But what do you mean when you talk about "artistic merit"?"

–Cammarano wrote his libretto in Italian verse, using lines in his poetry of varying metre just as did any other (theatre or non–theatre) poet. As operatic poets go, he ranks as one of the best of the Italian practitioners of that art and it is not surprising to find that the inordinately demanding Giuseppe Verdi for his part was always very respectful to Cammarano in the course of *their* later collaboration. Cammarano's texts are to the point – they say what they have to say economically and they keep moving, in fairness we must say that the historical success of *Lucia* is in large measure due to the outstanding quality of Cammarano's "little book", and which in turn inspired in such generous measure the composer of the music.

To the point and economical the poem most certainly is. But it is also written in that very special highflown language one could call *librettese*. Cammarano's characters don't get married they "ascend the nuptial couch" or they "complete the rites of Hymen". They don't have horses nor do they go to church, they have "steeds" and they "ascend to the sacred temple". In this case, Cammarano makes Edgardo refer to the vanished Lucia in his celestial apotheosis at the end of the opera as *"You who have spread your wings to God"*.

"You say "early Romantic", yet the heroine goes mad and both she and her boyfriend end up as corpses. I should have thought that "Romantic" would have meant that they all lived happily ever after!"

–A fair point! But we are here using the adjective "Romantic" in a musical historical sense (not in *quite* the same way as "Romantic" on *Classic* FM!). The Romantic movement was Europe–wide in the early part of the nineteenth century, ranging from the poetry of our fellow countryman Thomas Moore (inspiration of Hector Berlioz), Byron, Wordworth and Walter Scott (whose novel The Bride of Lammermoor is the literary source for *Lucia*), the music of Weber, or Marschner or Chopin, to the Italian operas of a Bellini or a Donizetti.
The Italian Operatic stage was a restless one constantly in search of innovation and itself in constant evolution, the faithful reflector of changing social attitudes in the "real world" outside. In the case of "early Romantic opera" there was a sea change taking place within the genre of serious scores. Up till now *opera seria* had used plots largely basic on classical legends, "Gods, Heros and Princes" as it were. Now the plots began to concern themselves with recognisable human beings, usually with a woman as the crux of the drama. The outcome was changing too as the Happy Ending (*"lieto fine"*) gave way to the contrary – poisonings and stabbings, suicides, beheadings, faintings and collapses or being thrown to the Lions, to quote just a few from the Donizettian archive.

"I was just beginning to wonder when you'd bring Donizetti in at all!"

–Patience please! Gaetano Donizetti was a freelance professional musician, working in the here and now of a strictly practical musical market place in which there was the most intense competition from the multitude of rivals trying to find an outlet for their work on the stage. In Naples, Donizetti was a "foreigner" carrying an Austrian passport in a Bourbon Kingdom. Even if the two most important theatres enjoyed both royal protection and royal subsidy, in the last analysis it was all down to "market forces" wherin success was measured by the response of the public.

"A very 1990's scheme of things I should have thought"

–Touché! Indeed, all over the Italy of the early nineteenth century the same basics applied, not least the market forces.

"And what sort of "market place" were these theatres in Naples?"

–Demanding, one might say, in terms of consumer expectations! Naples was coming to the end of a period where its theatres and types of opera had been a world leader. Its stages had been adorned by a veritable galaxy of singing stars that had raised its expectations of performance standards to the heights. Elsewhere, an Italian audience might show its appreciation of a performer by throwing a dead cat on the stage or the complaints of the spectators might result in no less than four *prime donne* come and go, in Naples everything was larger than life, the theatres were not much *demanding* as a species of lion's den!

"So how did Donizetti manage to compose for those exigent theatres?"

–He saw his work of composition as, in effect, a process of collaboration with his singers, for it was the quality of their interpretation that made his own work shine out (or not!) in all its glory, and produced (or did not produce) the desired response from the Box–Office. His singers were, of course, extremely highly paid and artists to their finger–tips, equally able to learn roles under pressure as the composer himself was to compose them. Accepted rules of composition greatly facilitated the process, even though music was made to measure for each voice there was an accepted sequence, for example, though the doom that will overtake Lucia is present in the brief Prelude the opera opens with the kind of chorus which fulfils the usual expectations...

"You say that the music was made to measure? I suppose that means that it was done this way to ensure that the singer did not make a fool of himself/herself?

–Far from it! These roles were all vocal torture–racks for the singers, wherein their talents are extended in a subtle but highly effective way. Take Lucia's entrance aria for example: this is not a single piece of music as you might think but has three distinct phases, each scientifically designed to dissect the singer's instrument as surely as a surgeon's scalpel.

Phase one: the *recitative*, in which the interpreter proves her competence in dramatic vocal recitation, in particular the ability to colour the words with her voice;

Phase two: the *cavatina*, a gentle piece of legato singing, by and large in the centre of her vocal range and with no hint of anything but smooth emission. Any serious student will confirm how difficult it is to sustain Donizetti's long-breathed legato...

Phase three: the *cabaletta*. The *pace* quickens and we hear (or we do not hear) the whole prowess of the singer in florid singing and ability to demonstrate the extremes of her voice.

In a broadly similar scheme of things, the other principals are introduced. Various ensembles for the diverse voices in the cast bring the whole opera to its emotional climax of confrontation – the great sextet which closes Act 1 when Edgardo bursts in upon Lucia during her wedding with Arturo. The shocked reaction of all present brings the action to a dead stop and the act terminates with the characteristic boiling apogee of which Donizetti was such a master.

"And the "Mad Scene". How does that fit in?"

–Ah yes, the *"Mad Scene"*! Deservedly famous, for in it the composer portrays a Lucia unhinged by matrimonial misfortune, yet another example, if you like, of the type of cross the Romantic heroine was obliged to bear. Mind you female instability had been a chronic problem since Paisiello's *Nina* had gone "mad for love" towards the end of the eighteenth century but in the course of this Cammarano/Donizetti collaboration the disease started to show morbid complications...
The date of the prima of *Lucia* also has its own significance, it marked the re-opening of the great theatre after its closing for the Novena of San Gennaro, for Novenas, like Lent, Royal mourning, and plagues, caused the theatres to close down.

"San Gennaro!. He is that Neapolitan Saint whose preserved blood liquifies with such miraculous regularity?"

Indeed...

"And how did Lucia make out on her first night?"

–It was "all right on the night"! In Donizetti's own words to the publisher Ricordi *"It has pleased and pleased very much...I was called out many times, and a great many times the singers too..."* And not just in Naples; in a French adaptation it started the Donizettian conquest of Paris that so annoyed Hector Berlioz (who, it must be said in all fairness, cordially detested most Italians); and it pleased the rest of the world too and remained a hardy perenninal of the operatic stage to the extent that at one low point it was the only serious opera of his to continue to be performed. Until 1957 I suppose, at La Scala, when *Anna Bolena* with Maria Callas began the long process of the true "Donizetti Renaissance". The "Renaissance" of those operas (whatsoever the librettist) that boast the accolade of "Music by Gaetano Donizetti".

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*ie *"Atto unico"*. How sad it is, and how characteristic, that this famous score, so musically mangled over the years, should be so seldom allowed its early designation. Now almost casually described as an Opera in Three Acts, its division into *Due Parti*, the first *La Partenza* comprising an Act One (described as *"un solo atto"* or *"Atto unico"* and the single section of that Part – here described, not incorrectly, as a "Prologue"), and the *Parte seconda, Il contratto nuziale* (divided into an *"Atto primo"* and *"Atto secondo"*) could very usefully be re-adopted in this age of vaunted authenticity. Northern Ireland at least has been on the right lines.

Ed.