Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century

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Over the years I have collected a number of lithographs and prints of theatres, actors and opera singers. The larger part of my collection is of scenes from operas given in London from 1800 to 1899. There are well-known operas, some not so well-known, and some which are now completely forgotten. I thought I should like to share some of them with our members, along with press-reports of the period and some observations on the singers: to complement the articles by Douglas Bennett in Newsletters 93 and 94: what better to start with than:

Lucia di Lammermoor

Donizetti's 47th opera did not take long to reach London where it had its first perfrmance st Her Majesty's Theatre on 5 April 1838 with Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani, who had created the role, as Lucia. Edgardo and Enrico were sung by Giovan Battista Rubini and Antonio Tamburini. The review in the Times of 6 April gave the singers a favourable mention but more space was given to the thought that Persiani's dresses were more elaborate than those she wore as Amina, also that the Queen attended and that the theatre was crowded early in the evening. But what amazed me was the review for the opera itself: *"Like other Italian operas, it is rather a succession of scenes than any attempt at a plot of regular drama, the material poor and spiritless in itself by no means good even for Donizetti, who is but of a mediocre school"*. However, it became a favourite with London audiences. A performance on 5 April 1842 was cancelled due to the fact that Persiani had *"left Boulogne in a storm and the passage to England having taken thirty hours Madame Persiani continues to suffer so severely that it is impossible for her to appear"*. The second act of *Gemma di Vergy* and the third act of *Il giuramento* were given instead.

The first performance in an English translation took place at the Princess's Theatre, which stood in Oxford Street, on 19 January 1843 *"with new scenery, dresses and decorations, the principal roles sung by Mr Templeton, Mr Burdini and Madame Eugenia Garcia as Lucy"*. The critics were not kind, one reviewer complaining *"Donizetti's operas forming the grand staple of the lyric theatres of Europe, the great writers of Germany and the better spirits of Italy are almost banished, Rossini is "Philistine" and Mozart "ro coco"* (!). But the performance met with approval and singers were called-out time-and-time again, encores were demanded and met and the theatre was finally cleared when to loud cheers it was announced that there would be further performances. It played in repertory until the end of the season in July 1844.

Donizetti had written a French version for Paris in 1839 of course and on the night of 16 July 1845 this was presented at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane by a Brussels Company led by M. and Mme Laborde. The reviews were good. One said *"a great musical treat"*; another *"Madame Laborde has distinguished herself on several occasions but in Lucie she was quite triumphant, and next to Persiani (who has left a hopeless gap) is, perhaps, the best representative of Scott's exquisite creation"*. The baritone was also singled-out for praise *"M. Laurent Quillerveri's Enrico* (that is: *Henri*) *was*

second only to Tamburini's, and that is the highest praise that can be awarded to the Belgian baritone". M.Laborde, who I presume sang the role of Edgard, was not mentioned.

In 1846 the composer Giuseppe Persiani, with others, purchased the lease of Covent Garden for £35.000 and the house re-opened as The Royal Italian Opera in April 1847, in direct competition with Her Majesty's. Seventeen operas were given that first season, five of them by Donizetti, one being *Lucia* with Madame Persiani, Luigi Salvi as Edgardo and Giorgio Ronconi (who had sung in the premières of seven Donizetti operas) as Enrico. The venture paid off, the public left Her Majesty's in droves to be seen at Covent Garden. But Benjamin Lumley, the lessee of Her Majesty's, had an Ace to play and that Ace was Jenny Lind. Would Jenny turn out to be a wild card? That first season Lumley had to travel to Vienna to persuade her to come to London, even escorting her part of the way. Eventually she arrived on 17 April and made her début on 4 May as Alice in *Robert le Diable*. Later in the season she starred-in Verdi's specially commissioned *masnadieri*. But there were still dangers. Would she sing on the nights scheduled? Would she honour next seasons' contract? An article in the weekly newspaper The Era dated 4 June informed its readers that the previous week a performance of *Lucia* had had to be cancelled due to *"Jenny Lind having the day previously joined the crowd at the races to watch The Oaks* (one of the classic horse races) *and the excitement of the sport induced indisposition and the consequence was that instead of the bursting heart and burning brain of the distraught heroine of Sir Walter Scott, we had instead the plaintive and wit wandering of the Swiss* (sic) *Linda di Chamounix"*. Her last performances were in 1849 when she appeared in six special performances. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert saw all six, twice in *La sonnambula*, once in *La figlia del reggimento* and *Robert le Diable* and twice in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Her operatric career was over.

But Lucia's come and go, and as Jenny Lind was singing one of her last Lucia's so on 28 April another nightingale Catherine Hayes from Limerick in Ireland was the Lucia at Covent Garden, supported by [Giovanni] Mario and Tamburini. Her début in the role had been two days earlier and one review had said *"Her success was well merited and her reading of the part was summed-up as a tender, affecting and truly feminine performance"*

On 6 December 1847 the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, under the management of the impresario Louis Antoine Julien re-opened as a theatre for National Grand Opera. The theatre had been renovated and as one review said *"the filth and dust of ages removed"*. A new drop-curtain had been painted, seats were re-upholstered and the orchestra pit enlarged. This last was augmented by more players and they were conducted by Hector Berlioz. The evening began with one of the overtures Beethoven wrote for *Leonora* which drew *"unanimous applause from the audience"*. The opera which followed, the "Bride of Lammermoor", was sung in English; Lucy was sung by Julie Dorus-Gras of the Académie Royale de Musique of Paris and better known in London on the concert platform; this was her début on the English stage. But the greater interest of the night was the arrival of the young English tenor Sims Reeves as Edgar, direct from La Scala, where he had been appearing to great acclaim in the same role. As one reviewer wrote *"The malediction in the second act was given with a*

degree of intensity that electrified the audience; and the finale to the third act, brought the curtain down amid a perfect hurricane of applause - hats and handkerchiefs were called into requisition, and the audience rose 'en masse' to testify their delight."

To be continued



MDLLE. JENNY LIND, AS "LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR," AT HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE.