Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century

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Lucia di Lammermoor (part two)

From the first performance at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1838 London audiences revelled in a love affair with *Lucia* and in the sixty-two years until 1899 there were only ten or twelve years that the opera was not heard in one guise or another. The opera was given complete, as Donizetti had composed it, at the three main opera houses, in some other theatres parts of the score were deleted and replaced with Scottish Airs and Dances, or, as in one instance, with *songs by Mr.Donizetti and Mr Robert Burns*. Plays

were given and advertised as being "with selected airs from Mr Donizetti's popular opera" but perhaps the most curious version was given at the Prince of Wales Theatre in September 1865. This was advertised as a:

New and Original Burlesque Extravaganza founded on Mr Donizetti's Celebrated Opera, and was entitled "Lucy or The Laird, the Lady and the Lover".

Edgar was sung by Miss Marie Wilton and Lucy by Mr J. Clarke (and no, this is not a printing error!). It must have been a success as it ran in repertory until July the following year.

Sometimes Acts I or III were given as the second offering of an evening's entertainment. This usually happened on a Thursday which came to be known as *Long Thursday* and you would need stamina to attend such an evening. This is what you might expect, as I found from a newspaper review. Commencing at 7.30pm, a complete performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*; this was followed by the one-act farce *La prova d'un opera seria* by Francesco Gnecco, then came a ballet divertissement with a bevy of dancers led by Mlle Lucile Grahn and M.Gontier. There was still more to come: next came a duet from Bellini's *I Capuletti e i Montecchi* and as it was nearing Christmas the evening ended with a pantomime entitled *"Harlequin and the Wild Fiend of California"* . It is no wonder that letters appeared in the press complaining that with the last item of the programme starting at 1.40pm it was only with difficulty that people managed to return to their homes. At one time Gnecco's farce was given before *Lucia*, this brought a scandalous reaction from both the public and the press: as one newspaper pointed-out *"this must not continue, to give a farce before a tragedy is not right or seemly."*

In 1857 the Italian soprano Marietta Piccolomini sang Lucia at Her Majesty's (see illustration). One revewer said:*"her performance as Lucia was so superior to that of her previous efforts not excepting the Traviata"* (she had sung Violetta at the London première the previous year). The review continued: *"Lucia demands at one time the talents of a great tragedian and an accomplished singer, and the young prima donna showed herself to be both"*. Antonio Giuglini as Edgardo was also accorded a good review as he *"created a greater sensation than he has ever done before, and Donizetti's beautiful music displayed to the utmost advantage all the qualities of his exquisite voice"*.

Mlle Piccolomini's popularity was more to do with her youthful appearance than with her acting or singing. Not everyone thought highly of her. The Rev. J.E. Cox in his book Musical Recollections (1872) had this to say of her Lucia: *"by dint of sheer impudence managed to lead the habituées and a very large portion of the public by the nose. As for singing she had not an idea of what the meaning of that accomplishment really was... if it had not been an insult to common sense, whenever she came into contact with a difficulty, the manner of shaking her little head, making a dash at it, and scrambling helter-skelter through it, would have been amusing... She could no more sing a scale than she could move the Monument"*

But this young singer, only twenty-three, was not unduly upset, she was known to have said: *"They call me little imposter, and they give me bouquets, applauses and moneys: why not be little imposter and keep the moneys"*

Three years later in 1860 a performance also at Her Majesty's met with this response in the press: *"The composer wrote many operas subsequent to Lucia which, moreover, was am ementation from the spingtime of his years, but taken as a whole, it must rank as one of the most perfect achievements"*. The soprano who was singing the role for the first time in London had already been heard as *Lucrezia Borgia, Semiramide* and Valentine in*Les Huguenots.* This was the great Thérèse Tietjens of whom it was written that she *"made a very great impression both by her vocal and dramatic power"*.

Since 1847 *Lucia* had been heard at Covent Garden nearly every other year. No opera at all in 1856 and 1857 due to fire and rebuilding. Now in 1861 *Lucia* was once more on stage, this time with a young soprano Adelina Patti. It was her second role, the first having been Amina in *Sonnambula* just eleven days earlier. The role of *Lucia* was repeated the following year, but not happy with the roles offered she left, not returning until 1866 to sing Lucia for the next three seasons and then again in 1879.

The roster of *primedonne* who sang Lucia in the 1800's is like reading a history of the art of opera itself. Singers who remain well-known; singers known only to musical scholars; and some just a distant memory. To name a few: Miss Austin, Maria Nau, Anna Zerr, Alaja Orgeni, Caroline Duprez (daughter of the famous tenor), Mathilde Sessi, Alma Frohström, Jeanne Devries and Ella Russell as well as Christine Nilsson, Marcella Sembrich, Emma Albani and Jeanne Castellan.

One singer who came to London had a reputation for punctuality but also a horror of rehearsals which she hardly ever attended. She was sure to turn-up at the theatre on the evening and at the hour but never thought it necessary when travelling from the continent to give any idea when she might arrive. She had also taken a dislike to the railway station at Cologne where she said that a German Officer had spoken to her without being introduced, On one occasion, to avoid Cologne, she took what she called a short cut: from Vienna she took the train to St.Petersburg, then a boat to Hull. Arriving at the theatre she found another artist already in costume as Lucia and waiting to go on stage. Our diva argued with the impresario; that she was engaged to sing Lucia; she was here on time to sing Lucia; that she would sing Lucia, and she did. Is the story true? I don't know. The singer was the Croatian soprano Ilma di Murska and the impresario Henry James Mapleson, and it comes from his memoirs published in 1888. Sadly he was amiss with the dates but di Murska sang in some of the seasons he gave at the three theatres between 1865 and 1873.

In 1888 a youg artist made her début at Covent Garden as Lucia and did not arouse any great excitement. In fact one press review commenting upon "this tired old warhorse" did not mention her name The young singer was Nellie Melba and in the eleven years until 1899 she sang Lucia in seven of them. And it was Melba who took *Lucia* into the Twntieth Century in 1900 and 1907. There were three performances in 1902 with Regina Pacini and two in 1903 with Erika Wedekind. Louisa Tetrazzini sang *Lucia* in 1907, and then in 1908 and 1909. But the golden days - when in one year alone there were seven different sopranos to be seen and heard - were now at an end. One single revival in 1925 then silence for the next thirty-four years. The love-affair was over.



SCENE FROM "LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR," AT HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE: "LUCIA," MDLLE. PICCOLOMINI; "EDGARDO," M. GIUGLINI.

sang *Lucia* in 1907, and again in 1908 and 1909. But the golden days- when in one year alone there were seven different productions in five different theatres and eight different sopranos to be seen and heard- were now at an end. A solitary performance in 1925 then silence for the next thirty-four years. The love-affair was over.