

AROUND TOWN

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Opera

in all its full-blooded glory

'Lucia di Lammermoor' is a showcase for singers that should prove equally attractive to newcomers to the genre and connoisseurs alike

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Bernard Shaw's quip that in Italian operas the soprano and the tenor want to make love, and the baritone tries to stop them, certainly applies to Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, due to be given its first ever performances in Taiwan in Taipei's National Theater next weekend.

Since Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬), a major opera enthusiast, left the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) in 2007, it's been the Taipei Symphony Orchestra (TSO) who've taken up the slack opera-wise. Tseng Dau-hsiung (曾道雄), who is both conducting and directing *Lucia*, has come up with several colorful productions over the past three years, whether in Taipei's Metropolitan Hall (*Don Giovanni* and an operatic double-bill including *Gianni Schicchi*) or in the National Theater (*Idomeneo* and this current venture).

His style is not to subvert the composers' original intentions, so that what you get is the traditional product, though usually in a fairly dramatic form. "Our aim is not to draw squiggles over the face of the *Mona Lisa*," he says, meaning that he respects the integrity of art and therefore offers it pretty much as originally conceived.

Gaetano Donizetti was an extraordinary figure — syphilitic, later insane, but nevertheless writing 75 operas in 12 years — and *Lucia di Lammermoor* was his most successful serious (as opposed to comic) production. It wouldn't get a place in the world's 20 greatest operas, but it might make it into the top 50.

It amazes us today that so many Italian operas of the 1830s were based on historical novels by Sir Walter Scott. But Scotland was considered as the ultimate romantic destination at the time — mist-shrouded, mysterious, full of feuding families and tragic lovers. In his lifetime Scott was the most successful novelist the UK had ever produced, with his books translated into all the major European languages. During the 1830s he was the height of fashion in Italy.

Scott's novel, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and Donizetti's opera, tell the story of a Scottish family, the Ashtons, living in a remote baronial hall, Ravenswood. They've fallen on hard times, and their only hope is to marry off their daughter Lucy (Lucia in Italian) to a rich friend Arthur (Arturo). Unfortunately for

them, she's fallen for a romantic figure called Edgar (Edgardo), the Ashton's sworn enemy. Considering Edgardo's surname is Ravenswood, and the Ashtons have stolen his castle from him, the enmity is hardly surprising.

Henry (Enrico), Lucia's brother and the villain of the piece, is consequently determined to do everything in his power to thwart the young couple.

The music is the usual Italian mix of high-energy rhythm and romantic melody, though with one difference. Extravagant vocal acrobatics were demanded from the leading soprano in this era, leading to the appellation "bel canto" (beautiful singing) for the period's operatic style. Some people think it's more like a bullfight, with the suffering soprano as the bull gored into ever-more-impossible vocal flights by the callous males around her. *Lucia di Lammermoor* is nonetheless considered to be one of the high-points of the bel canto style.

The opera opens with evocations of the mystery of Scotland, and then of violent conflict. The curtain goes up to reveal Enrico, the wicked brother, horrified to hear that Lucia has been secretly meeting his enemy in the castle grounds. Two fighting arias from Enrico follow, swearing to tear up the youthful love affair by the roots.

Scene Two introduces the women in an outdoor nighttime scene. Lucia sings of a ghost that haunts the spot (there are always ghosts in Scotland). It's an omen of disaster, says her friend and confidante Alisa. No, Lucia retorts, launching into another aria. Her beloved Edgardo is the man for her, come what may.

Edgardo then shows up on cue but announces he has to go to France on a diplomatic mission. Together he and Lucia end Act One by singing of their undying love, launching into what was to become the opera's most famous melody.

In Act Two, Enrico shows Lucia forged letters, supposedly written by Edgardo, that display him as having an affair while abroad. Raimondo, a Calvinist pastor, proves little help to the now distracted Lucia, and with nowhere else to turn, she agrees to go ahead with the wedding to the affluent Arturo.

The marriage ceremony then takes place. But moments afterwards Edgardo

unexpectedly returns from France, leading to a famous sextet where the six main characters simultaneously sing of their determination to hold to their contradictory courses.

Lucia is one of a long line of women in Italian opera caught in impossible situations; Tosca, Butterfly, Gilda, Desdemona, Norma — their distress is as predictable as the routine triangular situation Shaw pointed to.

Here, after Edgardo has cursed Lucia for having broken her promise, she relapses into total madness, and murders Arturo on their marriage bed (an event narrated in the scene following the marriage). Her "mad scene" soon follows, involving the most florid vocal acrobatics of all, to which soloists throughout the opera's history have added their own embellishments, invariably making it even more extravagant and difficult to sing than Donizetti intended.

Naturally Tsang has made certain he recruits someone of high quality for the role of Lucia. Kim Jeong-a is a Korean with a reputation for versatility and strength, and she will sing the role on New Year's Day and on Jan. 3. But soloists can rarely manage three performances of Lucia's music on the trot, so a Taiwanese singer, Tai Hsiao-chun (戴曉君), has been brought in to sing the title role on Jan. 2.

No comparable difficulties afflict tenors, apparently, and Shanghai's Li Jianlin (李建林) will sing Edgardo in all three performances. Enrico will be Taiwan's baritone Wubai Yu-si (巫白玉驪), the Don in the NSO's fine *Don Giovanni* of 2004, as well as many other major roles. The opera will be sung in Italian, with subtitles in Chinese only.

Tsang may be aiming for a traditional rendition but this hasn't stopped him jiggling with the plot. Normanno is a minor character, a huntsman working for Enrico, and the man who brings news of Lucia's secret assignments as the opera opens. He's also the person instructed to fetch Arturo to the castle for the wedding. Yet Arturo subsequently enters the castle alone, and Tsang finds this strange. So he's added some stage business that increases Normanno's importance, and shows him as in love with Lucia himself, giving him an added motive for betraying her secret meetings to her brother.

This is reminiscent of a new scene Tsang devised for the TSO's *Don Giovanni* in 2007 — in that instance he even incorporated extra music from another composer. The result was curious but not over-intrusive. Let's hope that Tsang's improvements this time will turn out to be equally innocuous. Such impulses can become inflated if they're allowed to get out of hand.

In many ways *Lucia di Lammermoor* is typical of the lively, tuneful, vigorous and dramatic creations that Italy spawned throughout the 19th century. The best of them are wonderful indeed, and many of the B-List are well worth dusting down for the occasional revival. They are, of course, in a style of their own, and it's a good idea to get used to its conventions. Even so, this was essentially a popular form, and not the sophisticated "art music" that came to dominate opera in a later period.

Perspectives on this opera, however, have shifted since its original composition. In its day it was considered a story of a wife who killed her husband, an almost unforgivable crime as few things were as threatening to the social order. But Scott and Donizetti's librettist show the extenuating circumstances, and so to an extent challenge traditional assumptions. Today, by contrast, the story seems little different from *Romeo and Juliet*, presenting the fate of two tragic lovers from opposing families.

Occupying the National Theater during the New Year long weekend, this should prove a popular presentation, equally attractive to newcomers to the genre and connoisseurs who will welcome it as the first production of Donizetti's masterpiece in Taiwan. Some of the ticket prices may come as a shock, however.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Taipei Symphony Orchestra, *Lucia di Lammermoor*

WHEN: Jan. 1 and Jan. 2 at 7pm, Jan. 3 at 2pm

WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City Admission, NT\$400, NT\$800, NT\$2,000, NT\$5,000 and NT\$10,000, available through the NTCH box office, online at www.artsticket.com.tw or by calling (02) 3393-9888



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