6 : A Private Lucia

A. In the Picture

1. Class title 1 (Zimmerman and Mitchell *Lucias*)

Last week, with *The Marriage of Figaro*, we had a familiar opera done straight; there was nothing in Sair David McVicar's production that Mozart himself would not have recognized as belonging to his world. Today, we look at another production of a familiar opera at The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) by **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797–1848). But this time the director, **Katie Mitchell** (1964–), although also setting the opera in the century in which it was composed, offers a very unusual approach indeed, as you may guess from the photo of her 2016 production here. But to show you what is unusual, I need to contrast it with an equally brilliant but more-or-less traditional staging. For that, I have chosen the 2009 production at the Met by **Mary Zimmerman** (1960–). It may not be irrelevant that both are women, both began their careers in spoken theater, and both were around 50 when they did their productions.

2. Mitchell and Zimmerman
3. Section title A (Mary Zimmerman's 2009 *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Met)

Mary Zimmerman updates the action to the later Nineteenth Century, rather than the earlier part when Donizetti wrote his opera (1835) or **Sir Walter Scott** (1771–1832) wrote the novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) on which the opera is based. Zimmerman tempers period detail with a strong dash of her own poetic imagination, as in the huge moon shown here, but there is no doubt that she is thinking (entirely appropriately) on the Grand Opera scale, or that she has drunk deep on the essence of Scott's Romanticism. This is what you see when the curtain opens.

4. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammmermoor* (Met 2009), opening
5. Synopsis, Act I scene 1

I'll move on from here to a quick synopsis of the story, illustrated from the Zimmerman production throughout. Scott's novel imagines two rival families living on large estates on the Scottish moors, the Ashtons and the Ravenswoods. In Act I scene 1, set on the Ashton estate, it is revealed that a stranger has been seen on the lands of **Lord Henry Ashton** (**Enrico**). His retainers report that this is his mortal enemy **Edgar of Ravenswood** (**Edgardo**) and suspect him of meeting Enrico's younger sister Lucy (**Lucia**).

6. Synopsis, Act I scene 2

In Act I scene 2, elsewhere on the estate, Lucia meets Edgardo in secret. He says he must go abroad for a while. The couple exchange rings, considering that tantamount to an actual rite of marriage.

7. Synopsis, Act II scene 1

Act II opens in the Ashton house. Enrico, concerned that financial losses and recent political changes threaten his family's ruin, has arranged Lucia's marriage to a wealthy bridegroom, **Arthur Bucklaw** (**Arturo**). He manipulates her into compliance with a forged letter implying Edgardo's infidelity.

8. Synopsis, Act II scene 2

We move immediately to the betrothal ceremony in a reception room in the house, attended by all the family retainers. Lucia has just signed the wedding contract when Edgardo storms into the room. After a stand-off that is the occasion for the famous Sextet, he denounces Lucia and is driven out of the house..

9. Synopsis, Act III scene 1

The opening scene of Act III (traditionally omitted in older productions) takes place at the splendidly-named **Wolfscrag**, the Ravenswood house. Enrico visits Edgardo during a storm, and challenges him to a duel the next day at his family's graveyard.

10. Synopsis, Act III scene 2

The second scene of Act III begins with Enrico Ashton's guests celebrating Lucia's wedding to Arturo, after the couple have retired upstairs. **Raymond Bide-the-Bent**, the family chaplain (**Raimondo**) interrupts the festivities to say that Lucia has murdered her husband. When she appears, covered in blood, it is clear that she has gone mad and believes she is celebrating her wedding to Edgardo.

11. Synopsis, Act III scene 3

The final scene takes place at the Ashton graveyard, where Edgardo comes , fully expecting to die. He is told first that Lucia is calling for him on her deathbed, and then that she has died. He kills himself to be with her. I don't want to leave you with a mere synopsis of the Zimmerman production, so I will give you the opera's two most famous scenes—the Sextet and the opening of he Mad Scene—one omitted entirely from my survey of the Mitchell production, and the other given short shift.

12. A caricature of the *Lucia* Sextet

I'll start the Sextet when Lucia arrives for the betrothal ceremony. It is a celebrated number in opera history, in bringing six characters together in a single ensemble, each with different reactions and largely different musical lines. Such big ensembles in grand opera, known in the trade as stand-and-sing (or park-and-bark), are all about reaction rather than action, and their immobility presents a problem for realistically-minded directors. I very much admire Mary Zimmerman's solution of tying this to a group photograph. The main singers are **Anna Netrebko**, **Piotr Beczala**, and **Marius Kwiecien**.

13. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammmermoor* (Met 2009), Sextet
14. Mad Scene photograph (repeat)

The Mad Scene is the supreme challenge for any dramatic coloratura soprano, 18 minutes of singing that challenges the acting as well as the vocal capabilities of the singer. Lucia imagines a different

wedding, one in which she is married to Edgardo, not to Arturo whom she has murdered in their wedding bed. It is full of quotations from their love duet in Act I, scene 2; you will hear a bit of this later, but will have to take my word for it by now. In most repertoire performances, the voice is accompanied by a solo flute, setting up a cliché for every mad scene to come. But companies like the Met, who can afford it, go back to Donizetti's even spookier original scoring, where the soprano enters into duet with a glass harmonica—the sound created by running a dampened finger around the rims of a set of wine glasses—I'll put a sample of it on the website. For now, I'll play the first 5 minutes of the scene itself.

15. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammmermoor* (Met 2009), Mad Scene opening

B. Beyond the Frame

16. Section title B (Mitchell opening picture)
17. Lucia onstage/offstage

"In the Picture" referred to the way Mary Zimmerman's pictorial style, the way her scenes always came out looking like Romantic paintings. "Beyond the Frame" says something about Katie Mitchell that is not about style at all, but something more essential. The role of Lucia is a huge one. She is onstage for four of the opera's seven scenes, and dominates the music whenever she *is* on. Three of her four scenes begin without her, to give her greater prominence when she does appear. The only scenes where she does not figure at all are the brief choral exposition, the Wolfscrag scene which is often cut, and the final scene when she is dead. Yet these are precisely the scenes that interest Katie Mitchell the most.

18. The above, with Mitchell photo

Mitchell recognizes, correctly, that despite having a woman's name as its title, *Lucia di Lammermoor* is a story devised by men, and showing a woman only in relation to men: as a lover, as a catspaw, and a bargaining chip. The containing story, from beginning to end, is that of the men: the feud between the two families, and what Lord Henry Ashton can do to shore up his financial and social position. We see everything through a male perspective. But Mitchell asks what happens to Lucia when we *don't* se her—especially in the second half of the opera, where she has that big mad scene, but nothing else?

19. Opening image from the Mitchell production

So gets her designer, Vicki Mortimer, to create a double stage set. One half is the picture we would see in any production; the other half is Lucia's personal world, which we normally would not see. Look how she sets it up at the very beginning of the opera. The main set represents the graveyard rather than Zimmerman's moors. We see Edgardo leaving a note and a flower for Lucia, then her confidante Alisa, in male costume, taking it and leaving a note from Lucia in its place. This is no longer a man's story at all.

20. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Covent Garden, 2016), opening
21. Lucia and Alisa

I need to explain the woman in white. I can't play the scene in either production, but when Lucia first appears she sings an aria about a ghostly woman who appeared from a well in the park, and seemed to beckon her to follow. You will see her again in the final sequence. The rest of the scene continues as usual, but as well as watching the chorus gather to talk about the mysterious intruder, we also see Alisa (**Rachael Lloyd**) help Lucia (**Diana Damrau**) dress in male clothes for her tryst with Edgardo (**Charles Castronovo**). I wish I could show their full duet, but it is 13 minutes. Mary Zimmerman just had Edgardo kneel to offer Lucia a ring, but Katie Mitchell takes this much farther. You can comment after watching.

22. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Covent Garden, 2016), Love duet, central section
23. — still from the above

I'm sure there must be someone who wants to comment on that! I could list the many problems. Actual physical sex is not what either Scott or Donizetti would have had in mind. It is mechanically awkward. It depends too much on the acting ability of the singers, which I think Charles Catronovo rises to better than Diana Damrau does. But in the context of the production as a whole, it is absolutely essential, as you shall see.

24. Act II, from the offstage/onstage chart

Act II is basically a scene for the men. Lucia's brother Enrico conspires with his steward, who then calls Lucia in to his room. There is a three-minute span before she appears at all. But Mitchell uses this; look what we see when she raises the curtain:

25. — the same, with opening picture

This is not a man's space at all, but Lucia's private bedroom, with a wonderful recreation of a Victorian bathroom *en suite*. On the narrative level, as you will see, Mitchell uses this to show the consequences of the love duet you have just watched. But it is more than that. Enrico must manipulate his sister to get her to marry the wealthy Arturo. He does this by putting pressure on her until she is no longer able to resist; the forged letter purportedly from Edgardo is the *coup de grace*. By staging the scene in her bedroom, *Mitchell has Enrico invade her space*. Even more, she twice has him confront her in her bathroom. I will show you the opening, then cut to the beginning of the duet. Enrico is **Ludovic Tézier**.

26. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Covent Garden, 2016), Act II opening
26b Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Covent Garden, 2016), Act II opening, continued
27. — still from the above

If I had time to play the whole scene, you would see Lucia flee to the bathroom and try to lock the door, but Enrico comes in anyway. All in all, it is a shocking scene.

28. Act III breakdown, chart

However, the real reason why Katie Mitchell sets up the love-making and resultant pregnancy is not to create a *frisson* in those scenes where Lucia can do this for herself musically, but to make sense of those scenes where she *cannot*. The third act of the opera, which most productions take after the intermission, is 57 minutes long. Of these, Lucia is onstage for only 18, less than a third of the whole.

True, it is her mad scene, but we have little idea of what led up to it nor—if we came to hear the soprano, as most opera-lovers tend to do—much reason to stay on after the soprano is dead.

29. Act III breakdown, pictures

Here are the three scenes in question, showing how Mitchell treats their public face. I especially like the way she emphasizes the fact that this is a man's world in the second by forgoing the traditional lofty hall, as in the Zimmerman production, in favor of a low-ceiling billiard room with even the women of the chorus dressed as men. None of these pictures show Lucia—she has not yet made her entrance for the mad scene—but she is offstage somewhere. *This* is what Mitchell aims to show.

30. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Covent Garden, 2016), Wolfscrag/murder
31. — still from the above

The murder, of course, is discovered. Raimondo, the family chaplain, comes in to tell the wedding guests of the tragedy. This leads to a magnificent chorus, but the dramatic interest for Mitchell is what is going on in the bedroom.

32. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Covent Garden, 2016), Chorus/miscarriage
33. — still from the above
34. No Lucia?

The real problem with a feminist-centered take on *Lucia* is what do you do with the final scene, where there is no Lucia? Here is how Mitchell solves it. In retrospect, you can admire how meticulously she prepared everything from the moment the curtain first rose.

35. Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Covent Garden, 2016), final scene
36. Class title 2

I am interested to hear what you think. In particular, is this an approach that could be applied to other operas? I think not; as it only works where the leading character has no agency. You would have no call to do *Figaro* this way, for example, and both Susanna and the Countess have arias which reveal their private thoughts. But there are many Romantic operas which portray their female protagonists without the ability to speak for herself. Lucia has two arias, one big and difficult, the other huge and well-nigh impossible. But in one she is recounting an hallucination; in the other, she has gone mad. By looking into the cracks between the arias, Mitchell provides us with a woman's story that can be explained in events and feelings that any woman will understand—and that is an achievement!