

LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR - CONFRONTING THE GHOSTS

Last week John and I went to Covent Garden to see Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*. I had not been there for many years so it was a great joy to see how well the recent restoration had been done. We sat in the lower slips, right at the side of the stage, which gave us a good view of the orchestra, and in particular of the famous glass harmonica which is played during the mad scene giving a fitting and ghostly other-worldliness to the situation. The production itself was very modern with a conductor who wanted to hurry everything along at top speed. Those vital and divine moments of pause were thrown away leaving the soul no time to receive and reflect. However, the subtitles provided on a little screen at every seat were a great help in enabling me to get the sense of everything that went on. The result was that rather than become frustrated by the limitations of the production I concentrated on the words and found myself starting to think seriously about the implications of this well rounded tragedy.

The action takes place in the lowlands of Scotland during the reign of William and Mary in the sixteenth century at a time when feuds and conflicts were commonplace. The Ashtons and the Ravenswoods, two noble Scottish families, have been enemies for generations. Bloody and inhuman struggles have ruined the last surviving member of the Ravenswood family - Edgardo. Impending political upheaval in Scotland also threatens the social and financial standing of the Ashtons. For this reason Enrico Ashton would like to marry his sister Lucia to the influential and wealthy Lord Arturo Bucklaw. New political astuteness is seeking to triumph over aristocratic carelessness. Enrico has no idea that Lucia has had a passionate attachment to Edgardo for some time.

The libretto is written by Donizetti's favourite poet Cammerano, and is based on Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Cammerano's genius divests Scott's story of all its scholarly paraphernalia and excess baggage and presents it as a terse drama, in much the same form as Scott would have originally conceived it. Upon re-examining the libretto I found that not only is Lucia surrounded by ghosts, but also, her brother Enrico emerges as an interesting figure.

Just as we sometimes arrive at a point in our lives where we need to look back in order to move forward, so with Lucia, it is necessary to re-examine the background to her situation. In so doing it is apparent that the story is dominated by past events. Tombs and ghosts abound. Like the Eumenides in Greek literature, they come back to haunt the players until some cathartic action takes place.

It is a tale where a choice has to be made between serving the old existing patterns or taking the much harder and more painful way that leads to reconciliation and the forging of new ones. It is no less than a tale of redemption. We must all weigh up and assess the past when it comes to making the decisions which will free us from the tyranny of inherited patterns and lead us to new and revitalised pastures. It is all too easy to stick automatically to what has gone before, without stopping to think out whether this is indeed the best way to go forward.

Light is the quality that Lucia, (luce/light) as her name implies, brings to the situation at the beginning of the story. The men all look to her for help. Edgardo sees his love for her as a way of cutting through the age-old family feud with the Ashtons. The pragmatic Enrico sees Lucia as a means of saving him from the disastrous situation he has got himself into. Raimondo too, as Enrico's aid, looks fondly upon her as a way out for the family difficulties.

However the situation is complicated by two things. Lucia's profound and total love for Edgardo, and, the presence of the dead, which like an iceberg, is only revealed in small fragments, which belie the true nature of their all-pervasive and crushing power.

Now we come to Edgardo. Unlike Enrico and Raimondo he is torn between his emotional tie to the old feudal system of vengeance, and acceptance of the new, implying reconciliation. It is a brave response to the loss of his ancestral inheritance. He and Lucia form the sacrifice which has to be made in order for healing to take place. In the first act Edgardo hopes for reconciliation with Enrico in asking for Lucia's hand in marriage. In the fountain scene in which they make their vows, he says how he swore vengeance over his betrayed father's tomb, but now, love may have the power to transform the relationship between the two families. It is also indicative that his mission to France is one of diplomacy. Through his humiliation and suffering at the hands of the Ashton family he now devotes himself to work of reconciliation. Unlike Enrico and Raimondo he has not only love in his heart which melts the ice of enmity, he also has suffered the destruction of his family and finds in his heart the humility to approach Enrico with an olive branch. *He* is the one who has the power to break old patterns and forge new ones.

Enrico could be described as a blind man for it is his anger which predominates and blots out balanced judgement. On discovering Lucia's secret love he falls into a blind rage, and then, when Lucia resists betrothal to Arturo he again be-

comes consumed with fury. And even when he arrives in the middle of the mad scene his first reaction is one of anger. 'Ah you treacherous women.' Enrico cannot see beyond personal ambition. He is dominated by anger, the age-old feud has drained him of creative energy, he cannot seize the opportunity to be reconciled with Edgardo and the Ravenswood family. Instead he sits ill-at-ease in the Ravenswood estate which he has seized, and in his discomfort is not integrated enough to recognise this precious opportunity which his sister's love for Edgardo has presented. In his insecurity he can only see what he imagines is his own potential ruin. Furthermore he has also been plotting against the King. In the world of the spirit he is inwardly at war with his deepest most profound self. He fears execution and so his final and most deadly weapon is his own death, and this he uses to persuade Lucia to accede to his wishes. If she refuses, he threatens that *she* will have made the blood-stained axe that will behead him, and she will evermore be haunted by his ghost. How ironic that, as it turns out, it is he who will be haunted by her ghost!

Raimondo too, could be said to be a blind man, for he is obsessed with outward appearance. Like Enrico he has the opportunity, especially in his position as a priest, to break the age old feud, he could have helped Lucia to escape to France with Edgardo. The fact that they have exchanged rings and have made solemn vows to one another is tossed away as invalid. Here he betrays himself as a priest allowing his allegiance to Enrico and all things earthly to dominate. He counsels Lucia to accede, her vow, it seems, means nothing. While God does not recognise her vow, the Almighty will, it seems, be ready to take special note of her sacrifice and will dry her tears. How patronising! He too, as a last resort, produces the ghost threat, telling her that her dead mother will shudder with horror at her recalcitrant behaviour. When all earthly powers of persuasion fail he brings out the dead. Like Enrico he 'uses' the deceased for his own ends, to obtain the solution he wants. Under this second ghostly threat Lucia succumbs.

And so Lucia is beset with spirits of the dead on every front, however her inner purity gives her the strength not to be dominated by the past. Although she has been frightened by the ghost of the murdered Ravenswood woman at the fountain she rejects Alisa's forebodings. She is strong in her love, strong in not being affected by Alisa, and strong in her resistance to Enrico. She resists all Enrico's attempts to win her over right up to the moment when he produces his trump card, death, this time it is his own death at the hand of the executioner. Blood it seems, is indeed thicker than water, and rather than face her family's disgrace and her brothers death she at last complies. Tellingly she foretells her insanity, for from that moment on, like a deserted house, she has departed to a different level of con-

sciousness. Her first words after this are 'I am beside myself' She is, as it were, from that moment on, outside herself. She has become a spirit and is no longer in the same form. The journey of sacrifice has begun. It is interesting to note that Enrico when he sees Lucia in the mad scene also says he is 'beside himself.' He too, is overcome, but his is a journey leading in a different direction. It is a pilgrimage of suffering and remorse, and one which can ultimately transform. *'My remorse promises to give me a lifetime of bitter tears.'* Lucia's sacrifice has indeed saved him, but not in the worldly way he had planned

This is a pivotal moment, a moment of redemption, a turning around. Enrico in his remorse has been given, through Lucia's sacrifice the possibility to change, to grow, and to heal. Perhaps through his suffering he becomes a noble and respected laird. He, is the beneficiary of this tragedy, the one glimmer of light in this oppressive tale infused with the mist of the spirits of the dead. And Lucia ? she has faced up to the ghosts and all that they demand of her. She has challenged the weight laid upon her by the past and emerges victorious. Through her purity and strength she has performed the cathartic action necessary to break the pattern and finally lay the ghosts to rest. Her response to their strangling grip is a resounding no, her love, even as far as death is stronger far than the fear of any ghosts.

*Eleanor Allitt
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Under the aegis of both the Conservatoire of Venice and
the Conservatoire of Bergamo in collaboration with the
Venice Biennale

Che originali

Giovanni Simone Mayr

Teatro del Piccolo Arsenale, Venice

7 (for schoolchildren only)/ 8/9 May 2004

The opera is likely to be revived the following week in
Bergamo

Revised by Paolo Fabbri and Maria Chiara Bertieri

Allievi dei Conservatorii di Venezia e Bergamo

Conductor: Maurizio Dini-Ciacchi

Director: Francesco Bellotto

(PS This will be an authentic original version of the much-
tampered-with score)

