50 Years of Joan Sutherland's Lucia

It is 50 years since Joan Sutherland first sang the title role in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* on 17th February 1959. For me, that's an anniversary worth remembering. I wasn't actually at Covent Garden that night, though I was aware from the press that something exceptional was happening and I was glued to my radio when the BBC cleared its Third Programme schedules to broadcast the performance on 26th February. I did witness her Lucia in July 1959, and it was that performance that sealed my addiction to opera in general, Donizetti and *Lucia* in particular, and made Joan Sutherland the singer I loved more than any other.

It was just one note that did it. It wasn't one of the high E flats interpolated at the end of the cadenza and cabaletta of the Mad Scene, even if I always found my heart beat alarmingly quicker and louder as those notes approached, a sensation that scared me the first time and recurred every time I heard her Lucia live in the revivals of 1960 (both February and December), 1965 and 1985, despite knowing that her top notes were more beautiful and more secure than those of anyone else.[1] No, the note in question was the E at the top of the stave on "Ascolta", just before the start of the Fountain Aria. I had never before heard anything so beautiful. A round, soft but gleaming tone that was perfectly steady and projected seemingly effortlessly up to the back of the Gallery at Covent Garden – those were the days when what is now the Amphitheatre was divided in two by a barrier between the old Amphitheatre and Gallery, each with its own entrance in Floral Street. From that moment I was hooked.

The broadcast performance of 26 February 1959 has been issued on the IMG/Royal Opera House Heritage label. Alas, the transfer is grievously flawed, so that the Mad Scene plays in E not E flat, with a consequent and marked thinning of Sutherland's voice. After correspondence with IMG and Richard Bonynge, I am convinced that everything from the chorus "D'immenso giubilo" to the end of the opera emerges a semitone sharp. As it is only the Mad Scene that emerges a semitone above the usual published keys this means that everything except the Mad Scene was actually transposed down a semitone in the performance. This was common as regards the final scene for Edgardo. But why were the four Lento bars just before the Mad Scene cut? And why were Raimondo's aria and the surrounding choruses of celebration and sorrow transposed down? I have a theory, but I would love to hear from anyone who was around at the time who can shed light on this.[2]

How to place her in the *ottocento* revival? It was because of Sutherland that I first saw staged performances of *La sonnambula*, *I puritani*, *La Fille du Régiment*, *Norma*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Lucrezia Borgia*. Callas had revived the Bellini works, but of them London saw only *Norma*. And if some of the Donizettis had been revived before Sutherland sang them here, I was certainly grateful that she did. For her, La Scala put on *Beatrice di Tenda* and *Semiramide*, which were true rarities in the 1960s. And those wonderful double-LP sets, Command Performance, The Age of Bel Canto and Romantic French Arias were packed with arias new to most of us – I hadn't even heard of some of the operas, let alone heard them. She has admitted the lack of a facile memory (especially for words and recitatives) which may explain why she didn't revive operas in concert or for single runs as did some others such as Leyla Gencer and Montserrat Caballé. But let us be grateful for what she did bring back and, perhaps as important, for helping to create a climate in which others could explore further.

It is thanks to her and her husband Richard Bonynge that so much of what she did was in editions that were fuller and more stylish than those otherwise heard. Far more blunt endings had their necessary appoggiaturas, repeats were properly ornamented, orchestral parts cleaned of later additions. I would question some decisions such as wrenching up the second verse of the cabaletta of Maria Stuarda's *entrata* by a minor third, presumably to facilitate a higher final high note. Or prolonging final trills with the orchestra silenced, as in later performances of *I masnadieri*, *Les Huguenots* and *Anna Bolena*, thus destroying the admirably generated rhythmic propulsion. But overwhelmingly the evidence is that they were a force for full and serious editions of the operas they performed. Those who complain that their *Semiramide* recording is cut should remember that in 1966 hearing it at all deserved our gratitude, that the original six LP sides were impressively full and spilling onto an extra disc may have been economically unviable. Rather we should offer thanks that they brought back to *Lucia*, both on record and in the theatre, the Wolf's Crag scene and the *tempo di mezzo* in the Mad Scene. And hearing both verses of a cabaletta was the rule, even in the longest parts. Who else on stage sang both verses of the cabaletta to "Casta Diva" in *Norma* or that to the Act IV aria in *Il trovatore* – a piece so often halved when it was sung at all? If some of their records, I think of her Handel and Mozart, now sound old fashioned in the light of the period performance movement, at the time they were decidedly radical.

As with many great singers, some aspects of her work received criticism, though this was rarely unanimous. I don't want to detail the arguments

over her strengths and weaknesses; everyone will have their own views on which aspects of her art are important to them and how they influence any assessment of her importance as a singer. But we can surely all salute her contribution to the *bel canto* revival. For myself, I find that when listening to her recordings I wish she had sung certain phrases differently. Yet when listening to almost anyone else, I wish I were hearing Sutherland. It was through Sutherland that I started to know and love this repertoire, and the aural memory of her performances remains strong. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Alan Jackson

[1] The stickler in me forces me to add that I think that in 1985 the first E flat was in fact a D flat, part of the Mad Scene being transposed down at this stage in Sutherland's career. It was still electrifying.
[2] This performance has also been issued at what I believe to be the correct pitches on the Golden/Melodram label (GM 5.0024). Comparisons between the two recordings are all in favour of this one, both soloists and chorus sounding much more natural.



Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No.8

The Knight of the Leopard

Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Talisman* is convoluted and very long (twenty-eight chapters and over three hundred pages) and had to be pared down for a libretto of a reasonable length. The task was undertaken by Arthur Matthison who dispensed with a lot of the novel and characters and used just the central core. This tells the story of Sir Kenneth, the Knight of the Leopard and his love for Edith Plantagenet, ward of King Richard I the Lionheart.

In 1864 Balfe and his wife leased Rowney Abbey, an estate of considerable size in Hertfordshire. It was here that he started to compose his new opera. All his life he had been plagued with chronic bronchial asthma and in 1865 he moved to Eastbourne on the coast of East Sussex hoping that the sea air would revive him. In a letter to his wife in August he said that the full score for act one was complete, also the piano score. Other work now took precedence and in 1868 he was in Paris to make arrangements for a production of yet another version of *The Bohemian Girl*, this time for the Theatre Lyrique. He returned to England briefly but was back in Paris the following spring. By now the bronchial attacks were worsening but in June he had to return home as his eldest