



# Peninsula Reviews

Lyn Bronson, Editor


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## Lucia di Lammermoor at Opera San Jose

by Heather J. Morris

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Based on a story by Walter Scott, Donizetti composed the opera Lucia di Lammermoor at the height of the vogue for *bel canto* operatic style. In addition to showcasing the singers' range of both pitch and dynamics and their ability to handle both fast and slow melodic lines, there are other aspects that tax singers. The orchestration doesn't help with the emoting of the text, often providing only a simple accompaniment, leaving the singer to create the drama. There's also little time to recover at the ends of phrases, so it's very wearing on the voice. Newcomer to the resident company, Colin Ramsay as the mediating chaplain has a wonderfully expressive bass voice which frequently sang out above the chorus, not with sheer power but with a quiet projection, graceful, yet authoritative – one of the highlights of the production. Michael Mendelssohn and Yungbae Yang had smaller but very important roles. Mendelssohn's Arturo provided the only opportunity for a spot of frivolity in the entire three hours, and he milked it for all it was worth in his flirtatious interaction with Lucia's companion Alisa, played by Anna Yelizarova. Resident company member Matthew Hanscom's very presence on stage is commanding and manipulative. His role as head of the Ashton clan, responsible for its very survival, necessitates authority and his resonant baritone voice and characterization demonstrates this in abundance.

Since this opera is probably most famous for its 'mad scene' when Lucia breaks down after her forced marriage and murder of her new husband, for Sylvia Lee, making her debut with the resident company, this must have been a daunting task, for although new to San Jose Opera, she was not new to the role, having played it

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with both the Korean National Opera and Hong Kong's Musica Viva. Her transformation for this final scene is truly remarkable. She looks, moves and sounds to be a different person, as she alternates between moments of complete lucidity and vivid hallucinations. Caught up in a family feud, not unlike Shakespeare's Juliet, both her family's honor and future depend on her marrying Arturo, when she is already secretly betrothed to Edgardo. Miss Lee's dramatic skills, personal imagination and vocal prowess are superb. Although a soprano has the title role, the tenor has a very demanding role, so demanding in fact, that in many productions his penultimate aria is omitted. Not here though, for in this production Kirk Dougherty was fully capable of singing two big tenor arias in the final scene. Though there was little chemistry with his leading lady, there was no denying his utter devastation at learning of her marriage. As he imagines her bliss on her wedding night he is torn apart with jealousy. The setting of this moment, fittingly, is the Ravenswood graveyard where Edgardo's father lies, killed by Lucia's brother, Enrico.

Steven Kemp's set design is stunning and is so much part of the drama that it almost becomes a character in its own right. Artistic director Larry Hancock chose to move the action of the opera back to 1485 when King Henry Tudor defeated Richard III at the end of the War of the Roses to explain the necessity of Lucia's family needing her to marry someone in the Tudor camp, thereby currying favor and lining their own pockets. The opening and final scenes depicting a moonlight forest with trees stripped of their leaves and the dead husk of a ruined church as a backdrop was evocative of the music, for in the daringly orchestrated overture there are a full nineteen bars of slow, eerie music on timpani and horns before the strings enter. This is balanced by an extended orchestral introduction to the opening of the final scene. There were prominent tuning problems in the orchestra in the opening overture and the precision of instrumental entrances was less than usual from this orchestra.

The opening set with its ruins of a church, though visually highly dramatic, speaks of later times and the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry Tudor's son, Henry VIII, and brings to mind the hulk of a great ship, wrecked by the stormy feud of the families. The depiction of the Great Hall at Lammermoor Castle, stronghold of the Ashtons, is sumptuous in stark contrast to the skeleton structures remaining at Ravenswood. In both venues the lighting by Sean Russell, who designed lighting for two of last season's operas, is highly evocative.

Opera San Jose's 'Lucia di Lammermoor' is a dazzling production in which the marriage of music and drama takes center stage. Showcasing the outstanding talents of both existing and new members of the resident company the three-act opera builds to a final scene, which explodes with amazing vocal gymnastics that only serve to heighten the drama.

End

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