

OPERAVILLE

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Opera San Jose's Lucia di Lammermoor

Opera San Jose

Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor

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Sylvia Lee as Lucia. Photos by Pat Kirk.

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ABOUT ME



 MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of

In the presence of a hundred musicians and three hours of gorgeous, sweeping music, the most gripping moments in this opera come from a single soprano and a single flute, performing passages not actually written by the composer. That is merely one of the wonders of Donizetti's masterwork.

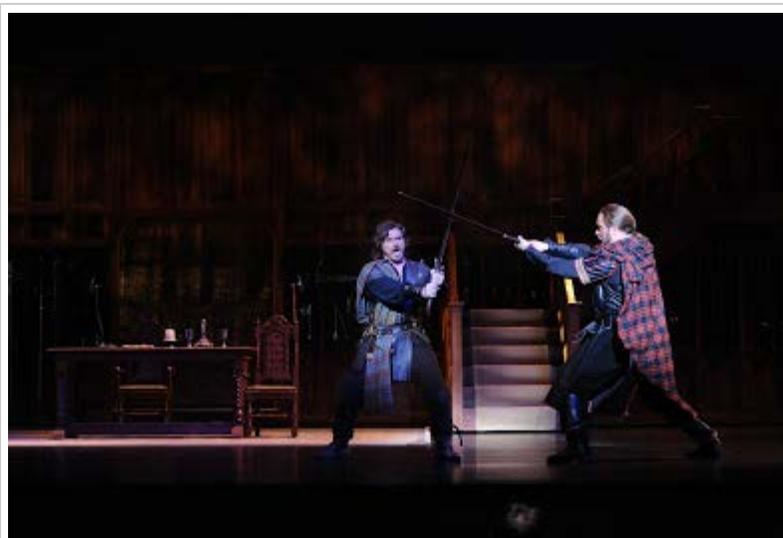
Lucia's Mad Scene is such a powerful creation that a theater full of modern, highly distractable citizens will inch toward the edges of their seats for long minutes of tense, mesmerized silence as a Scottish girl disintegrates before them. The scene is punctuated by sudden flights and nerve-wracking pauses, until finally she collapses to the stage, reduced to an infant conversing with a crazy bird in her head.

The extended cadenza, created by soprano Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani for the opera's 1835 premiere, was accompanied on this night by OSJ's sterling flautist Isabelle Chapuis. It also probably cemented Sylvia Lee's performance as best introduction of a new resident soprano ever. With OSJ's artist-resident approach, the patron-singer connection is deeper than most, and you could sense some first-date anxiety, particularly when you're asking the new girl to tackle one of the toughest roles in the canon. When Lee reached the end of the fountain scene cabaletta, "Quando rapito in estasi," the rousing applause was also a sigh of relief, that *this* was a voice they could listen to for years to come.

Lee's instrument is not the most powerful, but her ease in the upper register is divine, her dips into the lower surprisingly strong. Given her lyric tone and small stature, she plays the Mad Scene in a logical manner, a young girl driven by immense pressure into a childlike state. She adds sudden, threatening movements with weaponry that maintain the tension and draw surprised gasps from the audience. (And a nervous, comic thought from the spectators: "Would you *please* get that knife away from her?")

seventeen novels, including *The Popcorn Girl* and *Billy Saddle*. His poetry has appeared in more than 100 journals, and he works as a competitions judge for *Writer's Digest*. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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Kirk Dougherty as Edgardo, Matthew Hanscom as Enrico.

The development of the opera's characters is often driven by its casting, and here the case is made for a classic testosterone sandwich. Exhibit A is Lucia's brother/destroyer Enrico, played by baritone Matthew Hanscom with pure rage and power. Hanscom created confidence with the audience immediately, with his assured performance of the cabaletta "La pietade in suo favore." The discerning listener may hear the attentiveness and energy of his approach in a single word, "dolor," that finishes the preceding Larghetto. Hanscom lends this single word a dynamic shape, driving through to the end, and then finishes with a rolled R. These are small touches, but they are also signs of craft, the things that make a complete singer complete.

Our second macho man is Edgardo, Lucia's love and Enrico's nemesis, played by tenor Kirk Dougherty with passion and a forceful lirico spinto. It's easy to anticipate the meeting of two such powerful entities, but what is more interesting is what happens on the way there. Rather than drowning out the gentler tones of their Lucia, each, in turn, backs off for beautifully blended duets: Dougherty in the lilting fountain-scene love duet "Verranno a te sull'auré," Hanscom in the heavily conflicted Act 2 duet scene, in which Enrico tries to save his own neck by tricking his sister into a politically expedient marriage.



Kirk Dougherty as Edgardo.

This sublime sense of balance reaches its apogee in the famed Sextet, in which Donizetti pulls the trick of exploring six sets of character motivations simultaneously. The piece is genius enough on the page, but with six singers working so beautifully together, under the careful guidance of conductor Ming Luke, it's a musical/dramatic paradise. This attentive construction allows

Lee to soar over the top at the end, launching Lucia into her terrible fate.

Playing the chaplain, Raimondo, bass Colin Ramsey exhibits a delicious richness of timbre. He is well-equipped to handle one of the opera's pivotal moments, the delivery of the horrendous marriage-night news to the guests ("Dalle stanza ove Lucia"). The scene is punctuated by one of stage director Benjamin Spierman's provocative touches, having Raimondo absent-mindedly rub his hands over his face, forgetting that his hands are covered in blood. Spierman also sets up Lucia's victim, Arturo (tenor Michael Mendelsohn) as an A-one jerk, treating his new brother-in-law as a servant as he ogles all the ladies at the wedding. I can't decide if Dougherty's distracting, herky-jerky movements were a directorial decision or just a natural quirk. A subtle but beautifully choreographed device has the huntsman Normanno (tenor Yungbae Yang) stashing Lucia's murder-knife in his belt, where it is later stolen by Edgardo for his suicide.

Steven Kemp's exterior sets feature bare winter trees with dagger-like branches and a striking background flat of a tilting, destroyed castle window. The Ravenswood interiors are less effective, rather bland wooden panels, but the wall-length display of weaponry make for apt ornaments. B. Modern's costumes are deft and artful, especially Lucia's gorgeous green gown in the second act. The chorus is particularly strong, and especially the men's chorus, which sang the opening pursuit of Edgardo with vigor. Karen Theilen opened the second scene with Donizetti's sublime harp interlude.

Through Sept. 25 at the California Theater, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. Tickets are \$56-\$176. 408/437-4450, www.operasj.org

Michael J. Vaughn is a 30-year opera critic and the author of 19 novels, including Gabriella's Voice and the new Kindle edition of [Frosted Glass](#).

POSTED BY MICHAEL J. VAUGHN AT 6:19 PM

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