

Lucia di Lammermoor in a 21st century setting at the Metropolitan Opera

Fred Mazelis
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New York's Metropolitan Opera typically includes about a half-dozen new productions—including both new operas and new stagings of classics—among the roughly two dozen different operas it presents annually. For the 2021-2022 season, which ends on June 11, one of the new productions was Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, one of the most beloved operas in the repertory.

Simon Stone, a young Australian-born film, theater and opera director, was chosen for the task of updating *Lucia*, and he set it in 21st century America. The cast includes American soprano Nadine Sierra as Lucia, Mexican tenor Javier Camarena as her lover Edgardo and Polish baritone Artur Rucinski as her brother Enrico, with the Met Orchestra under Italian conductor Riccardo Frizza.

The opera, which premiered in 1835, was based on *The Bride of Lammermoor*, an 1819 historical novel of Sir Walter Scott. The adaptation of this novel, by Donizetti's librettist Salvatore Cammarano, told the story of a declining aristocratic family and the tragedy that ensues when a young woman is forced by her scheming brother to abandon her true love, instead entering into a marriage she rejects. The theme was a fairly common one in the period of the flowering of Romantic opera, reflecting in part the ideals of individual freedom associated with the consolidation of the bourgeois revolution.

Lucia was immediately successful, and it is without question the most celebrated of the 65 operas Donizetti composed in his relatively short life (1797-1848). About a dozen of his operas are still performed at least occasionally, and of these six or seven are particularly well known, including the so-called Tudor Trilogy (*Maria Stuarda*, *Anna Bolena* and *Roberto Devereux*), on the life and times of Britain's Elizabeth I, and the delightful comedies *L'Elisir d'Amore*, *Don Pasquale* and *La Fille du Regiment*. But none compares in popularity to *Lucia*, which has been performed at the Met 611 times since the opera house opened 137 years ago, according to the company's archives.

The role of Lucia was important in the careers of such sopranos as Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland, and more recently for Natalie Dessay, Diana Damrau, Anna Netrebko and others. The lengthy Mad Scene in Act III, after Lucia loses her mind and kills the man she has just been forced to wed, is a technical and expressive tour de force for soprano, and the entire two-and-a-half hours of music is perhaps the most famous example of the *bel canto* ("beautiful singing") style. Donizetti became the most renowned exponent of this style, especially after the early death of Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835).

There is scarcely a moment in *Lucia* that is not saturated with glorious melody. Donizetti's influence as an operatic composer lived on long after his death, most immediately and notably in the work of the compatriot who surpassed him, the quintessential composer of

Italian opera, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). Within a decade of *Lucia*'s premiere, Verdi had his first critical and popular successes, with *Nabucco* (1842) and *Ernani* (1844). He would go on to compose more than two dozen masterpieces in his long life.

Contemporary stagings of operas composed in previous eras are usually defended as helping to show the relevance of the work today and attracting new and younger audiences. The new Met production is set in contemporary America, in a decaying post-industrial town in the Rust Belt. Although not spelled out, the general setting recalls the US Midwest.

In the opinion of this viewer, the new production of Donizetti's famous tragedy, despite wonderful performances and some interesting moments, is largely flawed.

It is certainly legitimate to change the setting of well-known operas, but the task must be approached with care and with caution. It should not be motivated by a feeling that the audience cannot relate to the history of an earlier time, or that an oversimplified short cut is needed to reach new listeners.

The new production of Verdi's *Macbeth*, for instance, which premiered exactly six months ago in Milan, seems to have been an excellent example of a modern staging that worked. Verdi based himself, of course, on the Shakespeare play written more than two centuries earlier. The new production, by Italian director Davide Livermore and with a cast including Italians Luca Salsi and Francesco Meli and Russians Anna Netrebko and Ildar Abdrazakov, sets the story in today's world of high finance and growing mass suffering. As the WSWs put it in our [review](#), this is a world where "the power and greed of a super-rich minority threatens the lives of the majority of the population with disease, misery and death."

Director Simon Stone had different ideas for his conception of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The sets—a corner grocery store, gas station, liquor store and pawnshop—are generic, intentionally garish and not very interesting. A drive-in movie theater showing an old Hollywood film plays a major part in the action, a very odd choice for any American city in the present day.

Above all, the decision to place this story in a town beset by growing unemployment while ignoring its causes turns the plot of *Lucia* on its head. Whereas the recent staging of *Macbeth* is imaginative but faithful to Shakespeare's tale of power and ambition, director Stone makes the contemporary equivalent of the declining aristocracy depicted in *Lucia*—the working class! The tragic heroine is surrounded by what the upper-middle class would derisively dismiss as "white trash."

This was emphasized by a lengthy article last April in the *New York Times* promoting the new production, which explained, "Where the

opera's libretto depicts a decaying and desperate aristocracy in the Scotland of centuries ago, Stone has found contemporary resonances and turned the Met stage into something of a graveyard of the American dream—a landscape of opioid abuse, economic hardship and the last, dangerous gasp of white male power.”

In Stone's own words, on the Met Opera website, “It's always in these moments, where men feel that they and their sources of income are threatened, that misogyny and patriarchal abuses resurge.”

This is history according to the postmodernist practitioners of identity politics, in which all of humanity's past and present is seen as a timeless and ahistorical repetition of conflict over race and gender. Whereas in the original opera the issue of misogyny is placed concretely in its feudal context, in the new, contemporary setting the crisis-ridden ruling capitalist class, a section of which is openly embracing fascism, is ignored. It seems that it is not the system that is in crisis and outmoded, but rather its victims, the residents of the Rust Belt, where jobs and hope have disappeared.

The new production combines this conception of the opera's libretto with the kind of “busyness” that has increasingly affected some productions at the Met. Continuously rotating sets introduce an element of unnecessary confusion. Huge video screens, meant to amplify the action and grab the attention of the viewer, instead become a distraction. Much of the opera is spent choosing whether to watch the singers on stage or the video closeups—in some cases the same action and at other times entirely different—on the screens above.

There is one noteworthy reason to admire the presentation of *Lucia* this past season, however. That is the way in which the production alludes to the theme of unhappy youth, striking a chord in contemporary society. This is seen in Lucia's Mad Scene in Act III, when her despair and disconnect from reality is contrasted with images in her mind of previous joy with Edgardo. Here the overhead videos become important.

One cannot help thinking, while watching the fate of Lucia, of various studies that have documented the steady and significant growth of anxiety, depression and other emotional crises within the younger generation today. The crisis has deepened during the pandemic, but predates it. It finds expression in the rise in suicide and, in the most extreme cases, in the mass shootings that have become an everyday occurrence in the US.

Youth face a world harder than ever to navigate, in the midst of the pandemic, with decent jobs and housing out of reach, and the threat of fascist dictatorship and of a third world war looming ever closer. Lucia's dilemma is different, of course, but a similar issue is posed—can the young generation make its own decisions about its future, and will it have a future at all?

The music itself, and the sterling performances of the cast, headed by Sierra, Camarena and Rucinski, somewhat compensate for the current production's weaknesses. Riccardo Frizza's dedication and knowledge of the opera was evident throughout. Rucinski, who debuted at the Met about five years ago, deserves to be more well known to American audiences.

The extended duet between Enrico and Lucia that begins Act II (“Il pallor funesta”) was one of the high points of the evening, but only one. The world-famous Sextet, also in the second act, was magnificent, as was the love duet between Lucia and Edgardo that closes Act I (“Verrano a te sul aure”) and Edgardo's final farewell, “Tu che a Dio spiegaste l'ali,” coming soon after the climax of the action in Lucia's Mad Scene and ending the opera.

New productions like that of *Lucia* should be seen in their social and

cultural context. The drive to update and to make operas like *Lucia* “relevant” is a reflection of a broader crisis in culture, a crisis that reflects the political and social stagnation of recent decades. Updating is offered as a partial substitute for the relative absence of new operas that can win audience approval and join the classics in more regular performance.

The stranglehold of atonality in classical music for much of the last half of the 20th century did not help. But opera need not be confined to the Romantic classics of the 19th century. There are many operas of the past century, including the work of Janacek, Prokofiev and Benjamin Britten, that have found or should find a place in the repertory. The Gershwins' magnificent *Porgy and Bess* returned to the Met in 2019 for the first time in 30 years. 20th century and early 21st century opera includes the work of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, and more recent operas which have either found an audience, like John Adams' *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer* and *Doctor Atomic*, or that have had auspicious debuts, like Kevin Puts' *Silent Night* and last year's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, by Terence Blanchard.

As for attracting audiences, there is no short cut to overcoming the decline in cultural knowledge, interest and curiosity. Genuinely affordable ticket prices would be a start, but only if combined with a massive increase in music and arts education from the early school years. We cannot ignore the fact that music education today is almost exclusively confined to the music conservatories and those who are trying to make a career of music, while totally neglecting the rest of the population.

Why is this the case? The ruling elite and its political representatives are content to leave the field of opera as the playground of the super-rich and the upper-middle class. The resources of society are directed toward war, while the working class is left to foot the bill, through savage cuts in living standards, education and other public services, and scourges like COVID-19.

But great battles are on the horizon, and they will inspire creative artists, including composers, while also broadening the appeal of culture. This has always been the case, as a look at the music of Mozart, Verdi and others will demonstrate. The arts cannot develop hermetically. Great social struggles will bring with them new artistic and musical contributions.



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