

## Lucia di Lammermoor

Christopher Hoile



★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

by Gaetano Donizetti, directed by David Alden  
Canadian Opera Company, Four Seasons Centre, Toronto  
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“Un’armonia celeste”

The Canadian Opera Company’s current production of Lucia di Lammermoor is a feast of beautiful singing and effective acting with no weak link in the cast. The production comes from the English National Opera and was created for this particular Lucia, American Anna Christy. Director David Alden is not as given as is his twin brother Christopher to nonsensical staging, but he can sometimes be tempted to excess. Unlike his brother’s recent work (two duds this season with [Die Fledermaus](#) and [La Clemenza di Tito](#)), David’s lapses are at least tempered with bursts of insight.

Donizetti’s 1835 opera is based on Sir Walter Scott’s novel The Bride of Lammermoor (1819), which in turn is based on true events from the 17th century. Since Scott transports these events to the 18th century, Alden is fully justified in transporting Scott’s action another century upwards to the 19th. This also makes sense since Alden’s concept seems to be heavily influence by Edgar Allen Poe’s tale The Fall of the House of Usher (1839). The two key features of Poe’s tale Alden uses are the image of a crumbling house that reflects the owners’ state of mind and the notion of brother-sister incest.

In Alden’s production all the scenes, except the last, are located inside the decrepit Ashton mansion. He sets the fountain scene between Lucia and Edgardo in the mansion’s own theatre. This creates a sense of claustrophobia and entrapment and signals both the physical decay of the Ashton estate that requires Lucia’s marriage to a wealthy man to save it and the mental decay of Enrico Ashton, distraught that his sister should have to marry and that she has a lover.

Set designer Charles Edwards creates all the various rooms with two walls pushed together to form a corner. Initially, the walls give us the sense of solid rooms, but as the action progresses and Lucia and Enrico illusions are shattered, Alden has us view the set as a set. After Edgardo’s sensational disruption of Lucia’s marriage, the next scene begins showing us the back of one of the two walls with its supports and lighting instruments. During Lucia’s mad scene the two walls come apart at the corner. For the final graveyard scene all we have as a set is the back of the in-house theatre wall.

Now the revelation of the set-as-set as a metaphor for destroyed illusions is not new. Herbert Wernicke used the device to great effect in his 1999 production of Handel's *Alcina* when the sorceress loses her power. Stephen Daldry used the destruction of the set as a metaphor for the destruction of the Birling family's illusions in his famous production of *An Inspector Calls* in 1992. So Alden gets not points for novelty with this effect, now used rather too often, but he does use it well. The air of collapse and doom is enhance by Adam Silverman's lugubrious lighting.

Giving Enrico incestuous desire for Lucia does help to make the character more than just a brutish villain. Baritone Brian Mulligan is quite effective in giving Enrico a disturbed appearance without the panting, eye-rolling and silent mumbling that Alden burdens him with. We understand his desire for Lucia, since he can't seem to keep his hands off her, without Alden's making it explicit by having him feel her up (and thus elicit a high note – an effect better suited to comedy than tragedy). The fact that Lucia allows Enrico to tie her up to her bed with a jump rope suggests that the siblings have been playing unseemly games since before puberty and perhaps explains why they both seem emotionally stunted. The prime advantage of a mad Enrico is that it suggests madness runs in the family and clearly foreshadows Lucia's later actions and decline.

David Alden does show some of his brother's inclination to undermine important scenes, but luckily these do not ruin the entire work. He has Lucia perform her mad scene mostly on the stage of the in-house theatre in the Ashton's manor with the assembled guests seated as if at the opera. He has them applaud silently when the scene is over. Since this is the only time he presents a performance-as-performance it's an anomaly in the production and also does not fit with the naturalistic way he has directed the chorus everywhere else. At the conclusion he has Enrico break Edgardo's neck. This is totally unnecessary since Edgardo has already shot himself in the chest with a pistol Enrico has provided, making this a case of directorial overkill in more ways than one.



Otherwise, except for the overheated acting he asks of Mulligan as Enrico, Alden draws excellent dramatic performances from the entire cast. Their vocal performances are unimpeachable. Anna Christy is an outstanding Lucia. In creating this production for her, it clear that Alden focusses on her petite and girlish appearance. She seems fragile from the start, both physically and mentally, and still plays with dolls suggesting that she has just entered puberty. Lucia can be played as a woman who chafes under the strictures of her brother, but Alden's interpretation also works since she seems to have been her brother's victim from childhood onwards. Her vulnerability combined with the precision and power of her coloratura win us over right from the start. Her mad scene is particularly notable because Alden has used Donizetti's original version of it where Lucia is accompanied by glass harmonica, not by the flute. The mad Lucia sings of "un'armonia celeste" and the glass harmonica lends an eerie beauty to the entire scene. In returning to Donizetti's first thoughts, Alden omits the now traditional cadenzas at the end of the scene which do not appear in the score. This may disappoint some but the overall effect is like hearing the famous scene for the first time.

American tenor Stephen Costello is an ideal Edgardo. He is dashing in appearance, rather like Viggo Mortensen as Aragorn, and has a glorious Italianate voice that throbs with passion. His final contrasting arias are sung with such beauty and vitality that for once the conclusion focusing on Edgardo does not feel like an anticlimax after Lucia's mad scene.

American baritone Brian Mulligan sings Enrico's arias with such force that you can forgive the overwrought acting style forced upon him. American bass Oren Gradus is in fine form as the chaplain Raimondo, whose warnings no

one heeds. American tenor Nathaniel Peake is superb as the pompous Arturo, whom Lucia is to marry and Canadian Adam Luther gives a fine performance as Normanno, reconceived as Enrico's estate manager, as does Sasha Djihanian as Lucia's maid Alisa.

American conductor Stephen Lord leads the COC Orchestra in a vigorous account of the score making much of the works dark tonalities. He tends to slow his tempi for the best known set pieces but never so much that they lose momentum.

This is a Lucia unlike any you will have seen before, unusual, but generally in a good way. To have every role sung at such a uniformly high level is quite unusual and certainly trumps the unsatisfactory production [the COC last gave the opera in 2004](#). David Alden's production may have its flaws, but it captures the fatalistic mood of the piece and turns a standard repertory piece into vital, gripping drama. And to have a glass harmonica in the mad scene gives it an aura that literally seems out of this world.

Note: A version of this review will appear later this year in Opera News.

Photo: (top) Brian Mulligan and Anna Christy; (middle) Stephen Costello. ©2013 Chris Hutcheson.

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