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OPERA

Dark and stormy

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OPERA REVIEW

Intense, and intensely enjoyable

Dark and claustrophobic, *Lucia di Lammermoor* is, in the end, all about its music

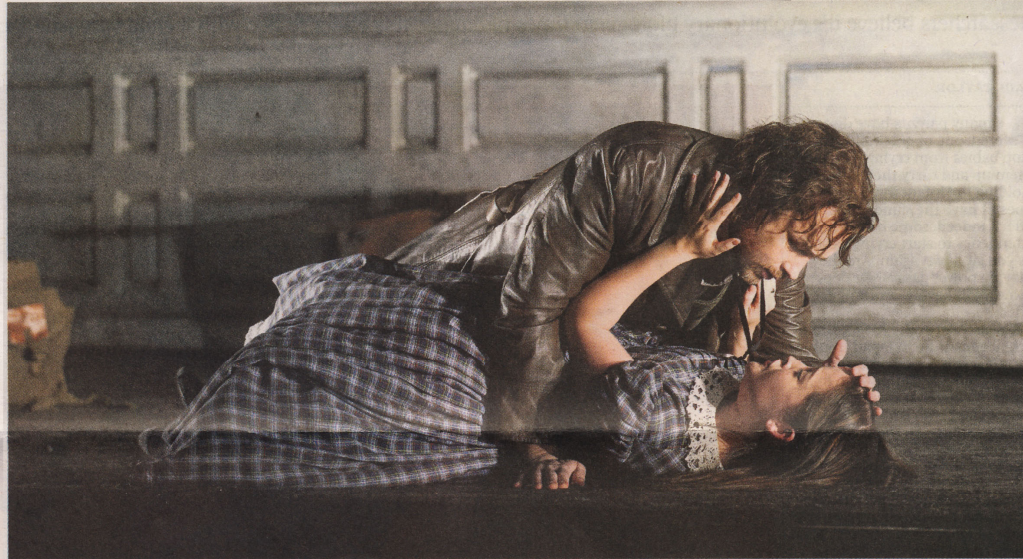
Lucia di Lammermoor
The Canadian Opera Company
At the Four Seasons Centre
in Toronto on Wednesday

REVIEWED BY
ROBERT HARRIS

It was a searingly intense production of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* that opened Wednesday night at the Canadian Opera Company's Four Seasons Centre. For an opera famous for a Mad Scene featuring only its heroine, we were presented with a *Lucia* where every character perched, it seemed, on the edge of hysteria, trapped in a monochromatic, crumbling world where only the strongest of emotions could break through the enveloping gloom. It was dark, it was claustrophobic, it was highly enjoyable.

The world of Donizetti's bel canto opera presents a strange contrast. On the one hand powerfully dramatic, the singing style of his operas nonetheless stress a florid, decorative, ostentatious beauty. In the wrong hands, the power of the drama and the showiness of the singing can fight one another, sometimes to a fatal conclusion. It was to the credit of all involved in this *Lucia* that the musical spirit of the production and its dramatic temperament were in substantial harmony.

A great deal of the credit for this must go to the production team of director David Alden, set designer Charles Edwards, costume designer Brigitte Reiffenstuel, and the lighting of Adam Silverman. Alden has set his *Lucia* in Victorian England, as opposed to the late 17th century of the Walter Scott novel on which the opera is based. We're in a crumbling, dilapidated mansion for the entire piece, and Edwards's set, Reiffenstuel's costumes – all in black, white and grey – and Silverman's stark lighting combine to create an austere, frankly Freudian back-



Anna Christy's *Lucia* is brilliantly sung and presented, matched by the fine tenor of Stephen Costello as Edgardo, *Lucia's* true love. MICHAEL COOPER

ground against which the extravagance of the opera's music is perfectly set.

What that means is that the characters in this production tended to lose their individual identity, and stand for something more universal. Anna Christy's *Lucia* – brilliantly sung and presented – is especially so. Christy and Alden's *Lucia* is presented to us as a child, dressed and acting like a doll when we first meet her, a woman who only seems to blossom into individuality when, ironically, she stands, blood-soaked (the only colour in the entire production), mad, in Act Three, having murdered the husband her brother has forced her to marry. Before her Mad Scene, *Lucia* is a cipher on which every other character writes their story – brother, would-be husband, lover, priest. She is the glue that

other characters use to cement their lives together. In this way, *Lucia* stands in a line of mysterious, haunted, romantic female characters that lead from her to Catherine Linton in *Wuthering Heights* to Emma Bovary all the way to *Gatsby's* Daisy. She is Everywoman and no woman at the same time. A different kind of *Lucia*, to be sure. But one that seems to be consistent with the opera's musical zeitgeist.

Because *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in the end, is about its music. No matter what any director does with it, Donizetti has imbued his score with so much drama that, in a way, you just have to get out of the way and let it sound. However, with the strains and stresses *Lucia* places on its singers, getting the music right is no easy task. But the COC production succeeds magnificently in this regard.

Christy's *Lucia* (Alden built the entire production around her) is subtle, clear, immensely powerful, but never overbearing. Her coloratura voice is so perfectly controlled that we stopped listening for its pyrotechnics, and just concentrated on its drama and artistry. The famous Mad Scene has been more flashily spectacular, but seldom more convincing. And Christy's *Lucia* was matched by the fine tenor of Stephen Costello as Edgardo, *Lucia's* true love. With power to burn, and a sweet, focused sound, Costello made the most of his final death scene, as he did with all his appearances.

But the real dramatic power on stage emanated from Brian Mulligan's Enrico, *Lucia's* brother who hates Edgardo, and sets up her eventually disastrous marriage to Arturo, who he thinks will solidify the *Lammermoor* fortunes.

Mulligan was ferocious, angry, intense and captivating all night. A man a little too attached to his sister, as Alden seems to suggest, Mulligan never let his stage business detract from the inherent drama of his role. Stephen Lord led a wonderful COC Orchestra, pulling real drama out of Donizetti's score, and supplying his vocalists with superb, easy, sensitive support.

This is not your standard *Lucia di Lammermoor*; it is not simply a feast of great singing, although its singing is first rate. It is an almost too-powerful interpretation of a classic that works, even as it disturbs.

Lucia di Lammermoor continues on selected dates through May 24 (coc.ca).

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