

Death in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*, between convention and innovation.

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1. Donizetti's position in the history of music

In the standard account of Donizetti's operas, William Ashbrook doesn't consider him a great innovator, but shows that this composer was coherent with himself and had a singular personality. I'm particularly interested here to focus on Donizetti's uniqueness and production, because for many years he was considered a post-Rossini or a pre-Verdi composer. Like many authors of more recent works about him, I want to support the importance of considering him by his own lights and not as a precursor or a successor of someone else.

Donizetti didn't appreciate some of the more common practices of his time. For example, he didn't want singers to sing pieces of their personal repertoire which came from other operas (the so-called "arie da baule") while they were singing his own operas. Despite his aversion for some theatrical habits of his time, during the first part of his career, he employed the techniques and the style of Rossini, who was the most famous and most appreciated composer during Donizetti's youth.

Donizetti was influenced not only by Rossini, but also by Mayr, who was his first teacher and master. Mayr's influence was evident, he transmitted to Donizetti the enthusiasm for the big musical structure and the greatness in depicting the dark and dramatic musical situation.

At the beginning of his career, Donizetti didn't express all his personal style because the audience preferred Rossini's way of writing in those years, so in order to have some opportunity to be engaged, Donizetti had to conform to the common desire of the general public.

From a formal point of view, Donizetti used freely the basic structure of the opera that was common in his period, but he never took a distance from the traditional customs. He modified the forms and he adapted the habits to the situations that he wanted describe.

Donizetti took some times in creating an immediately recognisable personal style, but he was very coherent. His operas are intimately connected: for some of them, Donizetti re-used pieces of music written for others.

Finally, we have to remember the sheer quantity of Donizetti's production: he wrote a lot and he expressed not only tragic, violent and dramatic feelings, but also comic and amusing ones.

2. Death in serious operas

During 18th century all serious operas had a happy ending and, in many case, they had mythological or legendary subject.

At the beginning of the 19th century there were changes in the tradition of musical theatre: the usages of comic opera influenced the serious theatre and new subjects and new forms were introduced. So, in the 19th century there were serious operas that ended tragically. As in the ancient Greek tragedies, also in the modern Italian operas violent scenes were omitted from the stage, in many cases some characters narrate the fatal events that happen elsewhere. Two examples of this convention can be traced in the Euripides' *Medea* and the Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*, the first was written in 431 BC and the second in 1813 CE.

Carafa's 1816 *Gabriella di Vergy* was the first opera of all time with a death on stage. In the previous serious operas which ended tragically, the death was not performed on stage.

After the first representation of *Semiramide*, Rossini moved to France, the attention of the audience was attracted by Vaccai and his *Giulietta e Romeo*. In this opera, lovers' deaths on stage and the sweet love story united with its tragic end made a great impression on audiences. Donizetti was attracted by violent scenes and death on stage and he reused the libretto of *Gabriella di Vergy* in 1826.

In 1827 Bellini wrote *Pirata*, which originally had to end with the Gualtiero's suicide on stage, but the leading lady (Henriette Méric-Lalande, who was also the first Lucrezia in 1833) wanted her final *bravura* air, so the original end was deleted.

Lucrezia Borgia is one of the Donizetti's masterpieces and is full of violent situations. All the scenes of *Lucrezia* take place during the night by the light of the moon. In this opera Donizetti expresses his maturity in composition and his preference for narrating bloody and criminal histories.

3. Lucrezia Borgia

3.1 Genesis

Donizetti wrote *Lucrezia Borgia* at the end of 1833. He didn't know that he had to write this opera for the beginning of the carnival season.

Firstly, Saverio Mercadante was employed for the opening night and he chose an unconventional main character, but Henriette Méric-Lalande, the leading lady, refused to play Saffo. Donizetti was called with extreme urgency and he imposed his subject, *Lucrezia Borgia*, to Romani, the author of the *libretto*.

Donizetti's choice worried Romani, because also Lucrezia's history was thorny: Lucrezia was Pope Alexander VI's daughter. Several problems affected the preparation of the first representation. The string quartet didn't want to be placed around the conductor as Donizetti's asked. Henriette Méric-Lalande didn't want to appear masked in the prologue because she thought that the audience wouldn't recognize her and so they wouldn't give her an ovation.

At the end of composition, censorship made some problems for the various following representations, but at the opening night, at the Scala in Milan on 26th of December in 1833, was a great success.

Donizetti rewrote several parts of this opera in the following years. In 1839 a new ending was written for Napoleone Moriani, nicknamed "the tenor of beautiful death".

3.2 Plot

Felice Romani wrote the libretto of this opera inspired by Hugo's drama. He was faithful to the classical form, but he expressed the early romantic spirit here.

He organized the events of this plot in one prologue and two acts. On the one hand, this structure is similar to the practice of the three acts organization that was used in romantic operas of the later period. On the other hand, Romani had a classical education so he decided to call the first act "prologue" and thus preserve the traditional structure in two acts.

The most successful aspect of the libretto is the gloomy atmosphere. During the opera the dark character becomes more and more dramatic and intense thanks to unexpected and brusque transitions and mismatched contrapositions.

Prologue:

The opera begins in Venice, where Gennaro, a young captain, is celebrating Carnival with his friends, among whom there is also Maffio Orsini. During a celebration in Grimaldi's palace, the young captain meets a beautiful masked woman. She looks interested in Gennaro and so he is attracted by her allure. When Maffio Orsini arrives and sees his friend, he decides to tear off the mask of the woman with whom Gennaro is talking. The unknown woman is Lucrezia Borgia. Orsini and Gennaro's other friends sing the list of Lucrezia's violence against their families.

First act:

Gennaro and his friends are in Ferrara. The others make fun of Gennaro because he initially seemed attracted by Lucrezia, so he decides to slash the emblem depicted on the wall of Borgia's palace. Lucrezia asks Alfonso, her husband, to find and kill the criminal who has insulted her name, but she doesn't know that he is Gennaro. Alfonso thinks that Gennaro is a lover of Lucrezia, so he is glad to ask his guards to imprison him and take him to the palace. Gennaro has to die and Alfonso gives him a cup of poisoned wine. Lucrezia waits for Alfonso to go out of the room and then she gives Gennaro the antidote and begs him to go abroad.

Second act:

Gennaro meets Maffio Orsini who are going to Princess Negroni's party and contrary to what Lucrezia has said to him, he goes with his friends to the celebration. Lucrezia wants revenge, so she goes to the princess's party and poisons all the people present. At the end, Lucrezia sees that among others, at the party, there is also her son. She finally tells him that he is her son and she gives him the antidote again, but this time Gennaro thinks of his friends' deaths and refuses it.

3.3 Music

From the composition of *Lucrezia*, Donizetti used structures that became the most widespread in the later works. From this moment, Donizetti's operas became more personal and inspired (Ashbrook 1987).

Donizetti developed a particular interest in violent circumstances and he showed it in *Lucrezia*. A great number of plot twists are present in this opera: in the prologue Gennaro's friends tear off Lucrezia's mask, during Orsini's toast peal of bells interrupt the celebration and, at the end, Gennaro is horrified by the revelation about his mother. In each of these particular moments, the composer arranged music that stresses the dramatic force of the event.

Donizetti wanted vocal competence from his singers in the same way required by the tradition of *belcanto*. But he wanted also dramatic plausibility and, to obtain it, he worked with Romani in writing an expressive *libretto* and he demanded realistic acting from his singers.

The exceptionality of some of Donizetti's choices is testified by reluctance of Méric-Lalande (the first singer that interpreted Lucrezia) to make some of the dramatic gestures required by the plot. For example, Henriette didn't want to appear masked in the prologue, because she thought that the audience would not be able to recognise her. For our purpose it is interesting to note that also in the ending scene of Gennaro's death Méric-Lalande wanted to change Donizetti's arrangement, because she wanted a final rondo, in which she could show off all her vocal skill. But a rapid final rondo wasn't realistic in a death scene.

Donizetti wrote various versions of the final scene of Gennaro's death, not only because of the soprano's request, but also because he re-thought the dramatic situation.

Lucrezia was written in 1833, which is also known as the year of the baritone. In this opera Donizetti began to focus on the use of the groups of singers more than on the virtuosity of single parts. Thanks to this new music idea, the characters, in *Lucrezia* interact more with each other than

in the previous compositions. The *arie* are less important there than the duets and in some cases, such as at the end of the first act, the duet could become a trio.

4. Death in *Lucrezia Borgia*

4.1 The narrative of death (Concertato)

The first moment in which death appears in the opera is at the end of the prologue. All Gennaro's friends accuse Lucrezia of various murders. The Petrucci and Vitellozzo told also about thefts of land and castle

In this piece, the action is put into the music. The musical theme is pathetic and threatening and iteration of music and rhythm inspires the idea of implacable action.

The iteration of "I" in the libretto underlines the repetition of the action and the feeling of Lucrezia's victims who are relatives of Gennaro's friends. Other word the choices are also interesting: each crime ascribed to Lucrezia is characterized by a verb that connotes its the tragic and violent nature. The adjectives and the participles underline the infamous nature of the crimes, which are committed during the night or in a festive situation, when the victims are unarmed and the bloody facts are unexpected.

The image displays three staves of musical notation from the opera 'Lucrezia Borgia'. The first staff is labeled 'Andante.' and 'p' (piano). The second staff is labeled 'ORINI.' and the third 'VITELLOZZO.'. Each staff has a blue box highlighting a specific musical phrase. The lyrics for the ORINI and VITELLOZZO parts are visible below the staves.

Andante.
p

ORINI.
Ma-flo Orsi - ni, Si-gno - ra, son' i - o Cul sve - na-ste il dormen-te fra -

VITELLOZZO.
tel - lo! Io, Vi-tel - li, cui fe - ste lo gi - o Tra-ci-dar nel ra-pi - to ca -

4.2 Gennaro's death

FIRST ENDING (cabaletta):

Donizetti wrote for the opening night a piece “*di bravura*” as Henriette Méric-Lalande had requested. The soprano wanted to show her talent and skill, so she wanted a piece of music in which she could insert variations of vocal technique.

Romani wrote a text for the soprano's final music. About the words of the libretto, there is not much interesting to say. The moral topic of the opera, motherhood as a route purification, is underlined with this final words, but there is nothing new and Lucrezia's feelings are hardly expressed.

About music, we can note the unreality of vivacious rhythm and the rapid rising and falling scales in contrast to the violent and bloody situation.

lu - ce in lui m'è spen-ta— Il mio co - re con esso è mor - to— Sul mio
dark - ness, destroy'd, ex - tinguish'd Fate hath brok - en the ma - gic dream - ing; O'er this

ca - po il cie - lo av - van - ta Il suo stra - re pu - ni -
head too sure - ly van - quish'd, See her wrath - ful vi - al

Più mosso.

to - re! Sul mio ca - po av - ven -
pour now! O'er this head sure - ly van -

SECOND ENDING:

The second version of the ending of the opera is more realistic. Gennaro is dying in his mother's arms, so he says goodbye to her and invokes God. The music proceeds with a slow rhythm. At the end of this, there are some eighths followed by sixteenths so as to imitate hiccoughs.

Gennaro's part have a strange tonal ambiguity, because it was written in G major but there are many accents in the score on the D # that resolved on the E, which is the tonic of the relative minor scale. The melody is undecorated, spare and poor. The great innovation of this second ending is the Donizetti's discovery of the potentiality of the role of the tenor in the expression of tragic situation.

Today, as in the case of the recording by National Philharmonic Orchestra with Richard Boynge and Sutherland, the first and the second ending were both performed. The second one was introduced before Lucrezia's last aria. Donizetti suggested this solution in 1840: for the second version of the ending he introduced Gennaro's "cantilena" and he reduced Lucrezia's cabaletta.

The musical score is for Gennaro's 'cantilena' from the opera Lucrezia Borgia. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The tempo is marked 'Larghetto' for the first three systems and 'con agitazione' for the fourth. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The lyrics are in Italian and English. A red circle highlights the first system of the third system, which contains the lyrics: 'ni-sea in mor-te al-me-no. Ma-dre, l'e-stre-mo a-ne-li-to Ch'io per-ia in this the pos-sess-ing? Mo-ther, I've oft pray'd-up-on thy breast-To'.

Larghetto.
Di-o mi man-ea il cor. Ma-dre, se ognor lon-ta-no . . .
tid-ing is worse than death Mo-ther, is this thy wel-come. . .

Larghetto.
Vis-si al ma-ter-no se-no, Che a te pie-to-so Id-di-o M'u-
This thy ma-ter-nal bless-ing? And must my day-dream, mine i-dol Thus

Larghetto.
ni-sea in mor-te al-me-no. Ma-dre, l'e-stre-mo a-ne-li-to Ch'io
per-ia in this the pos-sess-ing? Mo-ther, I've oft pray'd-up-on thy breast-To

con agitazione.
Fi-glio mi-o! fi-glio mi-o!
Child of sor-row! child of sor-row!

spi-ri-sul-tuo-cor. Ah!
four out-life last breath And

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Sitography:

<http://www.librettidopera.it/zpdf/lucrezia.pdf>

with english version from libretto of recorded cd of Sutherland, Horne, Argall Wixell

Score:

Editors [Arthur Sullivan](#) (1842-1900)
[Josiah Pittman](#) (1816-1886)

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