

It's madness

Green Mountain Opera Festival stages Donizetti's 'Lucia di Lammermoor' and Handel's 'Orlando'



Soprano Nikki Einfeld is the tragic heroine of the Green Mountain Opera production of Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor," June 18 and 20 at the Barre Opera House.

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By **Jim Lowe** Staff Writer - Published: June 11, 2010

It's all about madness at this year's Green Mountain Opera Festival. Most opera lovers are familiar with Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor" in which Lucia goes mad when forced to marry for politics over love. But madness also ensues when Handel's "Orlando" must face all-too-human love despite his invincibility as a war hero. Now in its fifth year, the Waitsfield-based professional regional opera company will present, as its main production, "Lucia di Lammermoor" at the Barre Opera House on June 18 and 20. The festival's Emerging Artist Program will present "Orlando" on Sunday at Middlebury's Town Hall Theater and on June 17 at Waitsfield's Skinner Barn. Both productions will be fully staged, with orchestra, and sung in the original Italian with English translation projected above the stage.

"Lucia is a gift to me vocally," explained soprano Nikki Einfeld, who stars in "Lucia di Lammermoor." "She's not a stock character at all. She does go on a journey. From the first time you meet her, young, in love, naïve, she's being completely controlled by all the men in her life, to a point where she's heartbroken, has zero control over her fate – and finally just goes crazy."

"Lucia di Lammermoor" is a dramma tragico (tragic opera) in three acts by Gaetano Donizetti. Salvatore Cammarano wrote the Italian libretto loosely based upon Sir Walter Scott's historical novel "The Bride of Lammermoor." The opera premiered in 1835 at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Donizetti revised the score for a French version which premiered in 1839 at the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris. The story concerns a political rivalry between two families, the Ashtons and the Ravenswoods. The Ashtons have taken possession of Ravenswood Castle, the ancestral home of their rivals. To assure his place, Enrico (Lord Henry Ashton) hopes to gain the support of the important Arturo (Lord Arthur Bucklaw) by offering his sister Lucia in marriage. But, she is in love with and has promised her hand to Enrico, the last surviving member of the Ravenswood family, and Enrico's enemy. The marriage happens. But, rather than consummate the marriage, Lucia kills Arturo.

The "Mad Scene" ensues. "Il dolce suono ... Spargi d'amaro pianto" has historically been a vehicle for coloratura sopranos and is technically and expressively demanding. Some sopranos, Maria Callas in particular, have performed the scene in a "come scritto (as written)" fashion, adding minimal ornamentation to their interpretations. Most sopranos, however, add ornamentation to demonstrate their technical ability, as was the tradition during the bel canto period of the opera.

"She does not strike anyone as an evil character," Einfeld said, "but by that point she is forced into a corner. She, probably unconsciously, does this without realizing that it's death she's brought to this young man. "I don't think she's in control of her thoughts or feelings by that point," she said. "There's no realization of what she's done." Einfeld previously performed the role with Syracuse Opera, and has sung other major roles with Opera Lyra Ottawa, Vancouver Opera, Manitoba Opera and New Orleans Opera.

"'Lucia' is one of the few people in the opera who has feelings," added Leonardo Vordoni, who is conducting. "Enrico is self-oriented and business-oriented. She's so passionate." Vordoni was on the conducting staff of New York's Metropolitan Opera last season; this season, he will make his debut at Lyric Opera of Chicago, among others. "Everybody plays Lucia as the pure virgin," Vordoni said. "But she's not that because every morning at sunrise she meets Edgardo – and it's not to play cards. She knows life."

The festival orchestra is made up of local professional musicians, including Montpelier flutist Karen Kevra and Vermont Symphony principal cellist John Dunlop, as well as players from throughout the Northeast, including members of New York's Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Lou Kosma, Vermont Philharmonic music director and longtime bass player at the Met, will be principal bass.

The orchestra will feature the rarely played armonica, often called the glass armonica, invented by Benjamin Franklin in 1761. Donizetti originally intended the famous mad scene to be accompanied by the eerie-sounding instrument. It will be played by Cecilia Brauer, a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra who played the instrument with the Vermont Philharmonic earlier this season.

"For me, a satisfying Lucia is watching and listening to this roller coaster," said stage director Garnett Bruce, who directed "Tosca" at Lyric Opera of Chicago last season. "Lucia's meant to be off the wall, but in her own little dream world, she's dealing with her feelings," he said. "With Sir Walter Scott, it's everything for romance."