

LUCREZIA BORGIA

Composed by Gaetano Donizetti

Libretto by Felice Romani

First Performed : La Scala (Milano) 1833

The time is the period of ascendancy of the Ferrarese and Venetian states (Italy, c. 1500s)

Background

Along with Lucia di Lammermoor, Lucrezia Borgia was one of Donizetti's most popular operas. For at least 40 years after its premiere it was still being mounted one place or another. This despite its graphic and controversial theme, depicting some of the more gruesome exploits of a despised socio-political and historical figure. Lucrezia Borgia, the indomitable protagonist, was an inscrutable power-monger. Daughter of a Pope and matriarch of the Estensi/Ferrarese line, she provided fuel for the Donizettian imagination which could not be quelled by his more timid contemporaries. The choice of story was in fact a cause of some trouble between the composer, his librettist, the censors and the author of the original tale, Victor Hugo. Thus, there were several revisions of the libretto though most were nominal and involved simple name changes (or giving the work under a different title, as: Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara).

In Paris (1840) the opera was presented under the title: La rinnegata (The Scorned/The Repudiated One --as La traviata would be the "lost" one). This in hopes of diffusing ongoing charges of plagiarism leveled by Victor Hugo. For this production at Theatre Italiens, the story was modified more extensively.

Not the controversial subject matter alone, nor even the civil controversy was the deciding factor in the work's contemporary popularity, but instead the mastery of distilling an operatic work that was powerful in its dedication to the dramatic element and composed of liquid strains and inventive set pieces. In short, another success by the composer who was everywhere in Europe being sought out for his musico-dramatic talents.

Prologue

This could just as effectively been labeled a first act of a collected three, then. But, Romani stuck to convention in calling his initial action (set in Venice) as prologue to the balance of the story which takes place in Ferrara. Donizetti dispenses with an overture in favor of an appealing prelude. In this shorter format he manages to stir the fancy for the tragedy about to unfold, suggesting the surprising turns of a mother's tenderness in an otherwise ruthless personality; her incognito exposed in a crowd of enemies; a powerful husband's jealousy and the ultimate loss of redemption for the chief protagonist.

A group of soldiers commissioned by Venice is celebrating that city's beauty, and Orsini is called upon to tell the story of Lucrezia Borgia's treachery as they entertain themselves in revelry. Gennaro is sitting off to the side and disdains (out of boredom) to listen to his comrades' story yet another time. Orsini (a traversi role) tells of the seer who foretold his and his friend Gennaro's undoing by the ruthless Lucrezia Borgia. After his tale, a lively concertante of the male voices (offset by the one mezzo-soprano voice in Orsini) regales the promise of parties of the evening to come, and they go off in splendid Donizettian style: Marvelous dance music (della campagna) evoked by tendrils of rustic trumpets plying the upper register in echo of the male-dominated chorus. (Senti, la danza invitaci...bando a si tristi immagini/Listen, the dance invites us, put off these nasty (sad) visions...)

They leave their friend Gennaro to his nap along the quayside and repair to the festivities. Enter La Borgia. She is masked so as to come closer to the object of her long-suffering separation. She has her *romanza* of which, principally, her *aria di sortita*, (*Com' e bello / How lovely he is*) is centerpiece.

Donizetti has crafted a lovely package throughout the *prima donna's* initial appearance. It includes a short *cavatina* prior to the *aria*. The *aria* itself is interrupted by the murmurings of Duke Alfonso and his henchman, Rustighello, who (in hiding) are trying to determine the extent of the Duchess's involvement with this unknown young man. The second section of the *aria* picks up (*Mentre geme il cor somnesso / My humble heart is sobbing*) with strains of the harp and clarinet rising over the beautiful lyrics of motherly love. A *cabaletta* section is next, (*Si voli il primo a cogliere / I would take the first kiss*) containing beautiful *coloratura* scoring. Its provision develops depth in a character whose depiction as a monochrome of evil was already legendary. The scoring hastens into a *duetto* mode when the young Gennaro awakens. He immediately professes his desire for the woman who has mysteriously shown him such affection. She tries to steer the conversation into less ardent territory and succeeds in having him recount his background (which is a mystery even to himself). This is the tenor's opening *aria*, (*Di pescatore ignobile / I once believed myself a humble fisherman's son*).

Finally, she turns the topic around to the young man's devotion to a mother he has never known, but whose letter to him, cautioning him to accept her incognito to avoid political embroilment, he shows this caring lady. As their *duet* concludes the crowd of Gennaro's friends breaks in upon them. High drama ensues as Donizetti pens a brilliant *stretta* (marked *Maestoso*) which looks ahead to his ensemble brilliance of *Lucia* (especially *Chi mi fren' in tal momento*--the renowned sextet). --Here, the family members of the victims of Lucrezia Borgia's cruel reign catalogue her infamy in alternating *mezzo/tenor/bass* measures as Gennaro's agony grows and he punctuates the rhythms with his disbelieving cries. It is more than a masterly conclusion to a prologue (which should enfold the listener into the emotional life of its principal players): it is a high water mark of operatic composition. At its *crescendo*, the lady is unmasked; the friends are exultant in their revenge; Gennaro is decimated!

Act 1

The Court of Ferrara. Duke Alfonso asks Rustighello if all is set for Gennaro's capture and they plot to take him to the Duke's palace that night. Alfonso sings his *aria* (*Vieni, la mia vendetta / Come vengeance!*) which is followed fast on by the *cabaletta* section, (*Qualunque sia l'evento / Whatever the circumstance*). This is a rousing deep bass tune. Alfonso vows that Gennaro will not see another dawn. The music is allegory to the unbridled power of the feudal lords. Again, it freely employs the *trombe rusticana* motif. The syllables of the Italian pronoun "qualunque, sia" fairly tumbling out of the *basso* register to the punctuation of *timpani* and trumpet.

In the next scene a concord of henchman meet outside Gennaro's residence in Ferrara. Gennaro has just bid farewell to his friends who have witnessed the young soldier defacing the Borgia crest outside the neighboring villa of the Duchess's family. Gubetta, (a cavalier of unprofessed affiliation tolerated by the group of soldiers), remarks that such careless affront will lead to trouble. After they disperse, Rustighello and Astolfo (the Duchess's man) argue over the rights to take Gennaro into custody. The Duchess had sent Astolfo to get Gennaro out of harm's way, but as he is considerably outmanned he bows to Rustighello's (and the Duke's) *puissance*. This exchange among the henchman is a charming bit of scoring itself, with male chorus sustaining the two chief protagonists' (*tenor/bass*) exchange. At its conclusion, Gennaro is spirited away by the Duke's men.

In Alfonso's castle the Duke instructs Rustighello to prepare two wine flasks: one with ordinary wine and the other with the poison wine of the Borgia's. His plans for Gennaro's demise are fixed. Lucrezia demands her husband redress the affront suffered on her crest (without knowing who the perpetrator was, and that her own son is in the vengeful Duke's custody). He promises her instant justice! Gennaro is brought in. Shock and horror from the Duchess; penetrating scorn from the Duke. Gennaro, when confronted, courageously admits his crime. Lucrezia pleads with her husband in an aside. He disdains to listen. Finally, his jealousy is revealed. He accuses her of having the young man as her lover. She denies it, but does not reveal Gennaro's identity. Their duet at this point is the lovely (*Perdoniam, la clemenza e regale virtu .../Pardon him, mercy is a royal virtue*) Herein, hangs the plot: All she has to do is tell the Duke this is her son, but for some socio-political imperative, she cannot.

The Duke is not appeased, and holding her to the fact that he promised the villain's execution he demands she choose its form: the sword, or the poisoned wine. She opts for the latter in horror (but with devious plan, also, in mind). Gennaro is returned, some pleasantries exchanged, and the Duke announces he is to be spared, and will join the family in a glass of wine. The brilliant trio (which begins with the Duke's hushed cautioning to his wife to not reveal the truth: (*Guai se ti sfugge un moto / Woe to you, if you reveal...*)) ensues as the three express each their separate emotions of the unfolding situation: Husband as revenger; mother as instrument in her own son's dilemma; Gennaro rejoicing his turn of luck (supposed).

Alfonso leaves after Gennaro has drunk. At this point Lucrezia tells him he has been poisoned, and offers him a vial containing antidote. The act concludes with Lucrezia trying to convince him that he is indeed accepting antidote, and that he has to trust her, notwithstanding his real hesitation over a woman who has come to represent villainy in his eyes.

Act 2

As Gennaro has escaped the Duke's power he returns to his home to prepare to flee Ferrara. There Orsini (his closest friend) begs him to join the crew at a party in the home of one of the nobles of Ferrara that evening. After a stirring exchange of friendship, culminating in a duet (which provides a foil for the deceit which is the pivot of so much of the story), the two men sing of the ties that bind a strong friendship: (*Qual due fiori a un solo stemme / Like two flowers on a single stem*). Finally, against his better judgment, Gennaro agrees to attend the party, as his last night in Ferrara, and Orsini vows to be off with him in the morning.

In the last scene, the revelers are in a wine tasting frenzy in a great hall of the host villa. Orsini gives the toast, a lively brindisi (*Il segreto per esser felici / The secret of happiness*). The chorus of revelers is interrupted by tolling bells and an offstage chorus announcing doom). Thus, Lucrezia Borgia appears at its conclusion as her guards bar the exits. The men are trapped. She announces that they've been poisoned, and her revenge for their having upbraided her in public, in Venice, is now complete. Gennaro steps forward from the shadows, professing his hatred of her, and she breaks down in horror of finding him in attendance. She quickly orders her guards to segregate the rest of the party.

There follows the grand finale in which she begs her son to avail himself of the final draft of antidote which he tells her he still possesses. He will do it only if she provides a lot for his comrades. She says that's all that remains. In her classic aria, (*M'odi, m'odi / Ah, listen, listen*) she finally reveals herself as his mother. The aria is written Largo (in G#), and while not long (some 32 measures) manages the near-impossible task of converting antipathy for the ruthless

character into sympathy for her ultimate defeat in finding outlet of any motherly love. For, it is too late, Gennaro, her son, lies dead.

In versions still rendering the finale nuova which Donizetti wrote in later, and rather reluctantly, to satisfy the coloratura demands of his era's prominent voices, a final (cabaletta-like) section of the soprano's upper-register show of lament concludes the opera. It is at least respectively titled: (Era desso il figlio mio/ My son is gone). And considering the master's hand in this as with all the preceding writing, it is a showpiece of soprano repertory writing.