

Press Release: November 9, 2007

Seen and Heard International Review 'Lucia'

Students of history may recall that Portsmouth New Hampshire is most famous for being the site of the 1905 treaty that ended the Russo-Japanese War. Future students of opera history may remember that on November 9, 2007, in Portsmouth New Hampshire's Music Hall, Barbara Kilduff sang the role of Lucia for the first time in her long career. She performed wonderfully.

All opera buffs know the story of the *Bride of Lammermoor* with its simple plot—Edgardo loves Lucia while Enrico—Lucia's brother—wants her married to Arturo to save his family fortune. A forged letter convinces Lucia that Edgardo has been unfaithful. No sooner does she sign the marriage contract than Edgardo returns and curses her. Lucia stabs Arturo to death on her wedding night and proclaims her love for Edgardo in the famous Mad Scene. Edgardo and Enrico agree to a duel, but as Edgardo waits for the sun to rise, he learns that Lucia has died with Edgardo's name on her lips. The distraught Edgardo takes his own life as the curtain falls.

Philip Lauriat directed a delightful traditional production complete with the Wolf's Crag Scene at the beginning of Act III. The costumes were period perfect and the scenery consisted primarily of huge painted backdrops. In the beautiful intimate 19th century Music Hall the audience was propelled physically and emotionally back into the first half of the 1800s.

One feature, however, was quite different and very effective. In most productions Arturo either appears as an immature youth or ascivious scoundrel. Lauriat chose to portray him as a cane wielding white haired old man and the impact of this characterization on Lucia was one of the dramatic high points of the opera.

Barbara Kilduff's career during the past two decades has been impressive. She has sung in many of opera's most famous venues including the Metropolitan Opera, La Scala, and the Bavarian, Vienna and Hamburg State Operas. Most recently she sang Norina in *Don Pasquale*, the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*, the Mozart Requiem, and the world premier of Luis Bacalov's *Cantos para Nuestros Tiempos*.

Her voice has now matured and is well suited to the demands of bel canto. Her upper register was particularly impressive and her performance of the Mad Scene literally brought the full house leaping to its feet. Although my wife thought she could have projected a bit more madness, I was happy to see that she didn't exhibit the histrionics of (say) Patrizia Ciofi.

Eric Fennell as Edgardo also brought a great deal of experience to the production. He has appeared with the San Francisco Opera, New York City Opera, Seattle Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, Glimmerglass Opera and Sarasota Opera—to name only a few. His credits include Don José in *Carmen*, Alfredo in *La Traviata*, Tamino in the *Magic Flute*, Nadir in the *Pearl Fishers*, and Gerald in *Lakmé*. Fennell has a beautiful tenor voice, but his performance could have been enhanced with more vocal projection and less wooden acting.

Vocal projection and wooden acting posed no problems for Jimi James as Enrico. His *Cruda, funesta smania* in Act I displayed not only a powerful baritone voice but excellent acting. This was reinforced by the brutal Lucia-Enrico confrontation in Act II Scene I. Excellent singing plus strong acting produced an effect more commonly associated with Verdi. In the Wolf Crag's scene, once again James set the tone and pace; and Fennell responded with a bit more projection.

Mark Cleveland's background featured more soloist engagements with chorales rather than opera, but he handled the role of Raimondo with clerical dignity and a solid bass voice.

Stephen Carpenter has performed at the Granite State Opera in *Madama Butterfly*, *Carmen*, and *I Pagliacci*. His repertoire has varied from *Coronazione di Poppea* to *Gianni Schicchi* and the *Ballad of Baby Doe*. As the white haired Arturo he transformed what is often an almost buffoon role into one of beauty and poignancy. Both Jacques Wilson and Brent Wilson handled their parts with competence as did the small chorus.

Many people know Lucia primarily through the Sextet and Mad Scene. Often the Sextet poses problems, particularly if one of the singers tries to steal the show. That wasn't the case at Portsmouth—the Sextet was well balanced and beautifully sung, and the audience responded with hearty applause.

Most bel canto operas end with the soprano singing a glittering rondo finale to bring down the curtain but Lucia Di Lammermoor is the exception. Edgardo dominates the last scene and his final aria *Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali* always brings tears to my eyes. Fennell's beautiful tenor voice served him well, but again, I wonder if he could be heard towards the rear of the Music Hall.

Edgardo's on stage suicide must have been a tremendous shock to the 19th century audiences. Although Bellini's *I Capuleti* concluded with the suicides of Romeo and Juliet, Donizetti's *Lucia* was the first opera in which the hero stabbed himself. Unlike the Boston Lyric's production a few years ago where Lucia actually appeared with Edgardo in an apotheosis after his death, Lauriat's treatment was straightforward and powerful. Edgardo fell, then rose to the center of the stage, and fell once more as the curtain descended and the fine orchestra played its final notes.

Granite State Opera was founded in 1998. In its short life it has won many awards and attracted singers with national reputations. With Philip Lauriat as both Music and Stage Director it is well positioned to provide excellent opera to the residents of northern New England. If its future productions are as beautiful and powerful as this *Lucia* it should go from strength to strength.