

On May 21st the Metropolitan Opera will broadcast a Live in HD performance of Gaetano Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor

The First Lucia and Edgardo

Rachel Stuhlman

Lucia di Lammermoor has come to be regarded as the epitome of bel canto opera, and the supreme musical expression of Italian Romanticism. Since Donizetti, like all composers of his day, wrote to the vocal capabilities of his singers, some knowledge of the two artists who created the first Lucia and Edgardo in 1835 can only enrich our appreciation. That Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani once threw a tantrum in rehearsal that terrified Gilbert-Louis Duprez only adds spice to the story. It was of course an intolerable situation for a diva: the tenor had been given the final scene, which meant the final applause, and the *maestro* refused to alter the plot to rectify this injustice.

Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani was a prodigiously gifted singer who had made her professional debut only three years earlier, in July of 1832. She sang her first Adina in the Venice production of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* the following year. That role became one of her calling cards, as did Lucia.

In her twenties, La Persiani was blond and slender, the physical embodiment of a romantic heroine. Her voice was light and sweet, with a brilliant upper register and remarkable agility. She could hit a high F effortlessly, and is said to have been able to sing a given aria several times in succession, each time with a different cadenza. Her ornamentations were original and tasteful. Many descriptions of this voice have come down to us. In a letter dated October 28, 1833, Donizetti described it as "very cold, but extremely precise and always on pitch." Alexandre Dumas père, on his trip to Italy in 1835, saw her at the San Carlo and wrote "[She] is a kind of nightingale, and sings as easily as one would speak... nothing compares to the sweetness of her voice, young and pure, but rarely dramatic. At the time of her triumphant 1838 Lucia in London, the *Musical Review and Record of Musical Science, Literature and Intelligence* wrote that the voice was "... not very loud, but clear, flexible, pure... She demonstrates in a thousand intricate cadenzas an immense vocal flexibility and unfailing accuracy ... She does with her voice what Paganini does with his violin... [and acts] with unparalleled naturalness." She had, in short, an instrument ideally suited to Donizetti's music.



The first Lucia, Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani, in the opera's 1838 London debut

La Persiani also possessed the temperament of a diva, refusing to rehearse if she was not paid. And like other star sopranos, she did not hesitate to substitute her favorite arias for those in the score. At the Naples premier of *Lucia* on September 26, 1835 she sang the music that Donizetti had written, with her own ornaments and embellishments of course, as was the practice of the day. But in subsequent performances she changed “Regnava nel silencio,” Lucia’s first aria at the haunted fountain, to “Perche non ho del vento” from Donizetti’s *Rosmonda d’Inghilterra* which the composer had written for her the year before. She deemed it a better showcase for her voice, and less perilous

to sing. Whatever Donizetti thought of this substitution, he acquiesced to La Persiani when preparing the later French version of *Lucie de Lammermoor*, using the music favored by his diva in the new score. And in 1837 he wrote another role expressly for her, *Pia de’ Tolomei*. The opera was intended for Venice’s La Fenice, which, however, burned down, as that theater has the habit of doing.

The French tenor Gilbert-Louis Duprez debuted in Paris in 1825 and, after three years of an indifferent French career, traveled to Italy in order to retrain his voice in the Italian style of singing. He studied with Donizetti, and the two became good friends. Duprez never mastered the florid coloratura of bel canto singing, and had his best successes in more dramatic roles. Today he is remembered as the first tenor to sing a high C in the chest voice rather than a supported falsetto, a technique that he unleashed upon the world in the first Italian performance of Rossini’s *William Tell* in 1831. Not everyone was so enamored of this new, ringing tone: Rossini, that malicious wit, likened it to the squawk of a capon being slaughtered. However, the style of singing that Duprez developed was well suited to the requirements of Italian romantic opera, and his *tenore di forza* voice survives to this day as the ‘dramatic tenor.’

Donizetti wrote five roles for Gilbert Duprez. In *Parisina d’Este* of 1834 he sang the role of Ugo to Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani’s heroine, and the following year they created the roles of Edgardo Ravenswood and Lucia Ashton. Duprez was supposedly a great ham, and certainly this role allowed him ample opportunity to indulge. In the reprise of the final aria “Tu che a Dio spiegasti l’ali,” after Edgardo has stabbed himself, the melody is taken up by the cello while the tenor gasps out broken phrases. Duprez claimed

that this effect was his own invention, although it was not. He did however compose some graceful cadenzas. Edgardo became one of his signature roles.

Three days after the premier at Naples' Teatro San Carlo Donizetti wrote to his publisher Giovanni Ricordi “*Lucia di Lammermoor* went on, and allow me in a friendly way, to my shame, to tell you the truth. It pleased, and it pleased very much, if I am to believe in the applause and the compliments I received. I was called out many times, and the singers even more often... Every piece was listened to in religious silence and honored with spontaneous *vivas*...La Tacchinardi [Persiani] and Duprez... were prodigious.” Lucia had 18 performances between Sept 26 and Dec 26 of 1835, and was repeated the following year in the Carnevale season. It went on to storm the opera world, and has been performed ever since.

Gilbert Duprez never sang with Tacchinardi-Persiani again, and in 1837 returned to Paris in triumph. There he created the tenor roles in three of Donizetti's French grand operas, *Les Martyrs* and *La Favorite* of 1840, and *Dom Sébastien* of 1843, roles sprinkled with high Cs and even the occasional D flat, although this athleticism had already damaged his voice. That voice was in tatters by the time of his stage farewell. The role he chose to bow out with was Edgardo, during an 1851 London production of *Lucia*. In his 1880 memoir *Souvenir d'un chanteur* Gilbert Duprez wrote movingly of the trials that Donizetti had endured during long years of work in the theater. His tribute was perhaps a just recompense for the blinding headache that Donizetti had suffered while writing Edgardo's final aria.



Portrait of Gilbert Duprez in the role of Edgardo, wearing a rather daring costume for the Paris production. 1840. Musée Carnavalet.