

'Lucie' is breathtaking

Opera review

By Janelle Gelfand • jgelfand@enquirer.com • June 27, 2008

Once every decade or two, a voice comes along that is so breathtaking, so thrilling for its sheer beauty and power, you feel lucky to witness it. That was the case when soprano Sarah Coburn took the stage in the title role of Cincinnati Opera's "Lucie de Lammermoor," which opened Thursday in Music Hall.

Donizetti's bel canto opera, more familiar in its Italian version, "Lucia di Lammermoor," has been a vehicle for some of the world's greatest singers, including Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills and Maria Callas. Whether the role will launch Coburn into the firmament of those operatic greats is unknown. Given her performance on Thursday, it could.

Scintillating high notes, agile coloratura, superb acting and a gripping "Mad Scene" would have been enough. But then came that high "F" above high "C" – possibly the highest note ever sung in Music Hall. Her execution of it was not only brilliant but also fearless.

Although Cincinnati Opera has mounted "Lucia" 50 times, this was the company premiere of its French sister, "Lucie," created for Paris in 1839. The story is based on Walter Scott's "The Bride of Lammermoor." Henry Ashton marries off his sister Lucy for his own financial and political gain, but she loves Edgar of Ravenswood, the family's archenemy. Thus begins Lucy's descent into madness.

In the French version, the plot, several characters and the music were changed slightly (Lucie has no maid, for instance). Musically, the French score is a step higher. But all of the great numbers, including the famous Act II Sextet and Lucie's "Mad Scene," were there.

Coburn's first aria was not her familiar "Regnava nel silenzio" but "Que n'avons-nous des ailes" ("If only we had wings," from Donizetti's "Rosmonda d'Inghilterra"). Her sound was crystalline as she sang the mournful little cavatina with beautiful inflection, precision and control, and then twirled irresistibly as petals fell from the sky.

Her emotional range was impressive, too, confronting her brother defiantly while tossing off trills and runs like so many bolts of fireworks. Her "Mad Scene" was a stunning high-wire act as she stumbled, hallucinated and tossed red petals. Her cadenza, with flutist Randall Bowman, will be remembered as one of Music Hall's great musical moments.

Small wonder that the rest of this production paled in comparison. As Edgard, Mark Panuccio was an impassioned actor but his red-blooded Italianate tenor didn't fully project until his farewell scene at the Ravenswood cemetery. There his singing was nuanced and deeply felt and his soft high notes had particular beauty.

Donizetti's music, with its profusion of gorgeous tunes, is so Italian in style, it seemed incongruous to hear this sung in French – when you could hear the French text. Gaetan Laperriere brought dramatic urgency to the role of Henri, with a blustery tone and swallowed French text. Yet his duets, particularly with the scheming Gilbert (Jeremy Cady) were high points. As Arthur, the hapless groom, John McVeigh projected a pure, attractive tenor. Of the men, the evening's standout was Alain Coulombe, who as the chaplain was imposing in presence as well as in vocal power.

In this production created for Glimmerglass Opera and Boston Lyric Opera, the singers navigated a craggy landscape of steel-like planks surrounded by tilted panels that reflected clouds. **Against this, Thomas C. Hase's lighting design was pure genius.**

If anything, the bleak, dark set design by John Conklin echoed the desolation of the Scottish Highlands, and of Lucie's predicament. Mark Streshinsky's effective staging emphasized her isolation. One charming addition (and very French) was the "ballet" – two dancers as a doe and stag, who echoed the story in orchestral interludes.

Then there were those costumes. The Dutch Masters outfits of the men and heavy red gowns of the women did not compute with 17th-century Scotland. The chorus, which sang wonderfully, mostly stood around looking like a Rembrandt painting.

The orchestra, too, led by Jean-Marie Zeitouni, was uneven. Even though the musicians of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra played well – including wonderful brass chorales and refined strings, the balance often overpowered the singers, and I wished for more subtlety of phrasing.

Still, this is a performance not to be missed.

"Lucie de Lammermoor" repeats at 7:30 p.m. Saturday in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-241-2742, <http://www.cincinnatiopera.org>