

Psychiatry in theatre

Lucia di Lammermoor: the 'mad scene'

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Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* stands as one of the most iconic operas in the bel canto tradition, renowned for its expressive music and dramatic intensity. Based on Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), the opera premiered in Naples in 1835 and tells the story of Lucia, a young woman caught in a tragic love affair, manipulated by her brother to marry a man she does not love.

At the core of *Lucia di Lammermoor* is the portrayal of her descent into 'madness'. In one of opera's most famous scenes, Lucia murders the man she has been forced to marry, subsequently falling into a profound mental crisis. A pivotal moment is marked by the aria 'Il dolce suono' ('The Sweet Sound'), which unfolds as an intricate melody reflecting Lucia's deteriorating mental state, blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality. Traditionally staged with Lucia in a bloodstained white wedding dress, she is seen to be experiencing intense auditory and visual hallucinations, convinced she is marrying the man she was forbidden from being with.

*'A heavenly harmony, tell me, do you not hear it?
Ah, the marriage hymn is playing!
They are preparing the rite for us! Oh, how happy I am!
Oh joy that is felt but not said!'*

This portrayal has been widely interpreted as a representation of the psychological toll of extreme emotional distress, exacerbated by repression and isolation. In modern psychiatric terms, Lucia's symptoms have prompted discussion regarding underlying diagnoses, with acute stress reaction, major depressive disorder with psychotic features and post-traumatic stress disorder among them.

The theme of 'madness' in women was a recurrent motif in 19th-century opera, exemplified in works such as *Norma* (1831) and *Hamlet* (1868). This was a period in which the medical and psychological theories of hysteria were being explored by people such as Briquet, Charcot and Freud, reflecting societal gender norms as well as the pathologising of female emotional responses, often framed within the context of oppressive personal or societal circumstances.

While definitive diagnostic clarity remains elusive, the opera endures as a compelling and timeless commentary on the vulnerability of the human mental state. Donizetti himself experienced periods of mental illness throughout his life, which would later be attributed to neurosyphilis. He died at the age of 50 on 8 April 1848, 13 years after the premiere of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. His personal struggles, including time spent in mental institutions, undoubtedly informed the opera's portrayal of psychological distress and its continuing relevance to audiences today.

Declaration of interest

None.



Portrait of Gaetano Donizetti by Francesco Coghetti, 1837.

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