

October 15, 2020 - Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*

An encore performance from the **Al Ruocchio** archives is featured on this week's Thursday Night Opera House: Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*. Premiered on December 26, 1833 at Milan's Teatro alla Scala, the opera was based on Victor Hugo's *Lucrèce Borgia*, which mixes fact and fiction about the legendary daughter of Pope Alexander VI. In the opera, Lucrezia and her husband Alfonso d'Este are a power couple, each with their own operatives and each seemingly with their own political agenda. There is indeed historical fact to support this. This was a marriage of two great political families, which included some of the most lethal despots of the day. Lucrezia did not *marry* a Borgia, she *was* one. It is entirely plausible that such a woman would have her own spies doing her personal bidding, independent of her husband.

The story takes place in early sixteenth-century Venice and Ferrara. During Carnival festivities in Venice, Gennaro (tenor **Alfredo Kraus**) is drawn to an unknown woman, until Maffio Orsini (mezzo-soprano **Shirley Verrett** in a "trouser" role) and his other friends reveal her as the infamous Lucrezia Borgia (soprano **Montserrat Caballé**). Lucrezia's husband, Duke Alfonso d'Este of Ferrara (bass **Ezio Flagello**), is jealous of his wife's interest in Gennaro, and Gennaro--to prove that he has no feelings for Lucrezia--defaces the Borgia crest in front of his friends. Lucrezia demands of Alfonso the death penalty for the offender but is horrified to discover that he is Gennaro who--unbeknown to all but herself--is her son.

Alfonso makes her give Gennaro the poisoned Borgia wine, but after his departure, she persuades the young man to drink an antidote. Gennaro joins Orsini and his friends at a banquet, where Lucrezia--in revenge for her treatment in Venice--has poisoned the wine. Appalled to discover Gennaro among the guests, Lucrezia reveals that she is his mother and begs him to take the antidote but, shocked to learn his true parentage, Gennaro prefers to die with his friends.

Jonel Perlea conducts the RCA Italiana Orchestra and Chorus in this 1965 RCA/BMC recording, CD number 261021.

From a 1977 Australian Opera production, **Dame Joan Sutherland** sings Lucrezia's final Act II cabaletta "Era desso il figlio mio": <http://youtu.be/5OmHN2bCrXs>.

Please join me next Thursday, October 22nd, for Erich Wolfgang Korngold's 1920 opera *Die Tote Stadt* (*The Dead City*), based on Belgian Symbolist writer Georges Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte*. **Carol Neblett** sings the roles of Marietta and Marie, and René Kollo is the widower Paul. Heard in other principal roles are **Benjamin Luxon** as Frank, **Rose Wagemann** as Brigitta, and **Anton de Ridder** as Gaston. **Erich Leinsdorf** conducts this 1975 RCA Victor recording.

The Thursday Night Opera House is heard at 7:00 p.m. Eastern on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina. We're also streamed online, and you can listen as well on WCPE's Android or iPhone apps.

Bob Chapman

W. Robert Chapman, Host of the Thursday Night Opera House