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Gothic Imaginations in *Primo Ottocento* Opera

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A Thesis submitted to the New Zealand School of Music
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music in Musicology

New Zealand School of Music

2010
Abstract

Connections between the Gothic and opera remain a subsidiary concern to most writers on the Gothic and on opera, if they are even addressed at all. In this study I wish to illuminate how the Gothic is presented both musically and visually on stage through the setting and thematic traits in select nineteenth-century Italian operas. A number of ideas are central to this aim. Firstly, that the ‘Gothic’ dimension of ‘Gothic opera’ is overtly represented through staging. The settings of many ‘Gothic operas’ in Scotland and England reveal the continental European fascination with northern Europe and its history. This stemmed from the influx of English and Scottish literature, most prominently the Ossian poems and the works of Walter Scott and Shakespeare. Consequently, Gothic scenes such as ruined medieval castles and rugged cliffs, masked by darkness or mist are enmeshed with a northern landscape. Tartan costuming also visually situates the Gothic scenes in Northern Europe. Furthermore, the use of musical mannerisms of Scotland and England, particularly in chorus scenes, reinforces this parallel between the Gothic and the north, linking music to the visible Gothic setting. Secondly, I will explore the way in which Gothic imaginings of both immaterial and physical incarnations of the supernatural move between the latent subconscious and conscious realisation. This is evident through the interplay between voice, orchestra and the singer’s corporeality and draws upon recent operatic studies concerning representation of ‘others’, dramatisation, and theatrical spaces. This second section positions women at the heart of the Gothic in opera, as the soprano is most often the character susceptible to other-worldly encounters and madness.
The fundamental figure in this study is Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848). A number of his operas from the 1830s, especially *Lucia di Lammermoor*, emphasise how the Gothic may be revealed in opera. However, I conclude with a chapter on *Macbeth*, the ‘Gothic opera’ of Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), for this work demonstrates how the configuration of the Gothic is developed in musical and dramatic terms and presents a case where the supernatural influence becomes all-empowered.
Acknowledgements

Firstly, I wish to thank my supervisors, Dr Inge van Rij and Prof. Elizabeth Hudson. Their discerning comments and many suggestions about my work have been invaluable.

There are a number of other people who have assisted this project in various ways. I am grateful to my family, especially my parents, for proofreading, providing many cups of tea and an alternative place to work. Also, thanks go to Andrew for his help entering musical examples. I wish to show my appreciation to Dean, for giving me the time and space to complete my thesis; and to Connor, for his enthusiasm for opera in general and ‘all those crazy ladies’. Thanks must also go to two of my friends and fellow Master’s students in particular: Alex, for the many coffee dates, helpful suggestions and proofreading; and Teressa, for advice, proofreading, and sharing amusing eighteenth-century quotations.
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