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Gothic Imaginations in *Primo Ottocento* Opera

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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.

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Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>Abstract</i> | <i>i</i> |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | <i>ii</i> |
| <i>List of Examples</i> | <i>v</i> |
| <i>List of Figures</i> | <i>vii</i> |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter One: Scotland and the Gothic | |
| Neapolitan Scotland..... | 19 |
| The Myth of the North..... | 25 |
| Scotland's Dual Personas..... | 33 |
| Donizetti and Cammarano's 'Scottish Opera'..... | 39 |
| Musical 'Scottishness'..... | 45 |
| The Visual Gothic..... | 65 |
| Chapter Two: 'Heroines', Hallucination, and Hysteria | |
| Gothic Women..... | 93 |
| Emma et Lucie..... | 109 |
| Other Voices..... | 116 |
| 'L'ombra mostrarsi'..... | 122 |
| 'Quella voce m'è qui nel cor discesa'..... | 143 |
| Chapter Three: The Witches' Lair | |
| Verdi's Gothic Opera..... | 162 |
| Grand Opera and Gothic Opera..... | 171 |
| 'Il sol cruento mio pensier la dà forma'..... | 185 |
| Conclusion..... | 233 |
| Appendices: | |
| Appendix 1: Timeline of significant translations and adaptations of the Ossian Poems..... | 237 |
| Appendix 2: Timeline of significant translations and adaptations of the literature of Walter Scott..... | 244 |
| Appendix 3: Donizetti's Gothic and British Operas..... | 248 |
| Bibliography..... | 249 |

List of Examples

| | |
|--|-----|
| Example 1.1: <i>Preludio</i> from Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb.1-21. | 47 |
| Example 1.2: <i>Preludio</i> from Donizetti's <i>Lucrezia Borgia</i> , bb.1-13. | 48 |
| Example 1.3: Hunting chorus from Act 1, scene 1 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 64-90. | 51 |
| Example 1.4: 'Per te d'immenso giubilo' from Act 2, scene 2 in Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 20-35. | 56 |
| Example 1.5: 'D'immesso giubilo', Act 3, scene 2 from Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 34-74. | 59 |
| Example 1.6: <i>Sinfonia</i> from Donizetti's <i>Roberto Devereux</i> , bb. 10-29. | 62 |
| Example 1.7: Elisabetta's entrance for her cavatina in Act 1, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Roberto Devereux</i> , bb. 1-6. | 62 |
| Example 2.1: 'Home Sweet Home', from John Bishop's <i>Clari</i> . | 97 |
| Example 2.2: Act 2 finale of Donizetti's <i>Anna Bolena</i> , bb. 293-6. | 97 |
| Example 2.3: Act 2 finale of Donizetti's <i>Anna Bolena</i> , bb.160-8. | 98 |
| Example 2.4: 'Cielo a'miei lunghi spasimi', Act 2 finale of Donizetti's <i>Anna Bolena</i> , bb. 246-57. | 100 |
| Example 2.5: 'Coppia iniqua', Act 2 finale of Donizetti's <i>Anna Bolena</i> , bb. 361-88. | 101 |
| Example 2.6: Harp introduction to Lucia's cavatina, Act 1, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 1-8. | 123 |
| Example 2.7: Scena, Act 1, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 27-48. | 129 |
| Example 2.8: 'Regnava nel silenzio', Act 1, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 58-95. | 138 |
| Example 2.9: 'Quando rapito in estasi', Act 1, scene 2 of <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , Donizetti, bb. 129-34. | 142 |
| Example 2.10: Act 2 finale of <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , Donizetti, bb. 132-9. | 146 |
| Example 2.11: Raimondo's aria, Act 3, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 19-31. | 147 |
| Example 2.12: 'Ardon gl'incensi', Act 3, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 7-28. | 150 |
| Example 2.13: Act 3, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 78-94. | 154 |
| Example 2.14: Lucia's mad scene, Act 3, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 21-4. | 156 |
| Example 2.15: The return of 'Verranno a te' in the mad scene, Act 3, scene 2 of Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , bb. 42-50. | 157 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Example 2.16: ‘Spargi d’amaro pianto’, Act 3, scene 2 of <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , Donizetti, bb. 270-95. | 159 |
| Example 3.1: Witches’ chorus, Act 1, scene 1 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 52-7. | 193 |
| Example 3.2: Drum interruption and Allegro of witches’ chorus, Act 1, scene 1 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 90-120. | 194 |
| Example 3.3: Witches’ Waltz, Act 3, scene 1 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 207-14. | 197 |
| Example 3.4: ‘Tutto è finito’ motive, Act 1, scene 4 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 76-99. | 201 |
| Example 3.5: ‘Come del ciel’ from Act 2, scene 2 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 21-9. | 205 |
| Example 3.6: Duet, Act 1, scene 4 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 136-94. | 209 |
| Example 3.7: ‘Sappia la sposa mia’, Act 1, scene 4 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 9-22. | 213 |
| Example 3.8: ‘Sappia la sposa mia’, Act 1, scene 4 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 52-6. | 214 |
| Example 3.9: <i>Brindisi</i> theme, Act 2 finale of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 80-8. | 219 |
| Example 3.10: Act 2 finale of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 396-413. | 221 |
| Example 3.11: Lady Macbeth’s <i>sonnambulismo</i> , Act 4, scene 2 of Verdi’s <i>Macbeth</i> , bb. 1-78. | 228 |

List of Figures

- Figure 1.1: ‘Sala nel Castello di Windsor negli appartamenti delle regina’, Alessandro Sanquirico, stage design for Act 1, scene 1 of Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* (Milan, Teatre Carcano, 1830). 67
- Figure 1.2: ‘Parco nel Castello di Windsor’, Alessandro Sanquirico, stage design for Act 1, scene 2 of Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* (Milan, Teatre Carcano, 1830). 68
- Figure 1.3: John Constable’s *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop’s Garden*, (1825). 69
- Figure 1.4: ‘Atrio delle prigioni nella Torre di Londra’, Alessandro Sanquirico, stage design for Act 2, scene 3 of Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* (Milan, Teatre Carcano, 1830). 71
- Figure 1.5: Alessandro Sanquirico, costume for Anna in Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* (Milan, Teatre Carcano, 1830). 73
- Figure 1.6: Alessandro Sanquirico, costume for Percy in Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* (Milan, Teatre Carcano, 1830). 74
- Figure 1.7: Filippo Peroni, costume for Edgardo in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Naples, Teatro san Carlo, 1835). 76
- Figure 1.8: Filippo Peroni, costume for Enrico in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Naples, Teatro san Carlo, 1835). 77
- Figure 1.9: Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani as Lucia at the London Premiere, Her Majesty’s Theatre, 5 April 1838. 78
- Figure 1.10: Filippo Peroni, costume for Alisa (left) and Lucia (right) in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Naples, Teatro san Carlo, 1835). 80
- Figure 1.11: Costume for Alisa in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Paris, Théâtre-Italien, 1837). 82
- Figure 1.12: Hautecouer Herménégilde, costume for Lucie in Act 3 of Donizetti’s *Lucie de Lammermoor* (Paris, Théâtre de la Renaissance, 1839). 83
- Figure 1.13: Hautecouer Herménégilde, costume for Lucie in Act 3 of Donizetti’s *Lucie de Lammermoor* (Paris, Théâtre de la Renaissance, 1839). 84
- Figure 1.14: Francesco Bagnara’s set design for Act 3, scene 3 of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Venice, Teatro la Fenice, 1844). 88
- Figure 1.15: Francesco Bagnara’s set design for Act 3, scene 3 of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Venice, Teatro la Fenice, 1844). 88

- Figure 2.1: Joshua Reynold's portrait of the Countesse of Eglinton (1777). Photograph courtesy of Agnew's, London/The Bridgeman Art Library. 126
- Figure 3.2: 'Parco. In lontananza il castello di Macbeth', Giuseppe Bertoja's stage design for Act 2, scene 2 of Verdi's *Macbeth* (Venice, Teatro La Fenice, 1847). 163
- Figure 3.1: Giuseppe Bertoja's stage design for the witches' grotto in Act 1, scene 1 of Verdi's *Macbeth* (Venice, Teatro La Fenice, 1847). 163
- Figure 3.3: Costume for Macbeth in Verdi's *Macbeth* (Venice, la Fenice, 1847). 165
- Figure 3.4: Costume for Lady Macbeth in Act 4 of Verdi's *Macbeth* (Venice, la Fenice, 1847). 166
- Figure 3.5: Costume for the witches in Verdi's *Macbeth* (Venice, Teatro la Fenice, 1847). 187
- Figure 3.6: Henry Füssli's *Three Witches* (1783). Photograph courtesy of the Collection of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre/The Bridgeman Art Library. 188