

Expressions of Madness in Coloratura Mad Scenes
of Bel Canto Operas

Rachel Christenson

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2017

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Wayne Kompelien, D.M.A.
Thesis Chair

John Hugo, D.M.A.
Committee Member

Edward Martin, Ph.D.
Committee Member

James H. Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

Date

Abstract

This thesis will explore the musical innovations in the mad scenes of the bel canto composers in the 1800s. It will analyze Gaetano Donizetti's mad scenes in *Anna Bolena* (1830) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), and Vincenzo Bellini's mad scenes in *I Puritani* (1835) to discover how each composer expresses madness through the high and virtuosic voice of the coloratura soprano. The subject of madness is not a new idea in opera. However, the mad scenes of Donizetti and Bellini are the most successful and are often performed in opera houses around the world. Specific attention is given to the vocal melodies and passages of coloratura which are used to express the various emotions of the character in the midst of her madness. Between 1830 and 1835, the madness of the characters becomes increasingly extreme, culminating in the shocking and thrilling moment in *Lucia di Lammermoor* when Lucia appears on the stage in a blood stained nightgown. She has gone insane and has murdered her husband. Through the musical genius of Donizetti and Bellini and the vocal prowess of great impresarios, some of the greatest meltdowns of all time are played out on the operatic stage.

Expressions of Madness in Coloratura Mad Scenes of Bel Canto Operas

Introduction

Opera first appeared in Florence, Italy just before 1600. From the earliest operas, composers recognized the dramatic possibilities in depicting madness on stage through music and drama. From George F. Handel's mad scene in his opera *Orlando*, which premiered in 1733, to the premiere of *Idomeneo* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in 1781, to Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in 1835, madness has fascinated opera composers and their audiences for centuries. In many cases, the story's hero or heroine experienced mental illness or confusion as a result of some tragedy the individual endured. Whether it was the death or rejection of a lover or the weight of a difficult circumstance, the pressure proved to be too much for the character to bear, and he or she yielded to the overwhelming mental and emotional stress. This is the case in the bel canto operas that will be discussed in this thesis.

Romanticism, Bel Canto, and the Coloratura Soprano

Bel canto was a style of opera that arose during the early nineteenth century at the dawn of the Romantic period. It began with Beethoven's Third Symphony, *Eroica*, in 1803.¹ Composers of the late eighteenth century, such as Haydn and Mozart, valued structured symmetry and form. There was a shift in focus when the artists and composers in the early nineteenth century became more concerned with personal emotional expression. The music of the Classicists was characterized by form and rational order

¹ Walter Frisch. *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., NY, 2013), 1-2.

while music of the Romantics developed an emphasis on extreme and sometimes reckless abandonment of rational thought for the sake of emotion.² With this philosophical change in emphasis, it is not surprising that the most profound mad scenes in opera originate from the nineteenth century when Romantic expressions of unbridled emotion were popular in music and philosophy. The Italian composers Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) dominated the opera houses in Paris and Naples during the 1820's and 1830's, writing in what became known as the *bel canto* style.³ Gioachino Rossini was the forerunner of this style. In his early years, he was trained in the church where he studied the works of Haydn and Mozart and drew from their stylistic approaches as the foundation for his own musical compositions. These two influential composers continued to have a central role in Rossini's own career as a composer.⁴ His work in operatic composition transformed Italian opera in Venice and Naples, and his later work in France established Paris as the most important European center for opera in the early nineteenth century.

The term *bel canto* means "beautiful singing" and was an approach to singing that formed the foundation of the Italian opera tradition beginning in the seventeenth century. Rossini himself studied the *bel canto* method and was exposed to professional singing

² Arnold Whittall. *Romantic Music: A Concise History from Schubert to Sibelius* (Thames & Hudson Inc., NY, 1987), 9-10.

³ Leon Plantinga. *Romantic music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (W.W. Norton & Company Inc., NY, 1984), 130-143.

⁴ Richard Osborne. *Rossini*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 3, 2017), 7.

from an early age by his mother, Anna Rossini, who was a talented opera singer.⁵ By the eighteenth century, the bel canto technique was responsible for the rise of singers with voices of extraordinary skill, agility, and beauty. Operas became an avenue through which these exceptional singers were able to display their skill through improvised cadenzas during their performances. In some cases, arias became more of an opportunity for the singer to show off than an effective vehicle for the drama.⁶ Rossini composed for such renowned singers as the soprano, Isabella Colbran, and the famous castrati, Giovan Battista Velluti, writing in a dramatic expression and virtuosic style and laying the groundwork for the bel canto tradition.⁷ The success of the bel canto opera style was due to combining the importance of the voice as a dramatic tool, with the Romantic approach prioritizing the freedom of personal emotional expression.⁸ The music of bel canto operas was tonal and characterized by extremes of dynamics and emotion, making it the perfect vehicle for dramatic narratives. Through Rossini's example, the simple harmonic structures and orchestrations of Bellini and Donizetti operas were modeled after the classical operas of Haydn and Mozart. The bel canto composers used this orderly, foundational technique to turn the attention of the audience to the virtuosity of the singer and the vocal melody. All of these aspects of bel canto opera can be observed in the mad

⁵ Osborne, Richard. *Rossini*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 3, 2017), 9.

⁶ Cornelius L. Reid. *Bel Canto: Principles and Practices*, 9.

⁷ Osborne, Richard. *Master Musicians Series : Rossini : His Life and Works (2)*. New York, US: Oxford University Press, 2007. Accessed April 3, 2017. ProQuest ebrary, 13.

⁸ Burton D. Fisher. *A History of Opera : Milestones and Metamorphoses* (Coral Gables, FL: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2003), 128.

scenes of Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini, who followed the example set by Rossini.

The three operas that will be discussed are *Anna Bolena* (1830) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) by Gaetano Donizetti, and *I Puritani* (1835) by Vincenzo Bellini, each of which contains a mad scene performed by a coloratura soprano. Coloratura is a term that refers both to a style of vocal melody that is extremely virtuosic and melismatic and the type of voice type that is capable of performing these ornamented melodies. Bellini and Donizetti wrote some of the most thrilling and challenging operatic mad scenes for coloratura soprano. These three operas offer excellent examples of the treatment of the coloratura soprano's voice type within the context of the most famous operatic mad scenes of the nineteenth century.⁹

Anna Bolena: The Story

Although *Lucia di Lammermoor* contains Gaetano Donizetti's most famous mad scene, *Anna Bolena* is also a masterpiece, written earlier in his career. Premiering in 1830, *Anna Bolena* was his first major success which opened opportunities for his later works to be performed in the most prestigious opera houses in Europe.¹⁰ Although Donizetti was attracted to dramas like *Anna Bolena*, that allowed opportunities to invoke pathos or compassion, he found himself conforming to the more conservative tastes of the Italian opera houses at the onset of his career. These restrictions, along with the public's preference for happy endings, hindered Donizetti from choosing librettos that were more

⁹ Leon Plantinga. *Romantic music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 130-143.

¹⁰E. and R. Peschel. "Donizetti and the music of mental derrangement", 193.

suited to his tastes. After the success of *Anna Bolena*, Donizetti was commissioned by French opera houses, where there were fewer restrictions. There, he found more freedom to choose librettos that contained dramatic, or even violent content. He became known for his ability to invoke pathos through his musical settings of dramatic and tragic librettos.¹¹

Donizetti commissioned Felice Romani to write the libretto for *Anna Bolena*. It is based on the tragic history of the famous English queen, Anne Boleyn, who was condemned to be executed on charges of adultery, incest, and conspiracy.¹² As the opera begins, Jane Seymour is introduced as the King's new love interest, but she is burdened by guilt over her betrayal of her mistress, Anna, the queen. Anna is unhappy that her husband seems distant but is unaware that her handmaid is her rival. The king has planned a trap for Anna by inviting Percy, the lover of her youth, back from exile. He plans to catch Anna and Percy in a compromising situation and to accuse them of adultery. Meanwhile, Smeton, the court musician, has fallen in love with Anna. He is about to return a miniature of her that he had stolen, but conceals himself when Percy enters the queen's chamber, passionately proclaiming his love and his longing to know if Anna loves him. When Anna refuses Percy, he takes out his sword to kill himself and Smeton rushes forward to protect Anna. Just then, the King enters finding the queen with Percy and accuses her of unfaithfulness. Smeton accidentally drops the miniature,

¹¹ William Ashbrook. *Donizetti and his Operas* (Cambridge, England, Cambridge University, 1982), 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, 317.

implicating her even more. Anna, Percy, and Smeton are arrested and brought to the Tower of London to await their trial.

In Anna's cell, Jane pleads with Anna to confess so that the King may spare her life. However, Anna insists that she will not confess to the crimes since she is innocent. Jane finally reveals that she is the King's new love interest. Anna is angry, but Jane's "sincere remorse" softens her and the queen forgives her. Smeton confesses to being Anna's lover believing that it will save her, but his false confession only ensures her conviction. Anna is condemned to death even though Jane pleads with the King to spare her life. In the final scene, as Anna awaits execution in the Tower of London, she reminisces about her girlhood love for Percy. Her hallucinations continue until the sounds of celebration heralding the wedding of the King and Jane bring her to her senses. In her final moments, Anna forgives them both and asks God to be merciful to the new couple.¹³

Anna Bolena's Mad Scene

The final scene of *Anna Bolena* is set in Anna's cell in the Tower of London where a chorus of ladies lament Anna's hallucinatory state. At the beginning of the scene, Donizetti creates a "tragic atmosphere" using the solo oboe, which introduces the melody of the chorus.¹⁴ The chorus describes her "delirium and grief" as well as her uncharacteristic mood swings. Donizetti uses a pattern of long and short rhythms to create the affect of sighing in the melody of the chorus, setting the tone for Anna's emotional final scene, as shown in Example 1.

¹³ William Ashbrook. *Donizetti and his Opera*, 549-550.

¹⁴ William Ashbrook. *Donizetti and his Operas*, 318-319.

Example 1: Chorus melody – Excerpt from Anna Bolena Act II, No. 15, mm. 30-31

The image shows a musical score for a chorus melody. It consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both staves are in the key of B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "in tan-to af-fan - - no, in tan-to lut - - to,". The melody is characterized by a long, sweeping line that spans across both staves, with a Picardy third cadence at the end.

This chorus ends on a beautiful and affective Picardy third, cadencing in F major, as shown in Example 2. Donizetti may have been seeking to resolve to a major sonority in order to provide a smooth transition into Anna's entrance. Directly following this chorus, the orchestra plays the introductory theme to Anna's mad scene in the key of F major.

Example 2: Picardy third – Excerpt from Anna Bolena Act II, No. 15, mm 99-102

The image shows a musical score for a Picardy third. It consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both staves are in the key of B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "spex - xa - re il cor?" and "- xa - - re il cor?". The melody is characterized by a long, sweeping line that spans across both staves, with a Picardy third cadence at the end.

The orchestra swells and then dramatically decreases in dynamic providing a smooth transition into Anna's arioso. As an introduction for Anna's entrance, Donizetti has the strings playing a noble sounding melody reflecting her position as queen.¹⁵ Anna's character is falsely accused and imprisoned. Through this theme, Donizetti's may also be emphasizing her innocence and the injustice of her persecution.

¹⁵ Ibid., 319.

Example 3: Violin melody – Excerpt from *Anna Bolena* Act II, No. 16, mm. 1-4



As the ladies of the court gather around her, lamenting her fate, Anna is bewildered by their sorrow since she is under the delusion that it is her own wedding day: Anna has forgotten herself and is oblivious to the reality of her situation. Her first coloratura episode in the scene emphasizes her description of the altar where she believes she will marry the King. This first melisma extends to a high C, leaping up to the high note in a sudden burst of excitement before quickly descending.

Example 4: Melisma – Excerpt from *Anna Bolena* Act II, No. 16, mm. 22-25



Anna becomes preoccupied with adorning herself for the wedding in a gown and a wreath of flowers, but then, suddenly exclaims, “*Che Percy non lo sappia; il Re l'impose*” (Don’t tell Percy; the King commands it). The women’s chorus realizes that Anna is reminiscing about her marriage to the King, when she had to forsake Percy: Anna is retreating into her memories as a coping mechanism.

At this point, Anna has finished her arioso and the orchestra plays the introduction to her aria. The flute plays the theme, which floats high above a plodding bass line that leans into each down beat, giving the atmosphere a solemn heaviness, as shown in Example 5.

Example 5: Flute theme – Excerpt from *Anna Bolena* Act II, No. 16, mm. 45-49



Anna becomes increasingly agitated, believing that Percy is coming to reproach her for leaving him to marry the King. The music builds and accelerates as Anna exclaims that she cannot hide from Percy. The tension builds and Anna's vocal line rises, culminating on a G5 as the orchestra plays at fortissimo. The tension is released as Anna's vocal line descends and she cries, "Forgive me".

Example 6: Anna's descending vocal line – Excerpt from *Anna Bolena* Act II, No. 16, mm. 66-70

Anna continues her cabaletta and the plodding orchestral accompaniment returns, emphasizing her unhappiness. Once again, Anna's mood changes almost instantaneously, indicated by a light, high flute motif that resembles a trill. This creates a stark contrast to the mood of the measures before as shown in Example 7.

Example 7: Flute motif – Excerpt from *Anna Bolena* Act II, No. 16, mm. 75-78



The tempo accelerates as Anna's excitement grows. "You are smiling?" she exclaims, "O joy!" The melody rises in pitch, culminating once again on a high note and a descending arpeggio to end the phrase.

Example 8: Descending scale – Excerpt from *Anna Bolena* Act II, No. 16, mm. 87-90

ANNA

-cy? oh gio-ja!.. ah gio - - - ja!..

A clarinet solo provides a transition into the orchestral introduction for Anna's next cabaletta. This time the clarinet (rather than the flute) plays the melody, one more ornamented than that of the previous section. Anna continues, reminiscing about a happier time in her girlhood. This phrase is in an inverse arch shape as Anna's vocal line ascends and descends by gentle, yet simple stepwise motion, as seen in Example 9 below.

Example 9: Example of coloratura and the gentle shape of Anna's vocal line - Excerpt from *Anna Bolena* Act II, No. 16

ai ver-di pla-ta-ni. al que-to ri - - - o

William Ashbrook points out a theme of, "descending major and minor seconds," which are a frequently emphasized throughout this aria entitled 'Al dolce guidami castel' (Lead me to the sweet castle). This short aria is in a simple form of A A' B B'.¹⁶ Anna's vocal embellishments in this cabaletta accentuate her distress and unhappiness, depicting her character as a true victim of injustice. The passionate aria comes to a close after a series of melismas and ornamentation.

The action continues when Anna hears the sound of drums and overhears the guards coming to fetch the prisoners for execution. She is suddenly brought back to

¹⁶ William Ashbrook. *Donizetti and his operas*, 319.

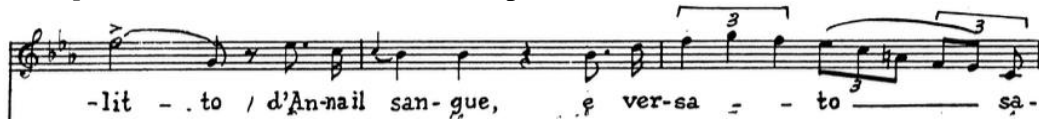
reality and the music intensifies as Anna's anxiety grows. Percy and Rochefort (Anna's brother) and Smeton are brought into her cell. Anna is distraught that they are both going to their deaths because of her. Smeton comes forward and admits to sealing her fate by incriminating himself. He says that he was led to believe that his confession would save her life. Anna seems to hallucinate again, asking Smeton why he is not tuning his lute. Percy and Rochefort realize that she is not in her right mind. Anna begins praying for strength in her time of sorrow as Percy and Rochefort hope for her hallucinations to continue to protect her from reality. The music of this short trio is not characterized by extremes of dynamics or by impressive virtuosity. Appropriately, the theme is beautiful and repetitive, resembling the simplicity of a strophic church hymn. The orchestral accompaniment simulates an organ with long, sustained harmonies that do not draw attention away from the singer. This peaceful moment is interrupted by the sounds of celebration in the distance. Anna demands to know what the commotion is about and her attendants reluctantly respond that the King has married Jane Seymour just hours before Anna's execution. Anna interrupts them with impassioned bursts of anguish, "Silence! No more!" as shown in Example 10.

Example 10: "Silence!" – Excerpt from Anna Bolena Act II, No. 16, mm. 339-342

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The top staff is a vocal line in G major, and the bottom staff is a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "-ten - to è Re-gi - na..." and "Ta - ce - - -".

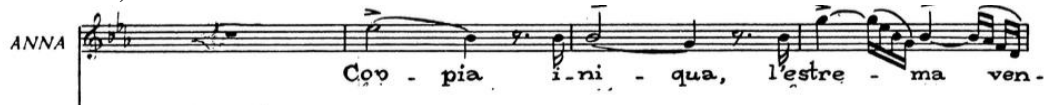
The orchestra accompanies her at fortissimo as she exclaims, "Anna's blood alone is needed to complete the crime." In Example 11, Anna's

Example 11: “Anna’s blood...” - Excerpt from Anna Bolena Act II, No. 16 351-353



Anna is jolted back to reality once more, and begins her final aria, ‘*Coppia Iniqua*’ (Wicked Couple). The aria begins with a strong downbeat and a waltz pattern in the orchestral accompaniment. Anna’s opening text reveals her indignation at the actions of the King and Jane, whom she refers to as the “wicked couple”. Anna’s melody descends to lower in her register, as if to angrily condemn the couple for her unjust treatment, as shown in Example 12.

Example 12: Example of descending melody – Excerpt from Anna Bolena Act II, No. 16 Moderato, mm. 361-364



As Anna wrestles violently with her emotions, the women’s chorus provides a commentary, acknowledging the injustice of the situation. This is a clear example of Donizetti’s ability to draw his audience into the emotion of the scene. The chorus serves an empathetic purpose as they react to the injustice of Anna’s situation, inviting the audience to enter into the story and experience their own emotions of indignation and sympathy on Anna’s behalf.

Anna’s struggle with her anger and pain is expressed through added trills and a long, ascending phrase, which builds in intensity as she sings about her awaiting grave. Anna is fighting for the strength to forgive her offenders, and her voice climbs higher and higher in tessitura as shown in Example 13.

Example 13: High tessitura – Excerpt from Anna Bolena Act II, No. 16 Moderato, mm. 384-386



At the return of the aria's opening theme Anna's melody becomes increasingly ornamented. Donizetti's use of coloratura for the final minutes of the scene intensifies the emotional impact. There seems to be a correlation between an increase in the number of notes Anna sings and an increase in the intensity of the emotions expressed throughout the scene. The entire cast joins Anna as the orchestra crescendos and prepares for the final cadence. Traditionally, the chorus sings through their final phrase and then the orchestra and chorus drop out to allow Anna to finish on her final high note. The orchestra closes the opera at fortissimo, prolonging the tonic to provide a sense of finality to Anna's fate.

Anna's mad scene is unique because it combines "aspects of [a] mad scene and [a] death scene" as she struggles to remain tethered to reality in the final hours of her life.¹⁷ Anna traverses an obstacle course of emotions, experiencing indignation, sorrow, joy, and anxiety. Ashbrook describes how this scene "presents the stages of Anna's retreat from unendurable reality, through longing for release, to triumph" through her choice to forgive her enemies. This emotional "episode" runs the gauntlet of vocal difficulty and dramatic intensity and it is an exemplary piece of Donizetti's brilliant musical intuition for tragic endings.¹⁸

¹⁷ William Ashbrook. *Donizetti and his operas*, 318.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Lucia di Lammermoor: The Story

The tragic story of *Lucia di Lammermoor* provided the perfect opportunity to showcase Donizetti's dramatic tastes and talents. *Lucia* premiered in 1835, five years after his success with *Anna Bolena*. The composer commissioned the libretto from Salvatore Cammerano, who adapted the story from a popular Walter Scott novel "The Bride of Lammermoor".¹⁹ Cammerano's plot is charged with emotions well-suited to the opera stage. The story, set in Scotland during the time of political uncertainty at the close of the 16th century, addresses themes of love, hatred, betrayal, sorrow, and, of course, madness. Lady Lucia Ashton, the title character, belongs to a family of high social status. She has fallen in love with Sir Edgardo of Ravenswood. At the opening of Act I, Enrico is told that his sister is in love with Sir Edgardo and he becomes furious since the two families are involved in a blood feud. Henry swears vengeance on Edgardo and the scene changes as Lucia takes the stage for her opening aria. This scene gives the audience their first glimpse of Lucia's mental instability and tendency to fantasize, which foreshadows the mad scene in Act II.²⁰ At the end of Act I, Edgardo and Lucia make promises of faithfulness to one another and Edgardo leaves on a diplomatic mission to France.

At the opening of Act II, it has been a few months since Edgardo's departure. Enrico has been withholding Edgardo's letters from Lucia, and she has begun to believe that Edgardo no longer cares for her. Enrico manages to coerce Lucia into marrying Sir Arturo Bucklow in order to protect their family from financial ruin. In the next scene,

¹⁹ Gaetano Donizetti and Salvatore Cammarano. *Lucia Di Lammermoor: The Bride of Lammermoor: Opera in Three Acts*. (New York: G. Schirmer, 1898).

²⁰ Gaetano Donizetti and Salvatore Cammarano. *Lucia di Lammermoor: Opera in Two Acts*, 32-35.

Lucia is presented to Arturo and Enrico forcefully compels her to sign the marriage contract. Just as the marriage is legalized Edgardo bursts into the room declaring his love for Lucia. When he discovers she is now married, he accuses her of unfaithfulness. His anger and rejection is more than Lucia can bear. She collapses as Edgardo storms out of the castle.

Lucia's Mad Scene

Lucia's mad scene takes place in the second scene of Act III. The setting is Lammermoor, where the wedding guests have gathered to celebrate the marriage feast. The mood of the scene quickly changes from celebratory to solemn when Raimondo Bidebent, a chaplain and good family friend of the Ashtons, interrupts the festivities and announces that Lucia has murdered her husband. As the chorus sings ominously in the background, Lucia appears, blood stains on her white dress, and a dagger in her hand. She is pale and her hair is disheveled. The solo flute plays a high, ethereal motive. Some professional productions of *Lucia di Lammermoor* use the solo glass harmonica instead of the flute in this scene for an eerie, atmospheric effect.²¹

Example 14: Flute melody – Excerpt from *Lucia di Lammermoor* Act III, No. 14, 10 measures before 24



In the first section of the mad scene, Lucia is hallucinating about a happy reunion with Edgardo. The music flows at a slow pace and the theme moves in chromatic, mostly stepwise motion as shown in Example 15.

²¹ Roger Parks. "Lucia Di Lammermoor's Mad Tragedy in Donizetti's Mad Life." (The Guardian, January 28, 2010) accessed December 07, 2016.

Example 15: Lucia calls Edgardo – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14, 13 measures before 25

gelomiserpeggia nelsen!... trema ogni fi - fra... vacilla il pie! Presso la fon - te

The music builds in intensity as Lucia calls for Edgardo to meet her by the fountain. This fountain was their rendezvous spot in Act I, and also the scene of Lucia's first hallucination of a ghost. The music transitions into recitative and Lucia turns from her imagined conversation with Edgardo to express her own emotions. She sings of "a shudder" that runs through her veins and of her trembling heart. Lucia's vocal line remains within the confines of the staff for the duration of this recitative.

Example 16: Lucia sings that "a shudder" runs through her veins – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14, 13 measures before 25

Lucia gelomiserpeggia nelsen!... trema ogni fi - fra...

Lucia's mood suddenly changes again as she returns to her hallucination about Edgardo. Even though she is inviting Edgardo to rest with her at the fountain, the strings play a series of anxious tremolos, intensifying Lucia's second plea for Edgardo to join her.

Example 17: String tremolo's – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14, 13 measures before 25

Lucia gelomiserpeggia nelsen!... trema ogni fi - fra... vacilla il pie! Presso la fon - te

Vni a tempo Recitativo fp

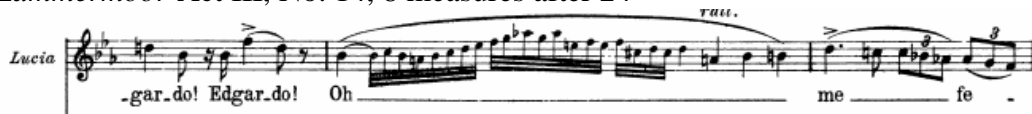
Vle fp

Ve. PIZZ. ARCO fp

Cb. PIZZ. ARCO fp

Another possible interpretation of this short passage is that Donizetti is creating an illogical contrast of emotions. A mind consumed by madness is not coherent. This may be what Donizetti was trying to convey through his music, that though Lucia is describing a peaceful and intimate encounter with her lover, there is something very wrong with the scene as a whole. She is fixated on something that does not exist and she is out of touch with reality. Another aspect of madness that Donizetti frequently expresses throughout this scene is sudden changes of mood or illogical jumps from one thought or idea to the next. Lucia's melodies frequently change and devolve into the passages of detailed ornamentation, as seen in Example 18, which is characteristic of coloratura repertoire.

Example 18: Coloratura passage from Lucia's mad scene – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14, 8 measures after 24



In order to depict bursts of extreme emotion, Donizetti uses passages of vocal embellishment to express emotions that cannot be expressed through words. In some instances these melismas are so extensive that barely a remnant of discernable melody can be detected.²² One interpretation stated it this way:

“As she retreats into fantasies of a happy union with her true beloved...her singing becomes more and more florid; by the end of the scene she has turned into a vocal whirling dervish, streaming forth cascades of vocal display.”²³

As this ends, the orchestra introduces a lilting theme in three-four which is suddenly interrupted when Lucia cries out in fear. The ghost has appeared in her mind's

²² Reid, *Bel Canto: Principles and practices*, 10.

²³ Roger Parks. "Lucia Di Lammermoor's Mad Tragedy in Donizetti's Mad Life".

eye and comes between her and Edgardo. Lucia exclaims repeatedly “il fantasma” or “the ghost” in a low, foreboding vocal register. Donizetti gives the stage direction *spaventata* meaning “frightened,” as shown in Example 19 below.

Example 19: “il fantasma!” – Excerpt from *Lucia di Lammermoor* Act III, No. 14, 2 measures before 26

In the next section, Lucia returns to her happy hallucination by the fountain. This time, the vocal line is even more highly ornamented. Another high, ethereal motive is played by the flute and centers around one repeated pitch.

Example 20: Flute motive – Excerpt from *Lucia di Lammermoor* Act III, No. 14, 4 measures before 27

Then Lucia sings a short chromatic, ascending motive, which has an eerie effect when it is sung unaccompanied.

Example 21: Lucia’s eerie chromatic motive – Excerpt from *Lucia di Lammermoor* Act III, No. 14, 4 measures before 27

The entire mad scene is composed of unfinished melodic ideas like the ones in Example 20 and Example 21. These motives are never fully allowed to play themselves out. The ear longs for resolution and for one theme to stand out and unify the music of the scene. However, just as one discernable melodic or musical idea surfaces, it is

interrupted by another impressive show of virtuosity or by a new motive. Lucia's vocal line is fragmented in this way except when she is hallucinating about Edgardo. It seems that the thought of her lover is the only thing that will console her. There are moments when Lucia sings to him and her phrases are, for the most part long and fluid. However, one of the most virtuosic passages in this scene is a moment of intense joy as Lucia imagines that she and Edgardo are to be married as shown in Example 18.

As the scene progresses, the melodic treatment becomes increasingly virtuosic. About half way through the scene, the trills and melismas flow one into the other and continue for a full minute before the orchestral accompaniment returns. Many of these melismas have been added by talented coloratura sopranos in their performances over the years and have become standard performance practice over time.

Immediately following these passages of coloratura, Enrico arrives, having heard that Lucia has murdered her husband. At first, Lucia mistakes him for Edgardo and begs him to understand that she always loved him, but was bound to the will of her brother. She cries "Edgardo, do not leave me!" and then begins to sing about her own death. The theme of this section has staccato articulations in the orchestra that seem playful and light-hearted, though the subject matter is solemn as shown in Example 22.

Example 22: Staccatos in wind instruments – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14

This section contains Lucia’s final moments of virtuosity, featuring trills, chromatic melismas and short, high vocal exclamations. Example 23a shows the trills Lucia sings as she imagines being with Edgardo in heaven.

Example 23: Trills – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14, 7 measures after 39

Lucia imagines a blissful reunion with Edgardo after her death, which suggests that in the midst of Lucia’s madness, she knows she is close to death. She sings that heaven will only be a blissful place for her when Edgardo joins her there.²⁴ This statement also foreshadows Edgardo’s suicide at the end of the opera shortly after he receives news of Lucia’s death. Lucia’s blissful description of heaven is expressed through ornamented singing like that shown in Example 24.

²⁴ Rob Glaubitz. “The Aria Database” (accessed April 3, 2017), <http://www.aria-database.com/search.php?changeToSimple=1>.

Example 24: Melismas – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14, 5 measures before 40



The end of the scene builds as the chorus sings of their grief over Lucia's demise. Traditionally, the last five measures of the chorus are cut to leave room for one last coloratura show. As Lucia sings this final high note, she collapses into the waiting arms of her maid, Alice. Although the highest note written in the score is an Ab, as seen in Example 25, traditionally the soprano sings this final cadenza with two variations. Rather than descending to the D5 and then ending on an Eb5, the soprano continues to climb in pitch. The Ab5 in the third measure of Example 25 is followed by a Bb5, which then resolves upward to climax at a spectacular Eb6.

Example 25: Final cadenza – Excerpt from Lucia di Lammermoor Act III, No. 14, 2 measures before 44



Comparing and Contrasting Donizetti's Mad Scenes

Anna Bolena's mad scene is more rigidly structured than that of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. This is understandable for two reasons. First of all, Anna never truly succumbs to madness. Her temporary delusional state is a coping mechanism by which she retreats into her memories as an escape from reality. By the end of the scene, she has regained her senses. However, Lucia's madness is a complete mental collapse, which ultimately leads to her death. Donizetti's music makes it clear that Lucia's condition is irreversible. Donizetti's Lucia shows signs of mental illness Act I with her delusional behavior. This important detail sets the stage for her mental break in Act III and causes

her demise to seem more believable. The disjointed melodies and schizophrenic nature of the musical setting of Lucia's mad scene clearly takes her character beyond the point of recovery. Anna's melodies, on the other hand, are complete and as a result keep her tethered to reality so that her recovery is still possible. With this important distinction between the two characters, it is understandable that Donizetti approached Lucia and Anna's mad scenes with very different musical devices.

The second reason that may explain the lack of form in *Lucia di Lammermoor* is that it was written five years later than *Anna Bolena*. The bel canto composers Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) and Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) wrote in a style that borrowed from the form and harmonic rules of the Classical period while prioritizing emotional expression. It would make sense that *Anna Bolena* shows more influence of the structure and forms of the Classical period, having been written earlier in Donizetti's career while *Lucia di Lammermoor*, written five years later takes a more innovative approach.

However different these two mad scenes are, they each represent a unity of musical style that identifies them with their common composer. In the recitative section of the beginning of Anna's mad scene, the melody is in a more continuous arioso style that is broken up and contains sudden mood changes similar to those that characterize Lucia's mad scene. In *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the musical themes alternate between orchestra and the soprano, and some fragments of melody are left unfinished in their orchestral or vocal statements. Another unifying aspect of these two scenes is a tradition in the bel canto style of opera where the "melody dominated, and by necessity, the

orchestra generally became subdued when the singer was singing..." Examples of this approach can be found throughout Donizetti's operas.²⁵

I Puritani and Bellini

Vincenzo Bellini lived the shortest life out of the three bel canto composers and wrote the fewest operas. In fact, *I Puritani* was Bellini's final opera, premiering just seven months before his death on September 23, 1835. Bellini's contemporary, Gaetano Donizetti, premiered his *Lucia di Lamermoor* in 1835 as well. These two composers, though both hailed as masters of bel canto, approached their mad scenes very differently. Bellini's music showed more influence of the Classical harmonic structure and he wrote meticulously, laboring over the ten operas he produced throughout his career. Donizetti, on the other hand wrote prolifically, yielding sixty-five operas during his life. Bellini did not use much ornamentation in his early operas, unlike his contemporary, Donizetti. While Bellini's melodic treatment tended to be more syllabic, his later operas contain passages of the coloratura style. The mad scene in *I Puritani* is one example of coloratura in his later works.

The setting for *I Puritani* is fifteenth century Plymouth, when England is in the midst of a civil war. Gualtiero is a Puritan who has promised his daughter Elvira in marriage to Sir Richard Froth, a Puritan rebel. However, Elvira is in love with Arturo. Despite his affiliation with the forces opposing the Puritan cause, Elvira convinces her father to allow them to marry. On their wedding day, Arturo discovers that Enrichetta, the former queen of England is being held as a prisoner in Gualtiero's fortress. He is loyal to the queen and uses Elvira's wedding veil to disguise the woman and to help her to escape

²⁵ Burton D. Fischer. *A History of Opera: Milestones and Metamorphoses*, 128.

captivity. Unfortunately, Riccardo witnesses Arturo leaving with the queen and informs Elvira that he has betrayed her. Elvira is so distressed that she goes mad. Arturo returns to Elvira, but is caught and sentenced to death for helping the queen escape. Just as all hope seems lost, the Puritans gain the victory in the war and Arturo is granted amnesty. Elvira regains her reason and she and Arturo are finally married.²⁶

Elvira's Mad Scene

Vincenzo Bellini was a contemporary of Donizetti's, but his approach to depicting madness was somewhat different. In a similar fashion to *Anna Bolena*, Bellini's mad scene is preceded by a chorus lamenting the emotional state of the heroine. Elvira's father, Gualtiero, describes her madness and her disheveled appearance. Elvira's voice floats sorrowfully from backstage, singing repeatedly, "return my hope or let me die". This phrase becomes a recurring theme in her upcoming aria.²⁷

Elvira's melody is full of heart-rending cries and the orchestra drops out to bring all the attention to the voice off stage. Riccardo and the character Giorgio sing a few painful phrases of mourning for Elvira who has fallen into a delusional state. As the orchestra introduces Elvira's famous aria, 'Qui la voce,' the melody is given to the flute, the clarinets and the first violins, giving it both a high, ethereal timbre and a strong presence, as shown in Examples 26a and 26b below.

²⁶ Burton D. Fisher. *I Puritani : 'melodramma Serio' in Three Acts = The Puritans: Opera Seria in Three Acts* (Miami, Fl.: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2007), accessed February 4, 2017, <file:///C:/Users/rachelchristenson/Downloads/ebscohost.pdf>, 4.

²⁷Ibid., 8.

Example 26a: Flute and Clarinet melody – Excerpt from *I Puritani* Act II, No. 7, 7 measures before 24

Example 26b: First Violins melody – Excerpt from *I Puritani* Act II, No. 7, 7 measures before 24

This is somewhat different from Donizetti's approach in his two famous mad scenes. Donizetti used the solo flute or solo clarinet to introduce or replay the melody. Donizetti chose to use solo wind instruments with a timbre that would allow for a more delicate expression of the mental illness of the character. Bellini's choice to place the melody in three sections strengthens its presence while still communicating the fragility of the character's mental condition.

During this introduction to her aria, Elvira makes her entrance. The stage directions describe her as 'scapigliata' (disheveled) and acting mad. As she begins her aria, the second violins play rolling triplets as an accompaniment to the first violins, which double the melody. The violas, cellos and double bass fill in the other harmonies as seen in Example 27.

Example 27: Violins rolling triplets – Excerpt from *I Puritani* Act II, No. 7, measures at 24

ELVIRA
Qui la vo - - ce sua so - a - ve mi chia.

24

I. Vni
II. Vni
Vle
Vc.
C.o.

As her aria progresses and the music builds, the wind instruments are added for a fuller sound. Elvira's text reveals that she imagines she hears Arturo's voice calling her. She sings of his unfaithfulness. Bellini creates an interesting interaction between the vocal line and the first violins. Elvira's melody is at times incomplete when compared with the melody introduced in the introduction. Her vocal line contains rests where Bellini has omitted notes from her phrases. As Elvira sings, the first violins mirror the vocal line, preserving the full phrasing of the melody as shown in Example 28 below.

Example 28: Violins fill in the melody – Excerpt from *I Puritani* Act II, No. 7, 3 measures after 24

ELVIRA
- ma - va... e poi spari. Qui giu - ra - va es - ser fe - de - le, qui il giu - ra - - va, qui il giu -

rit. a tempo rinv. a poco a poco

I. Vni

This concept of incomplete melody was something Donizetti took to an extreme with Lucia's madness where her melody was not only incomplete but also constantly subject to frequent changes and interruptions. For the most part, Bellini's melody is in stepwise motion, but he uses one particular interval to emphasize the word 'speme',

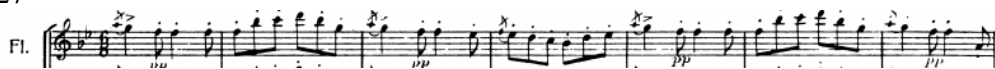
meaning “hope.” Elvira frequently sings the major 6th interval of Bb4 to G5 when she is expressing her hope for being reunited with Arturo.

Example 29: Interval of Bb4 to G5 – Excerpt from *I Puritani* Act II, No. 7, 4 measures before 26



As this first section of the mad scene ends, Riccardo and Giorgio interject once again, giving the soprano a chance to breathe before diving into the next section, which is more difficult vocally because of the increased occurrence of ornamentation. For this new section, the melody and mood change. In the transition between sections, Elvira describes her hallucination of Arturo. She is delighted to see him smile and suddenly the mood and tempo of the music is altered. The flute that just moments earlier played a tragic, lyrical melody, now expresses Elvira’s sudden light-heartedness and excitement with fast and playful staccatos as shown in Example 30.

Example 30: Light-hearted staccatos – Excerpt from *I Puritani* Act II, No. 7, measures at 27

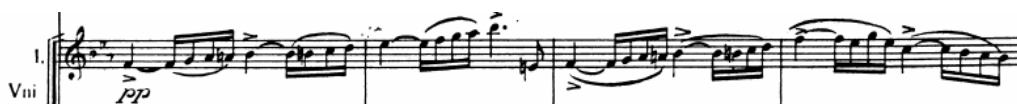


The music’s lighthearted beat represents the music of a dance as Elvira imagines Arturo leading her onto the dance floor. Elvira is so disconnected from reality that she believes Giorgio is Arturo and invites him to dance with her on their wedding day. Giorgio and Riccardo each express their own grave, inward response to Elvira’s show of madness as the dance music fades away. Elvira’s mood shifts again as she recognizes tears in Riccardo’s eyes. She sings “e gli piange” meaning “he weeps.” Her phrases gradually dissolves into a string of disconnected words, sung painfully and almost

nonsensically. Elvira is overcome with grief, commenting on how love is always synonymous with sorrow.

The music picks up an anxious tempo, with a dotted rhythm in the wind section as a percussive undercurrent to the sixteenth note theme played by the flute and first violins as shown in Example 31 below.

Example 31: Sixteenth note Violin theme – Excerpt from *I Puritani* Act II, No. 7, 4 measures after 33



In this section introducing the next arioso, Elvira once again imagines she is speaking with Arturo, assuring him that their sorrows will soon be over.

This final section of the mad scene is faster paced and far more ornamented than the first half of the scene. Elvira is calling for her beloved to return to her, and her vocal flourishes become increasingly challenging as the aria progresses. Elvira has retreated into her imagination in order to cope with a broken heart. The first signs of ornamentation come within the first few lines of the arioso, the most important words being emphasized by little melodic turns and triplet embellishments. The final two triplets in the following example are not traditionally sung.

Example 32: Example of triplet embellishments – Excerpt from Act 2, No. 7 *Allegro moderato* from *I Puritani*, 2 measures after 38

ca - ro, al - la tua El - vi - ra: es - sa pian - gee ti so -

Immediately following this faster section, the intensity continues to build as the soprano launches into ten measures of almost continuous runs, throughout which she sings two high Dbs. Each time she reaches for the next higher note, her character seems to be increasing the intensity and volume of her call for Arturo's return.

Example 33: Example of successive runs – Excerpt from Act 2, No. 7 Allegro moderato from I Puritani, 6 measures before 39



Giorgio and Riccardo continue with their alternating commentary on Elvira's state of mind and then the music returns to the theme from the arioso. Elvira continues her aria in a fashion that resembles that of the established form of a da capo aria as she returns to the text and melody from the beginning of the arioso, this time adding an array of new embellishments.²⁸ The coloratura is relentless throughout this section, with arpeggios and fast, high melismas. The listener can easily lose the melody among the intricate flourish of notes, much in the same way Elvira becomes lost in her dream world and unable to connect with reality.

The music is challenging and exhausting for a singer because each embellishment must be clean while being up to tempo. These cascading melismas run right into one another, barely leaving time for the soprano to recover before proceeding into the next embellishment as shown in Example 33.

The mad scene has been a subject of fascination in opera since its conception in the seventeenth century. Some of the most successful operas of the early nineteenth century contained scenes in which the heroine, under immense emotional distress,

²⁸ Reid, *Bel Canto Principles and Practices*, 8.

retreats into madness. Most often, the overwhelming pain of a broken heart in a tragic circumstance caused the character to descend into mental illness. This is the case in both *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *I Puritani*. In each of these operas, the mad scene contains sections of extravagant coloratura. The unique abilities of a coloratura soprano provided expressive opportunities that appealed both to Donizetti and to Bellini. For Lucia's mad scene, Donizetti experimented with having the soprano sing fragmented melodies to express the illogical and broken thought process of someone suffering from mental illness. He used sudden changes of mood and dynamics in the music and extreme jumps in the voice to represent how a person in the throws of madness might jump from one subject or emotion to another without any rational connection. In *Anna Bolena*, the heroine's sorrow is so intense that she seeks comfort in her happy memories. Unlike Lucia, Anna regains a conscious grip on reality near the end of the opera. The extent of each character's madness seems to be proportionate to the amount of virtuosic singing and to the disjointedness of the musical ideas in that character's mad scene. Anna's arias are more complete and logical than the schizophrenic stream of unfinished musical ideas in Lucia's mad scene. Elvira's mad scene in Bellini's opera *I Puritani* is not nearly as disjointed as that of Lucia, but the idea of sudden mood changes and incomplete melodies begins to take shape. For example, Elvira's sorrow is suddenly changed to joyous celebration when she has convinced herself that Arturo is speaking to and dancing with her. The coloratura in this scene expresses her anxious excitement with high sixteenth-note runs. The melody in Elvira's aria 'Qui la voce' is carried to completion by the strings where the voice is forced to break for a breath.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the different techniques used by the bel canto composers Donizetti and Bellini to express madness using the coloratura soprano voice. There is an obvious development in emotional intensity from *Anna Bolena* (1830) to *I Puritani* (January 1835) to *Lucia di Lammermoor* (September 1835). The heroine's descent into madness becomes increasingly extreme with each new opera, until Lucia wanders so far from reality that there is no return. This dramatic emotional state is paralleled in both the orchestration and vocal composition. Donizetti and Bellini treated the drama with the appropriate amount of musical insanity so that the character can only become as mad and incoherent as the music allows. For instance, Anna could not be completely insane since she must return to her senses by the end of the mad scene. On the other hand, Lucia's madness led to her isolation from the world around her and ended with her death. Therefore, the music must allow her character to be crazy enough for the outcome to be believable.

In each of these opera scenes, one finds evidence that coloratura can be used effectively to express varying dynamics of fear, anxiety, excitement, confusion, joy, sorrow, or even anger. Donizetti and Bellini set a new standard for expressing madness and in the process created some of the most beautiful and challenging repertoire for coloratura soprano. The mad scenes of *Anna Bolena*, *I Puritani* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* provide more than a literary narrative portraying emotional instability, but the musical means of expressing emotions and experiences associated with madness.

Works Cited

- Ashbrook, William. *Donizetti and his operas*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Donizetti, Gaetano, and Salvatore Cammarano. *Lucia Di Lammermoor: The Bride of Lammermoor: Opera in Three Acts*. New York: G. Schirmer, 1898.
- Erfurth, A., and P. Hoff. "Mad Scenes in Early 19th-century Opera." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 102, no. 4 (March 15, 2000): 310-13.
- Fisher, Burton D. *A History of Opera : Milestones and Metamorphoses* (Coral Gables, Fla: Opera Journeys Publishing), 2003, accessed October 29, 2016, *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*.
- Fisher, Burton D. *I Puritani : 'melodramma Serio' in Three Acts = The Puritans: Opera Seria in Three Acts* (Miami, Fl.: Opera Journeys Publishing), 2007, accessed February 4, 2017, *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*
file:///Users/rachelchristenson/Downloads/ebscohost.pdf.
- Frisch, Walter. "Music in the Nineteenth Century." *Western Music in Context: A Norton History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013.
- Glaubitz, Rob. "The Aria Database", (accessed February 27, 2016), <http://www.aria-database.com/search.php?changeToSimple=1>.
- Mickel, Muriel F. and Cornelius L. Reid. *Bel Canto: Principles and Practices*. New York: Joseph Patelson Music House, 1990.
- Parks, Roger. "Lucia Di Lammermoor's Mad Tragedy in Donizetti's Mad Life." *The Guardian*. January 28, 2010. Accessed December 07, 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/jan/28/lucia-di-lammermoor-donizetti>.
- Peschel, E., & Peschel, R. "Donizetti and the music of mental derangement: Anna Bolena, Lucia di Lammermoor, and the composer's neurobiological illness." *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 65, no. 3, (Summer 1992), 189–200.
- Plantinga, Leon. *Romantic music: a history of musical style in nineteenth-century Europe*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Reid, Cornelius L. *Bel Canto, Principles and Practices* (New York, NY: Joseph Patelson Music House, 1978), 1-17.

Osborne, Richard. *Rossini*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 3, 2017).