

## THE CHARACTER “LUCREZIA BORGIA” OF DONIZETTI’S HOMONYMOUS OPERA. AN ANALYSIS OF CHARACTER AND VOCAL FEATURES

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**SUMMARY.** Donizetti’s opera “Lucrezia Borgia” presents one of the most complex female characters in the history of Italian lyrical theatre – a notable portrait of “femme fatale”. Based on Victor Hugo’s play, Gaetano Donizetti’s creation offers generous interpretation contexts, both from a vocal and a dramaturgic point of view. This article will deal with the particularities of Lucrezia Borgia’s role, underlining the importance of the relationship between vocality and dramaturgy, focusing on the analysis of the main soloist moments.

**Keywords:** Lucrezia Borgia, Donizetti, character, typology, vocality

### 1. Introduction

Out of the vast romantic constellation of operas with historical themes, Gaetano Donizetti chose various representative characters to whom he dedicated memorable compositions. His influence consists in exploiting in an intensely emotional manner the human voice whose performance can transmit feelings and states such as exaltation, maternal love, melancholy, nostalgia, despair. The tragic daughter of the Borgia family, with her past marked by murder, incest and poisoning, a character with clear morbid features that the romantic sensitivity had not yet exploited. Victor Hugo, the one who inspired Giuseppe Verdi with his “Le Roi s’amuse” (which inspired the libretto of “Rigoletto”), wanted to refine Triboulet’s physical and moral deformity through his paternal love. The French writer tried to do the same in the case of Lucrezia. The intrigue, with many moments of wild passion, poisoning, and daggers, was structured by Donizetti in the traditional manner of

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the Italian melodrama. Thus, the Italian musicologist Luca Zoppelli noted the following aspects: “In 1833, the romantic explosion of *Parisina* and of *Lucrezia Borgia*, written for Florence and for Milan respectively (there was little opportunity for Donizetti to experiment the reactionary atmosphere of Naples), furnishes a rich array of stage music”.<sup>3</sup> Today, the opera “*Lucrezia Borgia*” is rarely presented on stage, affording a dramatic coloratura soprano the opportunity to show her vocal-theatrical qualities in the area of “bel canto”.

## 2. Lucrezia Borgia – notable historical figure

In Lucrezia Borgia’s biography, Ferdinand Gregorovius states the following: “Her personality appeared to me to be something full of mysterious, made up of contradictions which remained to be deciphered, and I was fascinated by it.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, even this biography, while seemingly following the historical clarity and accuracy through an impartial scientific process, represents another means to interpret Lucrezia’s character, and to exploit it to pursue a special purpose for each author.

As for the life and character of Lucrezia Borgia, they were linked to the fundamental ideal of respectable femininity. While the category of femininity is composed of different values for each period in the history of Italy and Western Europe, it can be defined in general as a series of feminine roles and functions, oral qualities and physical traits which are given a special status. Represented as desirable objects, these qualities were built into sets which become in various epochs the feminine ideals to which all women naturally aspire. The set of values acts, in its turn, as a discriminating factor in creating the borders between dichotomous categories such as virtue and vice. Thus, a definition which serves the purpose of this research, namely including the character of Lucrezia Borgia in the category of femme fatale, is the following: “The femme fatale is an important figure for the feminist understanding of the contemporary popular culture because her complex relationship with patriarchal and feminist understandings of female power forces to the surface broader concerns about the representation of women”.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of Lucrezia, through various written and painted representations, her figure was sketched alternatively within the lines of

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<sup>3</sup> Zoppelli, Lucca, *Stage Music' in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera*, *Cambridge Opera Journal* Vol. 2, No. 1 (Mar., 1990), p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Gregorovius, Ferdinand, *Lucretia Borgia*, Phaidon Press, New York, 1948, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Farrimond, Catherine, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale. Gender, Genre and American Cinema*, Routledge Publisher, New York, 2017, p. 1 (Introduction).

femininity specific for the epoch or thrown outside these lines, and subject to inevitable judgement. Coming back to Gregorovius and other authors, the list of Lucrezia Borgia's "supporters" and "accusers" can give rise to a series of discussions. On the one hand, the stances taken by certain authors, who place Lucrezia within the femininity of the epoch, thus, they consider her a virtuous victim; in this category it is worth mentioning Giuseppe Campori, and his article "Una Vittima della Storia, Lucrezia Borgia" of 1866. On the other hand, Victor Hugo and others cast her disparagingly outside these limits. Consequently, outside the space of appropriateness and acceptable, Lucrezia becomes a "moral monster", the personification of frivolity, of vices and greed, and, at the same time, she becomes a sort of warning against the temptation to walk outside the borders of acceptable femininity.

The ideal representation in the Renaissance of the respectable femininity in the framework of the court depended on the possession of physical and moral virtues such as: chastity, piety, fidelity. These virtues were thought to take shape in the beauty, grace, and goodness of women in performing their duties in marriage and maternity. This ideology concerning women is visible for the public through productions which symbolize the society in the Renaissance period, materialized in art, literature, and philosophy. "Numerous authors have contributed to the rendering of an artistic portrait of the famous Lucrezia Borgia, in addition to Victor Hugo and Gaetano Donizetti, especially in literature"<sup>6</sup>.

### **3. Lucrezia Borgia – source of inspiration in literature and painting**

Lucrezia Borgia's image and tumultuous life served as source of inspiration in many literary and artistic contexts.

In literature, we notice especially Victor Hugo's tragedy, written in 1833 – the one who also inspired the well-known opera by Donizetti. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Maria Bellonci – Italian writer, historian, and journalist – launched the psychobiography of Lucrezia Borgia in 1939 and the book "Rinascimento privato" in 1985, works in which concrete events from the heroine's life are presented. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the following literary creations complete Lucrezia Borgia's biography:

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<sup>6</sup> Plaidy, Jean, *A Novel of the Borgias*, Penguin Random House, 2019, pp. 34.

- “Il rumore sordo della battaglia” (2002) by the Italian writer Antonio Scurati;
- “Lucreçe Borgia” (2004) by the French author Joachim Bouflet;
- “Lucrezia Borgia. Life, Love and Death in Renaissance Italy” (2004) by the English writer Sarah Bradford;
- “Lucrezia Borgia: storia e mito” (2006) by authors Michele Bordin and Paolo Trovato.

In painting, Lucrezia Borgia was represented in various hypotheses. According to the tendencies of the Renaissance, these paintings reflect the image of purity, holiness. Despite her tumultuous life, the image of Lucrezia Borgia persists in time like that of a blonde virgin. Out of the most representative paintings, it is worth mentioning:

- “Disputation of St. Catherine of Alexandria” (1492-94) by Bernardino di Petto; in this painting, Lucrezia portrays Saint Catherine of Alexandria (Catherine de Siena); in Lucrezia’s description, these observations are relevant: “Saint Catherine’s long wavy hair has been left free to fall on her shoulders and down to her waist, while only the frontal strands are knotted behind the head. Uncovered and untied hair, in fact, was the customary style for unmarried women or new brides, as Lucrezia was in those years.”<sup>7</sup>
- “Portrait of a Young Lady” (1500-10) by Bartolomeo Veneto; according to the historical writings, it is assumed that this painting represents Lucrezia Borgia based on an analysis of the details found (clothing, symbolic details of clothing, jewellery);
- “Idealised Portrait of a Courtesan as Flora” (1520) by Bartolomeo Veneto; the portrait represents the Roman goddess Flora, but the model found in the painting corresponds to all of the physical traits of Lucrezia Borgia – a pale, blond, ethereal figure;
- “Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara” (1519-30) by Dosso Dossi; based on the historical data, Dossi lived between 1515 and 1520 in Ferrara, while Lucrezia was Duchess; at the level of the details found in the painting (for example, the dagger) there are references to Lucrezia, the heroine who played a decisive role in the Roman monarchy in Antiquity.

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, Allyson Burgess, *Rewriting Lucrezia Borgia: Propriety, Magnificence, and Piety in Portraits of a Renaissance Duchess*, In *Wives, Widows, Mistresses, and Nuns in Early Modern Italy: making the invisible visible through art and patronage*, edited by Katherine A. McIver, 77-97. Routledge Publisher, New York, 2012. pp. 81.

#### **4. Lucrezia Borgia in the context of the roles of "femme fatale" in Italian Romantic operas**

In opera, controversial female characters have always held a special place. They brought "colour" to the historical stories to which the composers gave a sonorous shape. Vocally, they are distinguished by a particular structure; the "femme fatale" characters are dramatic sopranos, either dramatic coloratura sopranos or dramatic mezzo sopranos. Casting these vocal types in such important feminine roles was due to the intensification of the dramatic action. Thus, the character's vocalicity must authentically support the action and the text in the libretto, which most often was inspired by dramatic history. The dramaturgic evolution of the Italian operas from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is due to famous interpreters, who belonged to vocal categories previously defined (Isabella Colbran, Giuditta Pasta, Eugenia Tadolini, Sophie Löwe, Henriette Méric-Lalande, Pauline Guéymard-Lauters, Marie Constance Sasse, etc.).

The representative roles for the typology of the "femme fatale" character is the following:

- Semiramide (the Queen of Babylon) of the homonymous opera by G. Rossini (1823)
- Anna Bolena (the Queen of England in the period 1533-1536) of the homonymous opera by G. Donizetti
- Norma (the Great Priestess of the Druid Temple) of the homonymous opera by V. Bellini (1831)
- Lucrezia Borgia (the daughter of Rodrigo Borgia, Pope Alexander VI) of the homonymous opera by G. Donizetti (1833)
- Elisabetta (the Queen of England in the period 1558-1603) of the opera "Maria Stuarda" by G. Donizetti (1835)
- Abigaille (the first daughter of the King of Babylon) of the opera "Nabucco" by G. Verdi (1842)
- Odabella (the daughter of the ruler of Aquileia) of the opera "Attila" by G. Verdi (1846)
- Lady Macbeth (the wife of General Macbeth) of the opera "Macbeth" by G. Verdi (1847).

#### **5. The construction of the vocal discourse of the role, technical and interpretative aspects**

Lucrezia's role is structured into arias ("Com'è bello! Quale incanto"! – Prolog, "Era desso il figlio mio – Act II), duets ("Ciel! Che vegg'io", duet with Gennaro – Prolog, "Che chiedete?", duet with Don Alfonso – Act I) and

ensemble moments ("Maffio Orsini, signora, son io" – Prologue, "Della Duchessa ai prieghi" – Act I). The vocal part is particular, requiring lyricism, slow dynamic and legato in the Prologue, as well as dramatism at the level of the recitatives and in the final ensemble of Act II of the opera. In this research we will analyse the arias attributed to the character, because they are the most intense moments, from the point of view of expressivity and of the technical difficulty of the musical score. For a better perception of the nature of the character, the following observations are relevant: "In the description of the heroine, Donizetti opts for the aesthetical embellishment of Lucrezia – from the orchestral prelude, which precedes her entry – describing her beauty and maternal feelings, dissimulated by the malefic presence, through successive episodes up to the end" (our translation)<sup>8</sup>.

The aria "Tranquillo ei posa ... Com'e è bello" shows the maternal side of the character, through a lyrical suave composition. The ambitus at this moment is *tertia decima*, and the form of the aria is *bistrophic* (section **A** – Andante, F Major; Section **B** – *Larghetto cantabile*, E flat major).

The melodic line of section **A** has a wavy profile, the composer opting for the use of large intervals. Also, the accompaniment most often supports the soloist line, thus facilitating the accuracy of the intonation and highlighting the melody.

E.g. 1

**Larghetto**  
LUCREZIA.

Tranquillo ei po - sa. **ANDANTE.**

collo parte. *p*

**Aria "Tranquillo ei posa... Com'e bello" (measure 18-22)**

Section **A** is built the same way, requiring the soprano's attention to focus on maintaining a pleasant coloratura of the vocal timber, to express her maternal feelings. It should avoid excessive reliance on the timber, which might produce sharp sounds in the evolution of the vocal discourse. The soloist rhythm is present at the end of this section, the indication *a piacere*

<sup>8</sup> Constantinescu, Grigore, *Gaetano Donizetti*. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, R.A., Bucharest, 2013, pp. 96.

allowing a comfortable and delicate interpretation. As for the personal touch, we will concentrate on the note B-flat 5, in *piano* nuances, taking into consideration maintaining the intonation accuracy. To make the end of this section even more expressive, we will use *mesa di voce* on the sounds D-flat 5 and C5, to accentuate the word "tormento".

E.g. 2

**Andante** 33

Aria "Tranquillo ei posa... Com'è bello" (measure 23-37)

In the transition, we observe Lucrezia’s dialogue with other characters. This section is built as a melodic recitative. We notice within this movement a measure for interpretative virtuosity. We will consider that the accent on note E-flat 5 “Oh!” should not exceed the limits of the previous dynamic (nuance *mf* would be the most adequate). The noble nature of the character must be speculated also in the context of a punctuated rhythm, context in which we should think of the vocal discourse in legato, preserving based on a good articulation word such as: “potess’io”, “passato”, “fosse” – words with double consonants.

E.g. 3

Lento

L. era... Oh! potess'io far tanto che il passa-to non fosse, e in un cor

L. solo destare un senso di pie-tade e..... amore che in vano al mondo

*dolce.*

Aria “Tranquillo ei posa... Com’e bello” (measure 49-59)

Section **B** stands out though the ascending-descending melody, the composer opting for interval leaps in the vocal discourse. We will consider the right phrasing in Donizetti’s style, observing the literary text. We will structure the phrases based on the following example: “Com’e bello! Quale incanto/ in quel volto onesto e altero!”, eighth breaks within the phrase, with an expressive function. The quiet and melancholic nature is due to the major tonality, the *tempo Larghetto cantabile* and the reduced nuances.



**Larghetto cantabile**

LUCREZIA. (*guardandolo con affetto*)

Com'è bel-lo! quale in can-to in quel vol-to uo-mi sto e al-ter-o! No, giam-

- mai leg-gia-dro tanto non sel pin-se il mio pen-sie-ro. L'al-ma

**Aria "Tranquillo ei posa... Com'e bello" (measure 84-92)**

As part of the individual study to choose the vocal coloratura specific for this moment, the following observations are relevant: "An almost 'demonic' heroine will be moulded on the feminine heroines of the Italian melodrama of the 1830s, tendentiously idealized and sometimes transformed into angels. Donizetti will express these intentions from the initial recitative *Tranquillo ei posa*, accentuating the pathetic and fast-moving nature of her concern for her son. Only occasionally the toxic side of Lucrezia Borgia's character is revealed in front of the spectators." (our translation)<sup>9</sup>

At this moment in the aria, we notice the composer's choice to highlight the interpretative virtuosity by introducing a small cadence, whose role is to pass to the next musical period. An innovation at the level of the sonorous organization is present in measure 93, Donizetti using the triplet, element which will generate the vibration effect.

<sup>9</sup> Emanoil, Alexandru, *Opera italiană în capodopere: belcanto (Italian opera in masterpieces: belcanto)*, Ed. Semne, Bucharest, 2008. pp. 713.

## Larghetto cantabile

## Aria “Tranquillo ei posa... Com’e bello” (measure 93-96)

The end of this aria is marked by an exposition of the voice in an elegant manner. An eloquent definition of this type of agility is the following: “Agilita di maniera – is an elegant agility which fails to ease the force agility, but which is rich in meanings and nuances.” (our translation)<sup>10</sup> The execution of the agility requires a good management of the breathing, because there is room for breath only before the attack of sound B-flat 5, whose dynamic is reduced - *piano*. Subsequently, for increased expressivity, we can use *messa di voce* on B-flat 5, with the purpose of maintaining the position of the sound.

The following representative moment in the structure of this role is the aria “Era desso il figlio mio”. This moment is part of the final ensemble of the opera, but the character of the music and the technical and interpretative aspects – challenging for most interpreters – make the interpretation of this moment seem to be a stand-alone aria. The ambitus of the aria is sixth-tenth, but the form is bi-strophic with reprise (Section **A**: Moderato, E-flat minor; Section **B**, Più mosso: E-flat major).

Section **A** stands out through the descending melodic line, and the minor tonality gives this start a melancholic character. Within this area, the vocal approach is distinct. The vocal composition – mainly in the medium register – gives the soprano the possibility to show a variety of nuances of the timbral coloratura. Given the dynamic, sombre nature of this moment, we will choose dark vocal colours – within the limits of one’s own capabilities. We

<sup>10</sup> Voinea, Silvia, *Incursiune în istoria artei cântului și a esteticii vocale (Foray into the history of singing art and vocal aesthetics)*, Ed. Pro Transilvania, București, 2002, pp. 98.

will consider “solving” the interval leaps with a lot of precision, without using the glottal attack. As for the personal interpretation, we prefer to alternate the *forte* nuance (“Era desso il figlio mio”) with the *piano* nuance (“la mia speme, il mio conforto”), to obtain an impressive dramatic effect.

E. g. 6

**Moderato**

LUC.  
Era des - - so il figlio

L.  
mi - - o, la mia speme, il mio confor - to... ei po... tea..... placarmi Id.

**Aria “Era desso il figlio mio” (measure 3-10)**

Section **B** is a real demonstration of vocal agility. We believe that his moment poses the greatest technical difficulties of the entire role. It is meant for a voice which possesses a generous medium register, the composition imposes increased focus on maintaining the vocal coloratura. A timbral balance is necessary in rendering this musical fragment because the attack of the high register may produce sharp sounds if the breathing is not “economically” coordinated. We believe that the expressivity of this operatic moment can be rendered even through the correct execution of this agility, keeping in mind the idea that each sound is equally important.

## Più mosso

The image shows a musical score for an aria. The top system is the vocal line (L.) with lyrics: "ca - poil cie - lo av - ven - ta il suo stra - le pa - ni -". The middle system is the piano accompaniment. The bottom system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "- to - re, sul mio ca - - - po av - ven -". The score includes dynamic markings like "f" and "cres." and performance instructions like "(fiora)". Red and blue boxes highlight specific musical phrases in the vocal and piano parts.

## Aria "Era desso il figlio mio" (measure 18-23)

The varied compositions of measures 21-23 show Donizetti's intuition for vocal versatility. We consider the part of "Lucrezia Borgia" an ideal vocal bel canto, with dramatic ascension and, at the same time, a vocal prototype of the Italian opera of the period 1830 – 1855. In Verdi's opera "I vespri siciliani", the bel canto vocal line decreases, announcing new stylistic and interpretative directions. The following observations by musicologist William Ashbrook are relevant: "*Lucrezia Borgia* marks the clear emergence of a manner that can be labeled distinctly Donizettian for all his retention of structures that were by now traditional; this individuality was already present in the finest passages of *Anna*, *Il furioso*, *Parisina* and *Tasso*, but it invests the whole of *Lucrezia*"<sup>11</sup>.

"Luminosa e nello stesso tempo pervasa di malinconie indecifrabili ma anche di un potente magnetismo vitale; una creatura che rimase costantemente, fra le più cupe tragedie del suo ambiente, isolata da esse, in solitudine ma sempre al centro della propria esistenza"<sup>12</sup>, Lucrezia Borgia is

<sup>11</sup> Ashbrook, William, *Donizetti and his Operas*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 348

<sup>12</sup> Bellonci, Maria, *Lucrezia Borgia*, Mondadori, 2016, pp. 5.

a semantically deeply portrayed, which gives performers the opportunity to experience an expressiveness that requires deep personal and vocal recalibrations.

## 6. Conclusions

In the maturity period of the Italian romantic opera, the characters are described through a series of scenes emphasized innovatively. They are based, undoubtedly, on the expressive force of the human voice. Roles created by Donizetti such as "Anna Bolena", "Lucrezia Borgia", "Maria di Rohan", etc. include challenging soloist passages, because this marks a new form of vocal expression. The approach of these roles requires a series of technical, interpretative but also acting qualities, suggesting an accumulation of vocal expressivity.

"Its multifaceted nature prompts, demands even, structures that differ from both instrumental music and spoken drama. Firstly, the sustained tones of singing take more time than regular speech. Secondly, the sounds of the words matter. Admittedly, sonic qualities play a role in dramatic poetry as well, but in opera sounds have a practical component because they impact performability (...). Perhaps more than any other domain in an opera the orchestral music can take on a wide range of structural and dramaturgical roles. Its main purpose may be to provide harmonic and rhythmic support for the vocal lines"<sup>13</sup>. All these elements contribute to the highlighting of a dramaturgical context that can more fully explain the characterological type and vocalicity of the character.

The vocal discourse of the characters is complex, being made up of diverse moments meant to exploit the soprano's voice in all its hypotheses, in all the registers, with challenging dynamics. These roles pose novel challenges in the bel canto opera. The vocal ambitus is ampler, the vocal coloratura must express a variety of feelings – usually, in a relatively short time (for example, the final aria of Lucrezia Borgia). Thus, we believe that the vocalicity of Donizetti's soprano in roles like the ones mentioned above corresponds to diverse types of characters, to marking historical figures often considered *femme fatale*, in art and literature.

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<sup>13</sup> Till, Nicholas (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to OPERA STUDIES*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 179-180.

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