



Gruberova returns to Munich as troubled Borgia

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In 2009, Christof Loy created his Munich production of Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* especially for the aging belcanto superstar Edita Gruberova. Ever since, the Slovak soprano has regularly reappeared in the part. Even though her singing still signals a mastery of bel canto technique and she shows impressive dramatic commitment, one is mostly left disappointed with her current vocal state.

Lucrezia Borgia: star vehicle

Donizetti's 1833 opera *Lucrezia Borgia*, based on a play by Victor Hugo, has a difficult character at its dramatic centre. Lucrezia has feelings of love and warmth towards her long-lost son Gennaro, and tries hard to be a loving mother towards him. At the same time, she is also a vindictive woman with a deadly reputation. It is this unlucky combination of character traits and desires that leads to the devastating finale.



Lucrezia Borgia (Edita Gruberova) and secret son Gennaro (Ismael Jordi) © Wilfried Hösl

The two extremes of Lucrezia's character, of tenderness as well as harshness, are reflected in the music, rendering it a challenging role for a soprano to sing. The role, therefore, has served as a vehicle for sopranos such as Joan Sutherland and Montserrat Caballé.

Loy's minimalistic staging

Christof Loy's 2009 staging of the opera is rather minimalistic. The stage is mostly bare and occasionally filled with chairs. There is a greyish wall with the name 'Lucrezia Borgia' displayed on it, almost as if it's the logo of a corporate organisation. This wall slides to the left over the course of the opera, revealing nothing more than darkness. In a way, one could interpret it to reflect the undoing of the 'brand' of the dangerous Lucrezia and the unveiling of a depth and complexity that is much less easily defined.

Gruberova as Lucrezia

Soprano Edita Gruberova reprises her role as Lucrezia at the Bayerische Staatsoper, and shows that she still possesses a solid technique. Her pianissimi are very controlled, her coloraturas are agile and her long legato lines are impressive. Especially as Lucrezia first appears on stage, approaching the sleeping Gennaro, does her voice sounds impressive and convincing.



Lucrezia Borgia (Edita Gruberova) © Wilfried Hösl

Technique, however, cannot keep the effects of time at bay indefinitely. And time has certainly not left Gruberova's voice untouched. The soprano's high notes sound a bit shrill and are sometimes painfully off. Most significant, however, are the problems she runs into when she has to shift registers. The opera's showpiece finale, 'Era desso', sounded painfully uncomfortable. Gruberova had move from very low to very high notes, passing through a middle register that was not quite there anymore on the way.

Impressive young voices

The Gennaro of Spanish tenor Ismael Jordi, on the other hand, was a joy to hear. His lyric voice has an impressive Italianate ring to it, and proved more than up to his role. He acted the part of the conflicted son well, although the character's strong friendship with Maffio Orsini could have been portrayed more convincingly by both parties involved.

Alex Esposito sang an impressive Don Alfonso, Lucrezia's distrustful and mean-spirited husband. In Loy's staging, however, the character seemed to display these characteristics more out of an uncomfortable sense of fear than anything else. He is trying hard to be the one who is in control and in a position of power, rather than ending up as Lucrezia's previous husbands.

Silvia Tro Santafé played a good Maffio Orsini, although her voice is a tad smaller than that of the rest of the cast. Also, her wide vibrato is a matter of taste. It's a pity that the strong friendship between Orsini and Gennaro fades into the background somewhat in Loy's staging, which renders Orsini little more than a member of Gennaro's party squad.

Conductor Paolo Arrivabeni drew a warm and lively sound from the Bayerisches Staatsorchester, although at times precision seemed to be lacking.



Don Alfonso (Alex Esposito) © Wilfried Hösl

The chorus of the Bayerische Staatsoper sang impressively and managed to add extra colour and atmosphere to every scene they were part of.

Although it is certainly interesting to witness Gruberova's Lucrezia in a production that was conceived especially for her, one is left wondering whether it isn't high time for another soprano to be given a chance in the demanding title role in this production.

Seen: 24 April 2016

[Two more performances remain this season](#)