

Joan Sutherland

La Stupenda !

Arias & Mad Scenes

from

Donizetti • Verdi

Gounod • Arditi

Thomas

alto



La Stupenda!

Giuseppe Verdi

- [1] *La Traviata* - È strano (libretto: Francesco Maria Piave)* 6:48
- [2] *Rigoletto* - Gualtier maldè (Piave)* 6:17
- [3] *I Vespri Siciliani* - Mercè, diletti amiche
(Eugène Scribe and Charles Duveyrier)[†] 3:32
- [4] *Otello* - Mia madre aveva una povera ancella
(Arrigo Boïto)* 8:09

Gaetano Donizetti

- [5] *Lucia di Lammermoor* -
Ancor non giunse! (Salvadore Cammarano)[†] 13:06
- [6] *Lucia di Lammermoor* -
Il dolce suono (Cammarano)[†] 16:16
- [7] *Linda di Chamounix* -
Ah! Tardai troppo (Gaetano Rossi)[†] 6:13
- [8] **Ambroise Thomas: *Hamlet*** - A vos jeux mes amis
"Mad Scene" (Michel Carré & Jules Barbier)* 8:52
- [9] **Charles Gounod: *Roméo et Juliette*** - Je veux vivre
"Waltz Song" (Carré & Barbier)* 3:26
- [10] **Luigi Arditi: *Il bacio*** (Gottardo Aldighieri)[°] 4:02

Joan Sutherland, *soprano*

* Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, conductor

[†] Orchestre du Conservatoire de Paris

Nello Santi, conductor

[°] London Symphony Orchestra • Richard Bonyngé, conductor
with

5 Nadine Sautereau, soprano

6 Choeur National de l'Opéra de Paris

LA STUPENDA!

Dame Joan Sutherland (1926-2010) was born in Sydney and received singing lessons first from her mother and later studied at the Sydney Conservatory. In 1949-50 she won both the Sydney 'Sun Aria' and the Mobil Quest competitions singing arias from *Aida*, *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Tannhäuser*. The prize money enabled her to travel to London in 1951 where she studied further at the Royal College of Music with Clive Carey. Her student performance as Giorgetta in *Il tabarro* was noted in the musical press: Arthur Jacobs in *Opera* wrote 'Here is a dramatic soprano of high quality and well-controlled power...one may confidently look forward to hearing more of her'. She auditioned for Covent Garden and being given a contract for the 1952-3 season, she initially sang a variety of roles ranging from Clotilde *Norma* (alongside Callas and Stignani), Amelia *Ballo*, Countess *Figam*, Lady Penelope Rich *Gloriana* and Overseer *Elektra*. Her next major role was Agathe *Freischütz* (May 1954) about which Cecil Smith in *Opera* wrote that 'her voice is a true lyric soprano...large enough to carry across the orchestra all the time in all registers...there is nothing about her basic method of singing that should keep her from developing all the flexibility in the world'.

In 1954 she married Richard Bonyngé, a friend from her days in Sydney and a leading expert in nineteenth century opera; that year Sutherland also performed the title role in Weber's *Euryanthe* for the BBC. The following season she carried off with aplomb the technically demanding role of Jenifer in the premiere of Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*. Like Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Sutherland discovered that to be part of the Covent Garden ensemble one had to sing anything and everything, and between 1955 and the end of 1957 she also performed such diverse roles as the three soprano characters in *Hoffmann*, Gilda, Micaela, Pamina, Eva, Desdemona and Mme Lidoine in the British premiere of Poulenc's *Carmelites*. Sutherland had spent the summer of 1956 (Mozart's bi-centenary year) at Glyndebourne, sharing the Countess *Figaro* with Elisabeth Grammer and singing the First Lady *Zaubetflöte*. Returning the following year, she played Mme Herz *Schauspieldirektor*, having electrified London audiences the previous March singing *Alcina* for the Handel Opera Society.

Barely known outside Britain and her native Australia, Sutherland triumphed as Donna Alma in Vancouver following the 1957-8 Covent Garden season. About these performances Rita Ubriaco wrote in *Opera* 'After so many *spinto* Annas who sound like refugees from Briinnhilde's riding club, it was a revelation to hear a fresh, young lyric voice of

uncommon purity at the command of an impeccable musician... She did not stun with *bravura*; she captivated with humanity'. However

Sutherland's major international breakthrough came in February 1959 when she sang Lucia to triumphant notices at Covent Garden. The following from Harold Rosenthal of Opera is typical: 'Her singing of the extremely difficult coloratura made it all sound so easy; her runs, trills and ornaments were marvellous and breath-taking. Without changing her name to Giovanna Miss Sutherland's success should take her to the opera houses of the world'. To help her prepare for the role of Lucia, Sutherland had been sent to Tullio Serafin in Italy. Serafin, who had previously coached Ponselle and Callas, and the director Franco Zeffirelli coaxed her into producing a fully formed character, and if it were not quite equal to Callas' interpretation, nonetheless it was superbly acted. Overnight she became a sensation and as Rosenthal had predicted, the floodgates opened with offers from numerous opera houses: Vienna cast her as Donna Anna and Desdemona; Venice and Dallas invited her to repeat Alcina. But Sutherland was now focussing on Italian Romantic opera, a specialist area of her husband's. Having proved her worth as Lucia, she sang this role in Paris, Venice and Palermo whilst Glyndebourne mounted a new production of Bellini's *Puritani* especially for her, as did Barcelona and Genoa.

On the first night of Covent Garden's new production of *Sonnambula* (21 October 1960) Sutherland was stricken with tracheitis. She recovered sufficiently to delight the critics with her vocalism, less perhaps with her acting which was compared rather unfavourably with Callas, with whom she was now sharing much of her repertoire. Her La Scala debut occurred during the 1960-61 season in which she sang the title role in Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda*, swiftly followed by further performances of Lucia and, in 1962, the title role in Rossini's *Semiramide*. Lucia became her calling-card role and during 1961 she sang this demanding part in Edinburgh, Paris, London, Dallas, San Francisco, New York and Chicago.

Sutherland's first recording, issued in 1958, was for Belcantodisc and consisted of unfamiliar arias by Donizetti, Rossini and Spohr accompanied at the piano by her husband. This was followed a few months after her Covent Garden *Lucia* by another recital, this time for Decca with Nello Santi conducting (tracks included here). Her next recital ***The Art of the Prima Donna*** was yet more ambitious and showed the guiding hand of Richard Bonynges in its careful choice of repertoire in which Sutherland pays tribute to her operatic forebears and roles they made famous. The idea for such a project might have been planted back in

November 1957 when Rosenthal presented a talk on the history of Covent Garden and Sutherland was called upon to sing *Regnava nel silenzio* as an illustration of Melba's Covent Garden debut as *Lucia*. So complete were her interpretations on these LPs however that critics doubted whether anyone would be aware of the fact that many of the roles portrayed lay outside Sutherland's repertoire at the time although Opera noted that she 'sets a standard by which future generations may well judge their own prima donnas'.

In an interview dating from this time, Sutherland outlined her plans for future roles which largely revolved around the Italian Romantic repertoire, which she did generally then concentrate on until the end of her distinguished career. There were just a few surprising choices, the biggest of which (but also in my view one of the most successful) was her stunning performance as Turandot in Decca's famous recording alongside Pavarotti. Wisely however she never sang this on stage. A labour of love which also raised eyebrows was her recording of Noel Coward songs.

Later in life one was as likely to encounter her as Rosalinde *Fledermaus* and Hanna Glawari Men), Widow as Donizetti's Mary Stuart and Cilea's Adriana Lecouvreur. She and Bonynges turned down many roles (it is rather shocking to think that Covent Garden considered her for Lady Macbeth so soon after her first Lucia) and it was that common sense which undoubtedly enabled her to retain her glorious voice for so long (she was still singing Lucia in Barcelona almost thirty years after she first sang the role). For her services to music Joan Sutherland was awarded the DBE in 1979. She died on 10 October 2010 at her home in Switzerland.

In listening to this collection of arias and scenes one can only echo the words of the late John Steane in his review of a reissue of Sutherland's first recital disc for Decca: 'All the old feelings return, listening to this record now on its reissue. The beauty of the voice, the astonishing technical accomplishment, the brilliance of the upper range, the tenderness and poignancy of the emotions: nothing seems less marvellous than it did then. In some respects indeed the record is more cherishable than ever, because the mannerisms (the dull vowels, enervated portamento and phrases killed by overcare) have hardly begun to take hold, and much of the best of the artist is here' (Gramophone, July 1981).

Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* is a late opera, composed for production at the Kärntner-Theater in Vienna in 1842. The action takes place in Chamounix and Paris c1760 and tells the story of a naive young lady who

is whisked off to Paris by an impoverished painter (actually an aristocrat) whose uncle has evil designs on her. In her entrance aria, Linda sings of her happiness when she

is with her 'painter' lover Carlo and of her dreams of living with him. By this time, Donizetti's style had evolved: he could no longer be bracketed alongside Rossini and Bellini and was very much anticipating the early and middle period Verdi. Like the other operas in this collection Linda was successful at first but fell into neglect during the twentieth century. Concert performances at Covent Garden in 2009 alerted audiences to its many beauties. Many 19th century operatic heroines were prone to madness of whom the most famous is Lucia, heroine of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* based on Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Lucia loves Edgardo Ravenswood, a descendant of the murderer of one of her ancestors. In *Regnava nel silenzio* as she awaits the arrival of her lover, she tells her maid Alisa of her sighting of her ancestor's ghost. Lucia's brother tricks her into believing Edgardo has betrayed her and she agrees to marry another. Edgardo's sudden return at her wedding drives her insane and she murders her husband on their wedding night. In Lucia's famous Mad Scene *Ardon gl'insensi*, she imagines that she is about to be married instead to Edgardo.

Verdi's *I vespri siciliani* (Les vepres siciliennes) comes between *Traviata* and the first version of *Simon Boccanegra* in Verdi's canon and was premiered at the Paris Opera in 1855. In scale it owes something to Meyerbeer but Verdi did not allow spectacle to get in the way of the drama which is set during the 13th century in French-occupied Sicily. This aria comes in the final act during the wedding of the Sicilian Helene and Henri, whom she believes to be Sicilian but who is actually the son of the hated French governor. A massacre of the French is planned after the wedding, something Helene is powerless to prevent. Gilda in *Rigoletto* (1851) is the latest conquest of the Duke of Mantua, a compulsive womaniser who has disguised himself as the impoverished student Gualtier Malde. In this aria we learn how completely Gilda has fallen under his spell. Violetta, the heroine of *La Traviata* (1853) is a pleasure-loving courtesan suffering from an incurable disease. At a party she meets Alfredo who seems different from the other men who fawn upon her. In this aria she wonders if he is the man for her but in a dazzling exhibition of coloratura she shrugs off the idea as pure madness. *Otello* (1887) was Verdi's penultimate opera and, apart from dispensing with Shakespeare's opening act, Boïto's text closely follows the Bard. In the final act Desdemona is tended by her maid Emilia before going to bed. She is filled with foreboding and sings a sad song taught her by her mother's maid.

Cane and Barbier's libretto for Ambrose Thomas's grand opera *Hamlet* (1868) was based on Dumas' adaptation of Shakespeare. Like Berlioz, Dumas had been overwhelmed by Harriet Smithson's improvisatory interpretation of Ophelia in Paris (1827) and his version was written with the memory of Smithson in mind. Thanks in part to Chabrier's famous quip 'There are three types of music: good, bad and Ambrose Thomas' Thomas' reputation has plummeted over the years. However a resurgence of interest in *Hamlet* has resulted in important productions seen across the world. In this opera Ophelia's madness is not reported but enacted in full view of the audience; Thomas rightly saw this as the perfect opportunity for the coloratura soprano to shine in an old-fashioned mad scene, tailor-made for Christine Nilsson, who sang in the premiere. In the final act Ophelia, driven mad by Hamlet's rejection, comes across some peasants by a river. She offers them flowers and sings of the Willis (nymphs who lure unhappy lovers to their deaths). As the music recalls her earlier scene with Hamlet she fears her own demise and, leaning over the side of a bridge she falls in and is carried away by the current. Cane and Barbier also adapted Shakespeare for Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette* (1867). This time the libretto had more in common with the original except that Juliette awakes from her deathlike sleep in the tomb in time to sing one final duet with Romeo. Juliette's showpiece waltz aria *Je veux vivre* was a late addition to the score requested by the first interpreter Marie Miolan-Cavalho. In this first act aria she explains to her nurse Gertrude that she does not wish to marry. This however is before she meets Romeo!

Luigi Arditi (1822-1903) was a much-travelled Italian opera conductor and violinist. Of his compositions, the waltz-song *Il bacio* (The Kiss), a favourite of sopranos from Patti onwards, is undoubtedly the most famous.

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Alto ALC1155

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1, 2, 4, 8, 9 recorded in London, 1960

Producers: **James Walker, Michael Bremner, and Ray Minshull**

Engineer: **Kenneth Wilkinson**

3, 5, 6, 7 recorded in Paris, 1959

Producer: **Ray Minshull**

Engineer: **Kenneth Wilkinson**

10 recorded in London, 1960

Producer: **Michael Bremner**

Engineer: **Arthur Lilley**

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