

May 19, 2022 - Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*

An encore performance from the **AI Ruocchio** archives is featured on this week's *Thursday Night Opera House*: Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*. Set to an Italian libretto by Felice Romani, it was based on Victor Hugo's play *Lucrèce Borgia*, which mixes fact and fiction about the legendary daughter of Pope Alexander VI. *Lucrezia Borgia* premiered on December 26, 1833 at Milan's Teatro all Scala. In the opera, Lucrezia and her husband are a power couple, each with their own operatives and each seemingly with their own political agendas. There is indeed historical fact to support this. This was a marriage of two great political families, which included some of the most lethal despots of the day. Lucrezia did not *marry* a Borgia, she *was* one. It's entirely plausible that such a woman would have her own spies doing her personal bidding, independent of her husband.

The story takes place in early sixteenth-century Venice and Ferrara. During Carnival festivities in Venice, Gennaro (tenor **Alfredo Kraus**) is drawn to an unknown woman, until Maffio Orsini (mezzo-soprano **Shirley Verrett** in a "trouser" role) and his other friends reveal her as the infamous Lucrezia Borgia (soprano **Montserrat Caballé**). Lucrezia's husband, Duke Alfonso d'Este of Ferrara (bass **Ezio Flagello**), is jealous of his wife's interest in Gennaro, and Gennaro--to prove that he has no feelings for Lucrezia--defaces the Borgia crest in front of his friends. Lucrezia demands of Alfonso the death penalty for the offender but is horrified to discover that he is Gennaro who--unbeknown to all but herself--is her son.

Alfonso makes her give Gennaro the poisoned Borgia wine, but after his departure, she persuades the young man to drink an antidote. Gennaro joins Orsini and his friends at a banquet, where Lucrezia—to revenge her treatment in Venice--has poisoned the wine. Appalled to discover Gennaro among the guests, Lucrezia reveals that she is his mother and begs him to take the antidote but, shocked to learn his true parentage, Gennaro prefers to die with his friends.

Jonel Perlea conducts the RCA Italiana Opera Chorus and Orchestra in this 1966 RCA Gold Seal recording, CD number 6642.