

From the archive, 18 February 1959: Lucia: a tour de force from Joan Sutherland

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- Philip Hope-Wallace
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Donizetti's "Lucia Di Lammermoor", good clean fun at the lowest evaluation but capable of great tragic intensity when finely produced as now at Covent Garden, came back last night to the stage where it was once the greatest of tests for the Melbas and Tetrzzinis, and where it had not been on show since Toti Dal Monte gave a single showing of the old war horse in 1925. It came back as a personal triumph for the Australian soprano [Joan Sutherland](#) — a future Melba, some people would be ready to declare, on the strength of her almost flawless singing of the great scene of the third act last night.

Her voice, intrinsically beautiful, was under the strictest control, nothing shirked, and the entire shaping of the scene put to the most dramatic effect. The producer Zeffirelli deserves his place in the catalogue of excellence and the veteran maestro Serafin likewise, but the audience was in no two minds about where the final credit lay: namely with this lyrical coloratura soprano who, on this crucial occasion, surprised her most ardent admirers. The pathos of her "Alfin Son Tua" seized the whole house. This was exceptional operatic singing, radiant, pure, and vivid and it won an ovation of the kind usually reserved for the favourite ballerina.

"Lucia" is, in fact, for the light soprano much what "Giselle" is for the ballerina. It used formerly to be given in haphazard manner with everything staked on the prima donna, absurdity rampant, and the Scottish chorus with their sporrans round their necks. This new production is full of feeling and atmosphere, with splendid sets, entirely successful costumes, and the most logical and intelligent movement. It looks like a contemporary print of the 1840s. The tenor had been laid abed with influenza and many in the audience should have been likewise kept at home. But Kenneth Neate obliged at short notice and sang with complete assurance.

Geraint Evans (Lucia's brother), Michael Langdon, and Margareta Elkins filled in well and the sextet not, mercifully, encored, was completed by Kenneth Macdonald (Bucklaw) and Raymond Nilsson. But it was Joan Sutherland's evening and she was acclaimed in all parts of the house and by many notable singers present: Mme Schwarzkopf applauded enthusiastically from the former royal box. Mme Callas, all sweetness at yesterday's rehearsal, had unfortunately had to leave betimes.

Philip Hope-Wallace

[Joan Sutherland's breakthrough performance of Lucia at Covent Garden on 17 February 1959 made her a star. Dame Joan died last year on 10 October.]