

Sweet Sounds & Wild Places;

Women's Voices from Lockdown

The Covid 19 world pandemic appears to have brought other pandemics in its wake; not least the exponential increase in mental health problems being experienced by people, and in particular, women and girls.

In the first piece of research of its kind, the international aid organisation CARE published findings in September 2020, indicating that 27% of women and 10% of men in their survey reported a devastating impact on their mental health & wellbeing in the previous 12 months during the lockdown restrictions imposed by many governments across the world. For most women the reasons cited for the deterioration in the state of their mental health included: worries about managing reduced income and the associated inability to provide food for their families; child home schooling and care of elderly relatives; home/ work life balance; loneliness & social isolation and for some, enduring aggressive, controlling and even violent, behaviour from their (usually) male partners due to enforced living together 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

You may read this and wonder how on earth Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* and its inspiration; *The Bride of Lammermoor*, the 1819 tale penned by Scotland's greatest novelist Sir Walter Scott, is connected to what has been described as a world crisis in women's mental health and wellbeing.

One answer might be that these women – imagined and real - lack the resources (of many kinds) to help them gain control over their own lives.

Poverty, lack of educational or career opportunities, issues around self-esteem, inequality in relationships as well as social pressure from family & community are just a few of the key factors in the lives of some women that can make them much more vulnerable to various forms of mental illness.

Consider that Lucia (and her literary counterpart Lucy) retreats into madness in order to isolate herself from the horrors of the situation she is powerless to influence. Married against her will, intimidated by domineering relatives and oppressive advisors (in the opera; these characters are almost exclusively male) with no hope of respite, one can easily imagine that to be 'out of one's

senses' would be a relief, despite the stigma that mental illness carries, only a little less today, than it did in earlier centuries.

For Lucia, the only escape from her situation is death – as terrible an action to contemplate then - as it is today.

In 2021 - 2022, as part of an international initiative to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Sir Walter Scott, Scottish Opera's Education & Outreach team worked with women and girls in the Scottish Borders region (where he lived and wrote his novels) on a skill building programme involving music & lyric composition and visual arts (including photography and sculpture) designed to empower them to express their thoughts and feelings about many aspects of their lives. Using as creative stimuli, Donizetti's score, the characters in the story and most importantly, the wild and dramatic landscape in which the novel and the opera are set, we plan to encourage them to share their hopes and ambitions, the challenges they face and ways in which they might find resolution to those challenges. In 50 years of working with music and the other art forms in communities across Scotland, we know the power the Arts has to enrich people's lives, whether as participants in creative workshop programme or as members of an audience in an opera house

We must learn and understand the motivations that drive characters such as Lucia to such desperate measures. This knowledge enables us to support and encourage women and girls to build their sense of self-esteem through shared celebration of their personal and group creativity. Helping them to find 'a voice' to express themselves may not solve their problems, but it will go a long way towards identifying resourceful, imaginative and permanent ways to manage them.

The music, poetry and visual images that the group have created has been curated into an exhibition entitled ***Sweet Sounds in Wild Places; An Exhibition in Four Acts*** which will be installed in the foyers of Glasgow's Theatre Royal between 26 October and 6 November 2022.