

## Chopin and Lucrezia

Until today, scholars have assumed that Chopin alluded to the French novelist Aurore Dudevant (1804-1876), alias George Sand, when he cursed “Lucrezia” in his letter dated London, 17 November 1848 to Albert Grzymała: “I have never cursed anyone; but now my life is so unbearable that it seems to me it would give me relief if I could curse Lucrezia – But no doubt she also suffers, – suffers all the more because she will doubtless grow old in anger.”<sup>1</sup>

This assumption was based on the six-year older George Sand having published her book *Lucrezia Floriani* in 1847, the year of her final rupture with Chopin. It was about a certain prince Karol, who after the death of his overprotective mother, fell in love with Lucrezia Floriani, a former actress with many lovers, who now lived near an idyllic lake with her children. Lucrezia gave the prince her motherly protection, but she suffered his jealousy for ten years, before she died at the age of 40. Lucrezia was considered by everybody to be a thinly disguised George Sand, and Karol was Chopin.



In Chopin’s letters from his sojourn in London and Scotland in 1848, however, he shows no particular interest in George Sand, except for some gossip about her various political and financial failures. Thus, his sudden emotional outburst and the feeling of his life now being “so unbearable”, do not seem to have any bearing on his past relationship with George Sand.

### Who was Lucrezia?



What or who else could have been on Chopin’s mind on 17 November 1848? A clue is provided by Victor Hugo’s three-act drama *Lucrece Borgia* (1833) that builds loosely on the myth of Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519), the daughter of a powerful Renaissance Spaniard who later became Pope Alexander VI. Portrayed as a femme fatale, Lucrezia appears in several tales of ruthless politics, murder and sexual corruption. Her father and brother arranged several marriages for her to important men in order to advance their own careers.

Hugo’s drama was transformed into a libretto for Donizetti’s opera, *Lucrezia Borgia* that had its premiere at La Scala in Milan on 26 December 1834.<sup>2</sup> The librettist was Felice Romani (1788-1865), who also wrote the librettos for Bellini’s *La Sonnambula*, *Norma* and *Beatrice di Tenda* – highly popular operas in Britain around 1848.

The prolific Carl Czerny (1791-1857)<sup>3</sup> composed at some point, perhaps around 1850, a theme for pianoforte on the *Lucrezia Borgia* opera. The title of Czerny’s piano piece reveals that Jenny Lind sang airs from this opera including: *Thème de Lucrezia Borgia* in a collection entitled *Souvenir de Jenny Lind sur des Airs chantés par Jenny Lind pour le Pianoforte – Dédié aux Elvés par Ch. Czerny* (published by G.P. Reed & C<sup>o</sup>, 17 Tremont Row, Boston).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From *Chopin’s Letters*, Henryk Opieński & E.L. Voynich (1932). Omitting the last sentence, Adam Zamoyski interprets the quote by saying that Chopin “could not prevent his thoughts from drifting back to George Sand” (*Chopin*, 1979, p. 269).

<sup>2</sup> When *Lucrezia Borgia* was produced in Paris, in 1840, Hugo obtained an injunction against further productions. The libretto was then rewritten and re-titled *La Rinegata*, with the Italian characters changed to Turks, and the performances were resumed. The first English-language production was staged in London on 30 December 1843.

<sup>3</sup> Czerny was born in Vienna to Czech parents, and he had taken lessons from Hummel, Salieri and Beethoven. Czerny was already at the age of fifteen a sought after teacher. Franz Liszt (1811-1886) and Sigismund Thalberg (1812-1871) were among his pupils. According to Fr. Niecks (1888), Czerny got well acquainted with Chopin in Vienna in 1829.

<sup>4</sup> The author found the score in October 2004 at Chapel Hill Music Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States. An original copy was subsequently obtained from an antiquarian in Wytheville, Virginia, United States.

## It could have been Jenny Lind

Thus, it is more likely that it was Jenny Lind and not George Sand to whom Chopin referred in his letter of 17 November 1848. Bellini's and Donizetti's operas were on top of Jenny Lind's repertoire at the time, and Chopin could in London on several occasions have heard her sing the airs from *Lucrezia Borgia* that Czerny commemorated with his composition.<sup>5</sup>



Thalberg may have provided a link to Czerny, his former teacher. Chopin writes on 6 May 1848, "Thalberg has been engaged for 12 concerts in the same theatre where Lind appears". As it happened, Thalberg was married to the sister of Frederick Lablache, the Italian opera singer, who often performed with Jenny Lind – notably at her charity concert for *Brompton Hospital of Consumption and Diseases of the Chest* on 31 July 1848. Thalberg could therefore have informed Czerny about Jenny Lind and inspired him to write the *Souvenir de Jenny Lind* piece.

If Jenny Lind was Lucrezia, how was she in November 1848 able to provoke such an outburst of despair by Chopin? The explanation can be found in *CHOPIN and The Swedish Nightingale* (Brussels, 2003) and a supporting research paper, which provide evidence that Jenny Lind in the autumn of 1848 tried in vain to persuade Chopin that they get engaged and eventually married.<sup>6</sup> Chopin, however, wrote on 30 October 1848 that he "was nearer to a coffin than to a marriage bed". In the above letter of 17 November, Chopin nevertheless also curses his own "fever of indecision", and he writes on 22 November: "I have promised to come back here next season!!!".

## Epilogue

Chopin was right in saying: "... she also suffers, – suffers all the more because she will doubtless grow old in anger." The 10-year younger Jenny Lind never forgot Chopin. In 1855 and 1856, she sang an arrangement of his mazurkas for Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace – including Opus 24, n° 3 in Italian ["... faithful love will never die"]. In 1887, Jenny Lind was buried in Malvern Hill, England to Chopin's *Funeral March*. Her memorial was raised next to those of Händel and Shakespeare at Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey in 1894. As it happened, Chopin's obelisk was unveiled in the garden at Zelazowa Wola the same year.

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Images: George Sand in 1850; Lucrezia Borgia by Bartolomeo Veneziano; and painting of Jenny Lind in 1847 by Alfred Count d'Orsay (National Portrait Gallery, London).

<sup>5</sup> Donizetti's *Daughter of the Regiment* (1840) had long been one of Jenny Lind's favourite operas. Chopin wrote on 2 June 1848: "Yesterday I again saw Jenny Lind in *Lucy of Lammermoor*" (1835). Donizetti died on 8 April 1848.

<sup>6</sup> Chopin did not come back to London. Instead, Jenny Lind travelled incognito to Paris in May 1849, with the knowledge of Queen Victoria, in an unsuccessful attempt to marry Chopin. Icons of Europe's research paper on this finding was reviewed with Chopin experts convened by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute in Warsaw on 1 March 2004.