

Macbeth

“Macbetto”

Italian opera in four acts
by
Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave,
after Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Globe
Theater, London (1605)

Premiere: Teatro della Pergola, Florence,
Italy, March 1847

Adapted from the
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by
Burton D. Fisher

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the Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series

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Story Synopsis

Verdi's *Macbeth* dutifully mirrors Shakespeare's tragedy: the powerful drama chronicles the rise and fall of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, their ultimate destruction resulting from their blind ambition to seize and maintain power in 11th century Scotland.

Banquo and Macbeth, generals serving King Duncan in Scotland's battle against England, accidentally encounter the three "Weird Sisters," Witches who prophesy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, next in line as king of Scotland: Banquo's lineage will succeed Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth, possessed by obsessive ambition for power, spurs her husband to kill King Duncan while he spends a night at their castle at Dunsinane. After the King's murder, fearing for their lives, Duncan's son Malcolm flees Scotland: Macbeth becomes king.

Fearing the Witches' prophecy, Macbeth has Banquo assassinated, but his son, Fleance, escapes. Macbeth, in fear and guilt, hallucinates, haunted by visions of Banquo's ghost. He again seeks the Witches' predictions: they assure him that his power will be secure until Birnam Wood arises against Dunsinane, and that no man "of woman born" shall harm him.

Macbeth learns that Macduff joined Malcolm's rebel army, and orders the slaughter of Malcolm's wife and children. His enemies, camouflaged with branches from Birnam Wood, advance on Dunsinane: Macbeth envisions their assault as a fulfillment of the Witches' prophecy.

Lady Macbeth dies, driven to madness by her guilt. Macduff kills Macbeth in battle, the final fulfillment of the Witches' prophecy: he was not "of woman born," but "from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd." Malcolm, Duncan's son, becomes Scotland's king, ending Macbeth's brutal reign of tyranny and terror.

Principal Characters in the Opera

Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, and a Scottish general in the army of King Duncan	Baritone
Lady Macbeth, his wife	Soprano
Banquo (Banco), a Scottish general	Bass
Duncan, King of Scotland Tenor	
Malcolm, Duncan's son	Tenor
Macduff, a nobleman	Tenor
A Murderer	Baritone
Lady-in-Waiting to Lady Macbeth	Soprano
A Physician	Bass
Hecate, goddess of night and witchcraft	Dancer

The Three Witches, Nobles, refugees, Scottish
and British Soldiers, Attendants, Apparitions

TIME and PLACE: 11th century, Scotland

Story Narrative and Music Highlights

Prelude:

The prelude furnishes various musical themes that express grim aspects of the tragedy. The first music portrays the Witches, conveying a shrillness, malevolence, and their demonic character.

The Witches' theme:

Allegro assai moderato



A second theme captures music from Lady Macbeth's Act IV *Sleepwalking Scene*; mournful music that suggests the gnawing guilt in the recesses of Lady Macbeth's subconscious.

Lady Macbeth's Sleepwalking theme:



ACT I – Scene 1: A wooded landscape. A group of three Witches appear amid a storm.

Roars of thunder and flashes of lightning evoke a terrifying atmosphere: a chorus of Witches sing and dance, priding their malevolence, and invoking themselves as children of Satan.

Macbeth and Banquo, Scottish generals returning from a victorious battle against their English foe, accidentally encounter the Witches. The Witches greet Macbeth, now Thane of Glamis, and prophesy that he will soon become Thane of Cawdor, a rank that would place him next in line as king of Scotland.

Witches: Salve, o Macbetto, di Glamis sire!

Andante sostenuto
WITCHES



The Witches' prediction of sudden good fortune seizes Macbeth with fear and anxiety. Banquo, equally stunned, commands the Witches to reveal his future, and they prophesy that he will never be king, but the progenitor of future kings.

The Witches' prophesy becomes fulfilled immediately: a messenger arrives and announces that King Duncan has proclaimed Macbeth the next Thane of Cawdor: his predecessor has been executed for treason, and his lands and title have been assigned to Macbeth.

Macbeth and Banquo, overwhelmed by the sudden events, express their inner sentiments: Macbeth's ambition possesses and overpowers his imagination: he becomes perplexed, anxious, and seized by thoughts of horror and terror; Banquo remains skeptical.

Macbeth: Due vaticini compiuti or sono

Andante assai sostenuto
MACBETH



Due vati-ci - ni compiuti or sono mi si pro-mette dal ter - zo un trono...
Prophetic visions of a throne now possess me.....

The Witches, noting the anxiety of the two men, erupt in triumph: they have planted their evil seeds, and now await the flowering of their malevolence.

Scene 2: A hall in Macbeth's castle.

Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth in which he describes his meeting with the Witches and their prophesy for his future. She explodes into uncontrollable excitement as she envisions their forthcoming rise to power: she bids Macbeth hurry home so she can incite him with her diabolical plans; for Lady Macbeth, no crime shall thwart her obsessive ambition for power.

Lady Macbeth: Vieni t'afretta

Andantino
LADY MACBETH



Vieni! t'afretta! Accen - dere ti vo' quel freddo co - re!
Come! Hurry home! Kindle the desires in your cold heart!

A messenger announces that Macbeth has arrived with King Duncan's entourage: the King plans to spend the night in Macbeth's castle. Lady Macbeth, energized by this sudden opportunity

to fulfill her dreams, invokes the powers of darkness as she contemplates the murder of King Duncan.

Lady Macbeth: Or tutti sorgete

Allegro maestoso
LADY MACBETH



Or tut - ti sorge - te, mini - stri inferna - li, che al sangue incorate,
Furies of satan assist me in my duty! Unsex me, hellish demons,

King Duncan and his entourage parade briefly before Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, a few gracious words are exchanged, and then the King retires for the night.

In a tense confrontation, Lady Macbeth reveals her diabolical murder plans to her husband, goading him to assassinate King Duncan that very night. Macbeth becomes possessed by fantastic images: he envisions the dagger, and as a night bell sounds, he rushes off to murder Duncan.

Macbeth returns to the awaiting Lady Macbeth, his hands bloody and still holding the dagger. In triumph, he announces *Tutto è finito!*, “All is done!”

In a sinister exchange between husband and wife, Lady Macbeth orders Macbeth to lay the bloody dagger near the guards so that they will appear to be guilty of Duncan’s murder. But Macbeth is horrified by his actions and is unable to return to the murder scene. Scornfully, Lady Macbeth seizes the dagger, rushes into the king’s chamber, and places the bloody dagger beside his bed.

Loud knocks on the castle gates herald the arrival of Banquo and Macduff. Macbeth, his hands drenched with King Duncan’s blood, is led by Lady Macbeth to their quarters to avoid suspicion.

Banquo enters the King's quarters to awaken him and finds him murdered. All are summoned, express their horrified anguish, and then pray for divine guidance for vengeance and justice.

Act II – Scene 1: A room in Macbeth's castle

Malcolm is suspected of Duncan's murder and flees Scotland. Macbeth is now King, but he is apprehensive and insecure of his new power. He becomes tormented by subconscious imaginings and guilt, and fears the Witches' prophesy: Banquo's sons will become the future kings of Scotland. Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to murder Banquo and his heirs. With fiercely determination, she urges her husband to be undaunted in his purpose: his resolve must remain firm, never weaken nor fail him; he must murder Banquo so he can fulfill his destiny and glory.

Lady Macbeth: La luce langue

Allegro moderato
LADY MACBETH

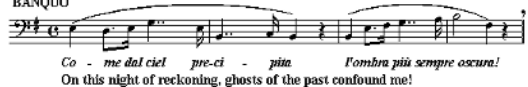


Scene 2: A park near Macbeth's castle

Macbeth's assassins wait in ambush to murder Banquo. Banquo appears with his son, Fleance, and meditates about his fears for his future.

Banquo: Come dal ciel precipita

Adagio
BANQUO



Assassins murder Banquo, but his son, Fleance, escapes.

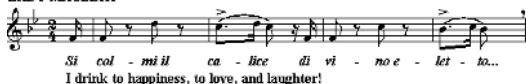
Scene 3: The Banquet hall

Scotland's King and Queen, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, are acclaimed at a banquet. Macbeth summons Lady Macbeth to celebrate and lead the noble guests in a *brindisi*, a drinking song praising happiness and love, and a farewell to anxiety and suffering.

Lady Macbeth: the Brindisi; Si colmi il calice

Allegretto

LADY MACBETH



As the closing strains of the *brindisi* echo, an assassin advises Macbeth that they have murdered Banquo, but unfortunately, his son Fleance escaped.

Macbeth becomes possessed by hallucinations: he alone believes that Banquo's ghost occupies a chair at the banquet table. Macbeth, incoherent and lacking presence of mind, addresses the empty chair. Lady Macbeth tries to discourage and calm him by repeating her *brindisi*, ironically proposing a toast to the health of the absent Banquo. But Macbeth, overcome with terror, cannot erase the vision of Banquo and proceeds to speak to the ghost.

In the confusion, Lady Macbeth tries to assuage the guests, declaring that the dead cannot return to life. However, Macbeth has become possessed by fear and guilt: he is determined to learn his fate and decides to seek the prophecies from the Witches.

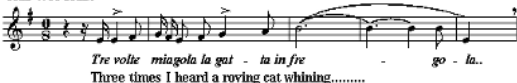
Act III: A dark cave. A burning cauldron surrounded by Witches.

In a bizarre display of supernatural imagery, the Witches sing and dance as they hover over a flaming caldron.

Chorus of Witches: Tre volte miagola

Allegro

THE WITCHES



Hecate, the goddess of night and witchcraft, appears before them and announces the arrival of King Macbeth: she orders the Witches to answer his questions, and should his composure break down, the spirits must revive and reinvigorate him.

Macbeth pleads with the Witches to predict his destiny. The Witches conjure up a series of apparitions, each preceded by a lightning bolt. The first apparition, the head of an armed warrior, warns Macbeth to beware that Macduff, Thane of Fife, is his mortal enemy. Macbeth acknowledges to the spirit that it confirms his own suspicions, but the next apparition, a bloody child, assures Macbeth that he need fear no man of woman born: Macbeth ecstatically proclaims that he no longer fears Macduff.

Another apparition predicts that Macbeth shall never be vanquished until the forest of Birnam Wood shall rise. Macbeth becomes overjoyed by the news, convinced that he is protected: Birnam Wood's firmly planted trees can never be uprooted.

Macbeth asks the Witches if Banquo's heirs will one day wear the crown of Scotland. Suddenly, the spirits of eight kings pass by: each disappears and is replaced by another apparition. The eighth king is Banquo: he holds a mirror, a symbol indicating that kings will stem from his lineage. Macbeth attacks the

apparition of Banquo with his sword, but the apparition, along with the Witches themselves, vanish.

Macbeth, possessed with fear and terror, faints and falls to the ground.

Macbeth: Fuggi, regal fantasima

Adagio
MACBETH



Lady Macbeth arrives and demands to know what Macbeth has learned from the Witches. Macbeth reveals their prophesies: beware of Macduff; that Macbeth shall not die by the hand of one born of woman; that Macbeth's glory shall last until the forest of Birnam Wood shall rise against him; and that Banquo's offspring shall wear the crown.

Lady Macbeth erupts into ferocious outrage. She condemns the Witches' prophesies as lies and frauds, and vows that they will never be fulfilled: anyone opposed to the Macbeths must be destroyed.

Lady Macbeth succeeds in restoring Macbeth's determination and purpose: he decides to demolish Macduff's castle and slay his wife and children; he will find and murder Banquo's son, Fleance. Lady Macbeth prides her valiant husband, who has returned once more to bravery: both unite and swear vengeance on their enemies; Scotland will witness a bloody dawn of destruction: a reign of terror that will secure the Macbeth's power.

Macbeth: Ora di morte e di vendetta!

Allegro assai
LADY MACBETH and MACBETH



ACT IV – Scene 1: Open country near Birnam Wood on the border of England and Scotland

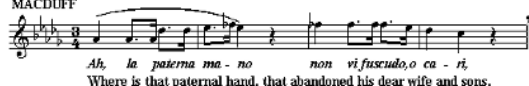
Refugees from Macbeth's tyranny express their patriotism and sorrow over Scotland's misfortunes: *Patria oppressa*, "Oppressed homeland!"

Macduff, whose wife and children were murdered by Macbeth, laments his agony and grief.

Macduff: Ah, la paterna mano

Adagio

MACDUFF



Malcolm arrives with soldiers from England. In preparation for an attack on Macbeth's castle of Dunsinane, he orders his men to camouflage themselves with branches from Birnam Wood's trees.

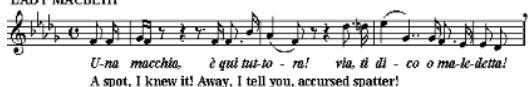
Scene 2: A Room in Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane.

Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep. Her physician and lady-in-waiting comment about her apparent loss of mind: she is subconsciously consumed with guilt, and in incoherent and disjointed phrases, recalls King Duncan's murder, all the while, rubbing imaginary blood from her hands.

Lady Macbeth: Una macchia

Andante assai sostenuto

LADY MACBETH



In another part of the castle, Macbeth condemns the traitors who have rebelled against him. He is haunted by the Witches' prophecies, but is undaunted in his determination to defeat his enemies and secure his power.

In a moment of introspection, Macbeth becomes possessed by the death and destruction he has fomented: he laments his legacy; no tears will fall on his death, only the thunder of curses from the oppressed. A woman announces that Lady Macbeth died: Macbeth shows neither indifference nor disdain; for him, the fury of life has resolved into nothingness.

Macbeth's soldiers announce that Birnam wood moves toward Dunsiname. Macbeth secures his armor, and goes off to battle.

Scene 3: A battlefield outside Dunsinane Castle.

Malcolm, Macduff, and English soldiers, camouflaged with branches from Birnam Wood, advance on Macbeth's castle. Macduff confronts Macbeth, and just as he is about to slay him, Macbeth proclaims that no one born of woman can strike him dead. Macduff contradicts him, claiming that he was not born of woman but ripped untimely from the womb. Macbeth turns frantic in terror: both enemies brandish their swords and exit battling.

Malcolm and English soldiers capture Macbeth's army and seize his castle. Macduff announces that he has killed Macbeth. In a victory hymn, the soldiers rejoice that the tyrant is dead, destroyed by the wrath and fury of the Lord. Malcolm becomes King of Scotland, while on bended knee, all proclaim, "God save the King!"

Verdi.....and Macbeth

Giuseppe Verdi began his opera composing career in 1839, a time when the styles and techniques of Italian opera, which had dominated the art form for over two centuries, were on the verge of ceding their supremacy. Many believed that opera had become stilted, old fashioned, and had even degenerated: Wagner's primary goal in his crusade at mid-century was to rescue opera from the decadence of Italian opera conventions.

Verdi's most immediate operatic guidelines evolved from the *primo ottocento*, a term loosely defining Italian music and opera during the first half of the 19th century. Verdi's immediate predecessors, Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, had dominated the early Romantic period and the *bel canto*, literally, the era of "beautiful singing, or "beautiful song."

Rossini was the architect who established the models for opera styles and conventions: he revitalized and refashioned the *opera buffa* (comic) and *opera seria* (serious) genres, and established the grammar and structural framework which every composer dutifully followed. In particular, Bellini and Donizetti initially emulated Rossini before they developed their own specific musical signatures. And quite naturally, Verdi was an heir to those traditions, his early operas adhering religiously to the conventions of *bel canto* structure and architecture. *Macbeth*, Verdi's seventh opera, was opera composed in the *bel canto* traditions and structural conventions of the Romantic period.

In the *bel canto* era, opera was a singer's medium, a venue providing an arena in which to display the vocal arts and feats of vocal acrobatics. Opera was rarely sung drama: its literary and dramatic values became secondary to singing and rarely if ever bore any organic

relationship or unity with its underlying music. The emphasis on voice, which peaked during the *bel canto* era, was a legacy that traced back to 18th century modes in which the singer and his vocal talents, not the composer as the musical dramatist, dominated the art form. As a result, opera composers were obliged to cater to vocal superstars who became, in effect, their austere clients.

Verdi's early musical language and techniques dutifully followed those of his predecessors: his early operas were composed in the traditions of the *bel canto* era, in which the vocal art remained primary: the orchestra was generally relegated to the secondary role of accompanist, "number" operas were integrated with recitative, and architecturally, all of the standard structural conventions were utilized; *cavatinas* (relatively simple single-part arias), *cabalettas* (generally two-part arias with fast and slow sections), and *strettas* (fast tempo finales of arias, duets, or ensembles).

But for Verdi, the opera art form was a forum in which he could expound his idealism: he would use his art form like a priest and teach morality. And through opera, he would convey profound human passions by combining the potency words with the emotive power of music. Temperamentally, Verdi was a son of the Enlightenment. He was an idealist who possessed a noble conception of humanity that abominated absolute power and deified civil liberty: his lifelong manifesto became a passionate crusade against every form of tyranny whether social, political, or ecclesiastical. During his first creative period, 1839 – 1850, his mission was a profound emotional commitment to Italy's liberation from foreign oppression and tyranny: he composed 16 operas during that period, each embedded with symbolism, allegory, and metaphor; Verdi's operatic pen provided his nation's anthems for freedom.

At the age of 26, his first opera, *Oberto*

(1839), was produced at La Scala, Milan. The opera was an acclaimed success, but more importantly, it nurtured optimism and expectation that finally, an Italian opera composer had appeared to revive their then decaying traditions. Unfortunately, his second opera, the comedy, *Un Giorno di Regno* (1840), proved a disastrous failure. But in his third opera, *Nabucco* (1842), Verdi's inventive melodic genius came to the fore: *Nabucco* was saturated with what eventually became the composer's musical trademark; broad, grandiose, and tuneful melodies.

From *Nabucco* onward, his operas became more unified in their integration of text and music; his characterizations began to possess an intense depth and express profound human values; and his music became injected with powerful psychological and emotional feeling: Verdi's goal was to use his music to bypass surface emotion and superficiality, an art form that would penetrate the soul of humanity.

Nabucco was followed with one success after another: *I Lombardi* (1843); *Ernani* (1844); *I Due Foscari* (1844); *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845); *Alzira* (1845); *Attila* (1846); *Macbeth* (1847); *I Masnadieri* (1847); *Il Corsaro* (1848); *La Battaglia di Legnano* (1849); *Luisa Miller* (1849); and *Stiffelio* (1850).

Beginning in 1851, Verdi's "middle period," his creative art began to flower into a new maturity: he began to composed what have become some of the best loved works ever written for the operatic stage; *Rigoletto* (1851); *Il Trovatore* (1853); *La Traviata* (1853); *I Vespri Siciliani* (1855); *Simon Boccanegra* (1857); *Aroldo* (1857); *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859); *La Forza del Destino* (1862); *Don Carlos* (1867); and *Aida* (1871).

As Verdi approached the twilight of his illustrious and prolific operatic career, he confounded the strictures of time and nature: he should have been relishing his "golden years," a

time when the fires of ambition were supposed to extinguish, and a time when he was supposed to become a spectator in life's show rather than its star. Nevertheless, the great opera composer epitomized the words of Robert Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra: "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be."

Consequently, Verdi overturned life's equation and transformed his old age into glory: "The best is yet to be" became his last two operatic masterpieces, inviolable proof of his continued advance toward greater dramatic integration between text and music, and ultimately, his transformation of opera into music drama.

Those last operas, *Otello* (1887), and *Falstaff* (1893), are considered by many to be the greatest Italian music dramas ever composed, both written respectively at the ages of 74 and 80. Verdi eventually composed 28 operas during his illustrious career, dying in 1901 at the age of 88.

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a tragedy in five acts, was first performed at the Globe Theatre, London, in 1605. The play was inspired by fears emanating from the rebellious Gunpowder Plot in 1605: its story focused on regicide and was intended to awaken suspicion in the new king, James I. In its day, *Macbeth* was a tremendous success, and likewise, it remains one of the most frequently performed of Shakespeare's plays. It is the shortest of Shakespeare's high tragedies, one-half as long as *Hamlet*, nevertheless, it is a rapid-fire drama possessing an almost ruthless economy of words, and like *Othello*, containing no diversions or subplots.

The time-frame of the *Macbeth* drama is the years 1040-1057. The historical Macbeth was a local chieftan in the province of Moray in

northern Scotland. Macbeth and his cousin, Duncan, derived their rights to the crown through their mothers, but Macbeth attained the throne in 1040 after killing King Duncan in a battle near Elgin: Shakespeare controverted historical fact and presented King Duncan murdered by Macbeth in his bed.

Scotland's civil wars for power continued unabated, but in 1045, Macbeth secured his throne by triumphing over a rebel army near Dunkeld, the modern Tayside region, which suggest Shakespeare's references to Birnam Wood, which is a village near Dunkeld. In 1046, Siward, Earl of Northumbria, unsuccessfully attempted to dethrone Macbeth in favor of Malcolm, eldest son of Duncan I: in 1054, Siward forced Macbeth to yield part of southern Scotland to Malcolm. Three years later, Macbeth was killed in battle by Malcolm, who had been assisted by the English armies.

Macbeth was buried on the island of Iona, traditionally a cemetery for lawful kings but not usurpers. His followers later attempted to install his stepson, Lulach, as king, but Lulach was killed in 1058, and Malcolm III became the supreme ruler of Scotland.

Shakespeare's contemporary rival, Ben Johnson, praised him as a writer "not of an age, but for all time," a universal genius and literary high priest who invented through his dramas, a secular scripture from which we derive much of our language, much of our psychology, and much of our mythology.

It has been said that Shakespeare, through his dramas, invented the human: his works hold a mirror up to humanity which lays bare its soul. His character inventions take human nature to its limits and have become truthful representations of the human experience: Hamlet, Falstaff, Iago, and Cleopatra; it is through those characterizations that one turns inward and discovers new modes of awareness and

consciousness. Shakespeare's ultimate legacy is that for four centuries, his plays have become the wheel of our lives, teaching us through their universal themes, whether we are fools of time, of love, of fortune, or even of ourselves.

Giuseppe Verdi had a life-long veneration for Shakespeare, his singular and most popular source of literary inspiration, far more profound to him than the playwrights Goldoni, Goethe, Schiller, Hugo, and Racine. Verdi said of Shakespeare: "He is a favorite poet of mine whom I have had in my hands from earliest youth and whom I read and reread constantly."

The desire to compose operas based on Shakespeare's dramas was a leitmotif threading through Verdi's entire career. He dreamed of bringing *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to the operatic stage: both were ambitious projects that never reached fruition. In particular, *King Lear's* intricacy and bold extremities represented an imposing deterrent. Even late in his career, Boito submitted a sketch to him after the success of *Otello*, but he hesitated, considering himself too old to undertake what he deemed a monumental challenge.

In 1847, the 34 year old Verdi received a commission from the Teatro della Pergola in Florence to compose an opera for the Carnival or Lenten season. Verdi was nearing completion of *I Masnadieri* "The Robbers," but its leading role was dependent on a tenor and none was available: he turned to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, an opera that he had conceived without a tenor lead.

In opera, the composer of music, not the playwright, is the dramatist of the story. Verdi had been continually evolving and refining his musico-dramatic techniques, and technically and temperamentally, he was ready for the emotional and dramatic scope of this Shakespearean work. An opera based on Verdi's favorite dramatist was an inevitability: *Macbeth*, his seventh opera,

became the first of his three music dramas based on Shakespeare's plays; *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893) belong to the last phase of his career

Shakespearean plots are saturated with extravagant passions that are well-suited to the opera medium. Themes of love dominate both his tragedies and comedies, as well as classic confrontations and universal themes involving hate, jealousy, and revenge. Dramatically, *Macbeth* possesses consummate power: it is one of the best constructed and most vividly theatrical of all of Shakespeare's dramas; its conflicts and tensions essentially progress with no episodes that fail to bear on the central action; and all of its action is focused toward its dramatic core and purpose.

In deference to Shakespeare, Verdi resolved to be as faithful as possible to the original play. He selected as his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, the poet who had collaborated with him on his recent successes, *Ernani* (1844) and *I Due Foscari* (1844), and would eventually become his librettist for nine of his operas.

Verdi wrote to Piave about *Macbeth*: "This tragedy is one of the greatest creations of man! If we can't do something great with it let's at least try to do something different..." Verdi and Piave faced that eternal challenge inherent in converting Shakespeare to the lyric stage: they had to retain the dramatic essence of the original drama while stripping the drama of its verbal intricacies: much of its word-play, eloquent speech, and poetic language are intrinsically not easily transformed into music theater, a possible reason that many operatic adaptations of Shakespeare are far removed from their originals. Librettist Arrigo Boito faced that same challenge almost a half century later when he reduced *Othello's* monumental 3500 lines to 700 lines for Verdi's *Otello*.

Composer and librettist battled vigorously,

Verdi at times bullying his librettist with strict instructions about the sequence of scenes and details of characterizations, and even occasionally supplying Piave with his own prose versions of certain sections. Even Verdi's friend, Andrea Maffei, a renowned Shakespearean and collaborator with Verdi on the libretto of *I Masnadieri*, retouched certain passages and contributed to the final *Macbeth* scenario.

The premiere of *Macbeth* in 1847 was a sensational critical success: the cheering audience expressed fanatical enthusiasm, and the composer was forced to take 25 bows. In retrospect, Verdi was so pleased with the opera that he considered it worthy of dedication to Antonio Barezzi: his expression of gratitude to the man who had been his benefactor, surrogate father, and former father-in-law.

However, in 1865, eighteen years after its premiere, Verdi revised and added material to *Macbeth* for a Parisian production: additions included Lady Macbeth's stirring sunset song, *La luce langue*; the vengeance duet for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, *Ora di morte*; Macbeth's death scene, *Inno di vittoria*; the concluding choruses, *Patria oppressa* and the thanksgiving chorus; and a ballet, forbidden in the original score because the opera had been commissioned for the Lenten season

The Parisian critics were cool and even disapproved of the revised opera. Verdi was puzzled and disappointed. Some critics condemned him as neither knowing nor understanding Shakespeare. The composer responded: "I may not have rendered *Macbeth* well, but that I do not know, do not understand and feel Shakespeare, no by heaven, no!..." Nevertheless, it is the revised Paris version of *Macbeth* which is generally performed in contemporary times.

Macbeth is a complex personality whose terrifying evil dominates the dramatic action in the story: his demonic persona soars and plummets with each new situation, inspiring him to horrifying and terrifying acts. Cold-blooded murder becomes his natural, customary, and characteristic behavior: his victims become those who interfere with his obsession and ambition for power; King Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macduff, and her children.

In Shakespeare's high tragedies, the characterization of Hamlet and King Lear contain scope and depth, Othello a painfulness, and Antony and Cleopatra, a world without end. In *Macbeth*, the core of the drama concerns unknown fears, all of which evolve from Macbeth's imagination. His fears lead him to hallucinations and imaginings, and then into a nihilistic abyss. However, Macbeth is not a fiendish Iago, confident and delighting in his wickedness, but rather, an insecure demon whose internal conflicts transform his soul into torment and agony.

Macbeth surrenders to his imagination, ultimately evolving into his misery, fear, and evil actions: the extraordinary and enormous power of fantasy engulfs him in phantasmagoria and witchcraft, all of which alter reality and events. He suffers intensely as each stage of his diabolical terror advances: he becomes a victim of compulsion that he cannot control.

At the outset of the play, Macbeth is a brave and respected soldier, a trusted general in King Duncan's army. He becomes overcome by ambition, his motivation to change the course of Scotland's succession: he becomes susceptible and vulnerable, ultimately the victim of the Weird Sisters' prophesies (Verdi's Witches), and then the goading and stirring of Lady Macbeth.

Shakespeare does not portray the Macbeths as Machiavellian exaggerations, or even as power-obsessed sadists: their lust and fiery

ambition for the throne is simply that they become victims of desire. However, once they achieve their goals, they are compelled to protect their crown: childless and without heirs from their own union, their only alternative is force and terror; scruples are nonexistent.

Macbeth is a drama which portrays a journey into the darkness deep within an evil soul, a primordial world that has become saturated with murder, horror, and terror; a world in which Macbeth's imagination and phantasmagoria transform into ceaseless bloodshed. In Macbeth's world, the blood spilled in the murders of Banquo and Duncan become his natural order. In the aftermath of confronting Banquo's ghost, overcome by his imagination, Macbeth faces the horror of his inner soul: "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood."

Lady Macbeth is a strong and calculating woman, determined to see her husband relinquish his "milk of human kindness" in order that he fulfill the ambitions she envisions for both of them. She taunts her husband, urges him onward, and succeeds in goading him to murder King Duncan: ironically, she herself cannot slay the sleeping Duncan because the good king resembles her father in his slumber.

When Macbeth imagines Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth intervenes to announce that Macbeth is prone to seizures: "My Lord is often thus/ And hath been from his youth." But Macbeth has surrendered to visionary fits that have overcome him and led him out of control: irrational forces and unknown images have overwhelmed and contaminated him; Lady Macbeth is impotent and cannot control his conscience.

Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are profoundly in love with each other, ironically perhaps, the most happily married couple in Shakespeare's canon. Their mutual passion depends on their dream of shared greatness: they

are motivated by desire, ambition, and power.

But the Macbeths are childless and have no heirs. Lady Macbeth speaks of having nursed a child, presumably her own, but the child is now dead. Macbeth, her second husband, urges her to conceive male children, but they cannot: there is pathos in Lady Macbeth's famous exclamation "To bed." In their madness, murder has become their sole mode of sexual expression. Freud suggested that childlessness became the Macbeths' haunting curse: unable to beget children, they slaughter children in revenge. For Macbeth, that genocide represents his overwhelming need to prove his manhood to his wife: he is, therefore, motivated to destroy Macduff's children, and stimulated to fiercely seek to murder Fleance, Banquo's son.

Lady Macbeth, unequivocally the most powerful character in the drama, is removed from Shakespeare's stage after Act III, Scene iv. She only returns briefly in her state of madness at the start of Act V: she is conquered by inner demons as she glides through her sleepwalking scene, a grotesque woman of undaunted evil calculation who has become transformed into a guilty soul and now despairingly tries to wash invisible blood from her hands as she follows her path into madness and suicide.

Nietzsche reflected on *Macbeth* in *Daybreak* (1881), suggesting that it is erroneous to conclude that Shakespeare's theater has a moral purpose intended to repel man from the evil of ambition. Nietzsche's hypothesis: man is by nature possessed by raging ambitions, which are a glorious end in themselves: man beholds those images joyfully, thwarted only when his passions perish. In Nietzsche's context, *Tristan and Isolde* are not preaching against adultery when they both perish from it: they are embracing it.

In a Judeo-Christian context, *Macbeth* deals with the immorality of evil. However,

Shakespeare does not endow *Macbeth* with theological relevance: *Macbeth* is a primordial “man of blood,” who, like Hamlet, Lear, and Othello, possesses a universal villainy that transcends Biblical strictures. Shakespeare traditionally evades or blurs Christian values: he is not a devotional dramatist, and he wrote no holy sonnets exposing the divine, or the path to redemption of the soul. Shakespeare presents pragmatic nihilism, an instinctive form of survival rather than a theological supernaturalism: Shakespeare’s high tragedies provide no spiritual comfort.

Macbeth is a primordial hunter of men who displays a shocking and energetic vitality for death, violence, and murder. In *Macbeth*, there is no spiritual truth, and God is exiled from his soul: Macbeth rules in a cosmological emptiness where a divine being is lost, too far away to be summoned. In Shakespeare’s world, there is only grief and death, but no spiritual solace. Macbeth’s crimes are against nature and humanity, not repaired or restored by the social order, or through redeeming grace, expiation, or forgiveness. Time notoriously dominates *Macbeth*, not Christian time with its linear paths to eternal salvation, but devouring time in which death is the nihilistic finality: death and time all integrate and become Macbeth’s evil soul.

The Weird Sisters become Macbeth’s will and destiny. They become his imagination and his alter ego that overpower his mind, but his ambitions were merely brewing and awaiting their elevation to consciousness: after the Witches, Macbeth was well prepared for Lady Macbeth’s greater temptations and unsanctified violence.

Macbeth transforms into a ferocious killing machine; his terror and tyranny manifesting themselves in a slaughterhouse reeking with blood. Macduff becomes Macbeth’s nemesis, his birth by cesarean section making him the fulfillment of the Weird Sisters’ prophecy: no

man of woman born will slay Macbeth; Macduff was “untimely ripped” from his mother’s womb. Macbeth’s fear of Macduff propels him to his horrifying reign of terror: he slaughters Macduff’s wife, children, and servants.

However, Macbeth’s bloody deeds gnaw at him and threaten him in his nightmares. Nightmares become the true plot of the drama: his subconscious participates in dreadfulness, and he allows it to rise to horrible imaginings. Samuel Johnson aptly evaluated the essence of the *Macbeth* drama: “the dangerous prevalence of the imagination.” *Macbeth* is about nihilism, saturated with the fullness of sound and fury: it portrays the darkness and evil lying within the human soul.

Verdi’s *Macbeth* is a music drama in which the emotive power of his music severely influences the text: the opera does not contain the exaggerated emotions and stereotypical characterizations of melodrama. In *Macbeth*, Verdi provided intense dramatic expression in a broad and sweeping musical style, at the same time, maintaining an extraordinary dramatic pace and swiftness by keeping recitative short and concise, and connecting set numbers with cohesive transitions. His music captures the eerie bleakness of Shakespeare’s play in a highly charged dramatic tone painting that is equally sustained by psychologically penetrating characterizations.

Opera is an art form for voices: in opera, the voice is the inherent keystone for characterization. At the time of *Macbeth*, Verdi developed his most singular voice innovation: the “high baritone,” a unique voice-type capable of providing sharp and distinctive characterization. The “high baritone” is a true baritone voice rather than a raised bass or dark tenor: it extends its range and moves comfortably higher than the bass

or traditional baritone, ultimately reaching an A (above middle C).

The “high baritone” represented the core of Verdi’s new musico-dramatic art: a masculine voice which could reach out to encompass an entire spectrum of emotion and character. This new “high baritone” voice became the embodiment of force from which Verdi could bring other voices into sharp contrast and focus. In *Ernani* (Verdi’s fifth opera, 1844), and likewise in *Macbeth*, the musico-dramatic force derives from the contrast of vocal archetypes. Verdi was now able to clearly delineate specific character qualities through the male voice: the tenor would possess an ardent, lyrical, and despairing sound; the bass would convey a darkness and inflexibility in tone; and the “new baritone,” a heretofore unknown luster and quality. The “new baritone” became a dynamo of vocal energy that was capable of expressing every color within the emotional spectrum. With his “new baritone,” Verdi was able to portray the dramatic essence of Macbeth’s character, the inherent qualities of the voice enabling him to truthfully sculpt Macbeth’s demonic and volcanic energy.

Shakespeare portrays Macbeth as a man obsessed by conflict, tension, and villainy. Verdi used his new “high baritone” to portray a man suffering from his emotional and psychological disasters and his inner turmoil. When the Witches predict the crown for Macbeth, Verdi adroitly uses the qualities of the “high baritone” voice to focus on Macbeth’s terror and bewilderment.

In *Macbeth*, the villain’s insanity results from his hallucinations and delirium, grist for the operatic mill where composers traditionally find their muse and inspiration. Some classic operatic characters, who are punished by madness and self-destruct through guilt for their misdeeds, are Nabucco, Macbeth, Boris Godunov, Wozzeck, and Peter Grimes. Verdi dutifully and ingeniously captures that magical

operatic moment of Macbeth's madness when he erupts into hysteria after his failure to control the illusion of Banquo's ghost and wonders, "Can the tomb give up the murdered?" Lady Macbeth adds the final outrage as her husband cowers before the ghost: she demands "Are you a man?" Verdi's music magnificently reaches into the Macbeths inner souls.

Nevertheless, vocally, Verdi made Lady Macbeth perhaps the most dominant figure in his opera. She, like her predecessor, Abigaille in *Nabucco*, is a dramatic soprano whose character is sharply and extravagantly drawn musically: these dramatic sopranos became the female equivalent of Verdi's "new baritone" power. Lady Macbeth is allotted some of the best, most absorbing dramatic pages of Verdi's score: her aria, *La luce langue*, "The light falls," a brilliant expression of conflicts and tensions, of fear and exultation; her jolly *brindisi*; and the stupendous Sleepwalking episode for which a Verdi biographer commented that "the composer rises to the level of the poet and gives the full equivalent in music of the spoken word."

In *Macbeth*, Verdi provided a super-charged drama with ingenious melodic inventions. The score is saturated with broad and arching lyric phrases, melodies that contain a sweeping, forward thrust, duets that contain a remarkably wide range of expression and contrast, and large ensembles which express a succession of intense dramatic ideas.

Macbeth contains a taut, fast moving libretto that gathers tension and momentum as it takes the plot racing along clearly and decisively from climax to climax. Shakespeare's plot may have benefited from its transformation into an opera: the opera's text moves tensely and directly toward the drama's conclusion.

Verdi's art was continually evolving and maturing: he would eventually transform existing Italian operatic conventions but did not overturn

them. *Macbeth* is an enthralling work in which the master reached beyond the confines of his contemporary Italian opera conventions and traditions: there is much *bel canto* in the score, and structurally, many existing traditions and conventions are followed *de rigeur*. Nevertheless, in *Macbeth*, Verdi provided many glimpses of a new freedom in operatic expression that would very quickly flower in his subsequent operas.

Macbeth became a springboard for Verdi to bring more intense and profound passions to the operatic stage: nevertheless, it is an opera with powerful drama and unrivalled musical beauty, a worthy tribute to his favorite poetic inspiration: William Shakespeare.

