

GIUSEPPE VERDI'S *MACBETH* – PART I

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SUMMARY. *Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's most noted tragedies. The Bard wrote the play between 1603 and 1607, and it was already performed in the year 1611. This tragedy, which due to the belief that it is cursed is most often referred to as "*The Scottish play*", grabbed Giuseppe Verdi's attention. It also prompted the composer to write an opera based on the play in 1846, and try ingeniously to render Shakespeare's deeply psychological approach to his characters as well as entire narrative thread into music.

The following text proposes to take an analytical approach toward Verdi's opera, bearing in mind its famous source, as well as the composer's deep admiration to the theme.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, tragedy, Verdi, Shakespeare, opera, direction, musical interpretation.

Historical background

In the fall of 1846, Verdi is eager to compose again. Since he has received numerous premiere offers from different operas, he now has to decide the location of his next premiere. He will prefer Florence in view of the fact that he is shown great appreciation from the important aristocrat families. The last thing to be decided is the theme of the next opera, Verdi oscillating mainly between Schiller's² *Die Räuber*³ and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Given that the first Shakespeare translations in Italian were made only a decade or so before that time, this opera was to be the first Italian opera based on his work.

Verdi himself writes the opera's libretto, a text that literally follows the Shakespearean tragedy, reduced to half its size. The same libretto is then sent to Piave⁴ who has the task of putting it into verse.

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² Schiller, Friedrich von (1759-1805), German poet, philosopher, historian and dramatist; considered to be one of the "*princes of German poetry*".

³ *The Robbers*.

⁴ Piave, Francesco Maria (1810-1876); Italian librettist, Verdi's lifetime friend and colleague.

By basing his next opera on a Shakespeare play, Verdi wants to respond to all those who accuse him of exploiting the political situation of that time and who think that he has achieved his success because of the so-called “*patriotism*” he portrays in his operas. With *Macbeth*, “*one of the greatest tragedies ever written*” – said so by the composer himself, he wants to do something else, he wants to show that his art is capable to rise to the level of such a masterpiece.

With *Macbeth*, begins not only Verdi’s maturity, but a new period in the history of Italian opera as well.

Although *Macbeth* was very well received, it seems that the innovative traits of the opera were left unnoticed, and sadly, – to everyone’s astonishment – its success did not last. Verdi brings forward many important modifications for the 1865 Paris premiere, alterations that remain relevant today as well, since this is the version that it is now played on opera stages all over the world.

Fig. 1



Francesco Maria Piave

It has not been a very long time since music history, and historians alike have done *Macbeth* justice. After the first English (1938) and German (1941) revivals of the opera, Italian musicologist Carlo Gatti⁵ dismisses the belief that

⁵ Gatti, Carlo (1875/6-1965), Italian composer and music critic; he studied at the Milan Conservatory with Bazzini, Catalani, Galli and Saladino; later teaches harmony and counterpoint in the same institution, while researching the life and works of Verdi until 1948, then continuing his historical and critical work on other composers, such as Viotti, Leo, Scarlatti, Paisiello.

Macbeth is one of Verdi's lesser operas, he does so in his excellent work on Verdi⁶. For the last few decades, this opera is considered one of Verdi's greatest masterpieces along with *Otello* and *Falstaff*, the last Shakespearean operas that the composer will write.

In the final months of 1846, Verdi is therefore entirely absorbed by his new creation, so much so that he refuses to disrupt his work to compose a hymn in the new Pope, Pius the Ninth's honor. The composer regrets this fact, but as long as *Macbeth* is not complete, he will not and cannot write a different music. By Christmas, two of the acts are ready except for the arias, for the reason that Verdi wanted to construct the musical outline of the story entirely, and only then depict each character through the melodic line assigned to them. The fragments that express passions and emotions, the arias, will come last. At the end of January the final two acts are also ready, Verdi seemed to progress even faster once the outline of the story had come alive. The orchestration of the whole piece will take him only fifteen days. In the middle of January, he leaves for Florence with the finished score, for he intends to watch over every single detail of the production. His foremost concern is the cast. Lanari⁷ manages to hire Varesi⁸, the baritone, one of the finest singers of that time, the presence of whom had been promised even before the opera had been composed. For *Lady Macbeth*, Verdi had Sofia Loewe⁹ in mind. However, she had cancelled in the last minute. This will be a rather hard blow for Verdi, who it seemed had very precise ideas regarding the soprano who could accurately portray this difficult character. He does not even like Tadolini¹⁰, who has beautifully interpreted *Alzira*¹¹ two years earlier. Mrs. Tadolini is an angelic beauty, while Verdi wants *Lady Macbeth* to be demonic. Mrs. Tadolini has a warm voice, while he needs a somber, almost hoarse one. The sleepwalking scene has to be rather acted than sung, with a hollow, superficial timbre; otherwise, it will not achieve the desired effect.

In the end, Marianna Barbieri-Nini¹² will be the one to take on this role. The female protagonist role is very hazardous from every single standpoint, for

⁶ Gatti, Carlo: *Verdi*; Milano, Mondadori, Verona, 1951.

⁷ Lanari, Alessandro (1787-1852); the impresario of the Pergola Theatre in Florence.

⁸ Varesi, Felice (1813-1889); Italian baritone, debuted in Donizetti's *Furioso*, role creator of Antonio Loustolot from Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix*, Rigoletto from Verdi's *Rigoletto* and Giorgio Germont from Verdi's *La Traviata*.

⁹ Loewe, Sofia, Swiss soprano, role creator of Elvira from Verdi's *Ermani*.

¹⁰ Tadolini, Eugenia (1809-1851), Italian soprano, female lead of many of Donizetti's operas; a genuine diva of that time.

¹¹ *Alzira* – opera in two acts and prologue by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto signed by Salvatore Cammarano, based on Voltaire's *Alzire*.

¹² Barbieri-Nini, Marianna (1818-1887), Italian soprano, who debuted with the role Antonia from Donizetti's *Belisario*; she studied with Luigi Barbieri, Giuditta Pasta, Nicola Vaccai, Romani. Role creator of *Lady Macbeth*, *Lucrezia* from *Due Foscari*, *Gulnara* from *Corsaro* – all by Verdi; Luisa Strozzi from Pacini's *Lorenzino de Medici*, *Merope* from Pacini's *Merope*, *Leila* from Apolloni's *Ebrea* as well as *Beatrice* from Pacini's *Buendelmonte*.

Verdi also needs someone with a solid bel canto¹³ technique. Lady Macbeth is a dramatic soprano with coloratura¹⁴ traits. The musical ornaments from the Brindisi¹⁵ scene in act II require a particular virtuosity, for the entire musicality of the fragment depends on the elegance of this delivery, not to mention the very high note of d³ in *pianissimo*, the musical as well as emotional climax of the sleepwalking scene.

Fig. 2



Marianna Barbieri-Ninni (Lady Macbeth)

Barbieri-Ninni had a much more dramatic voice than Tadolini; therefore, he knew she was the right choice for the part.

Marianna Barbieri-Ninni depicted the atmosphere in which rehearsals took place. On the night of the final dress rehearsal, with the musicians in the orchestra pit, Verdi requests to meet him in the foyer for a final piano rehearsal of the duet that takes place after Duncan's assassination. "*But Maestro, the baritone protests, we had already rehearsed the duet a hundred*

¹³ Bel canto refers to the Italian vocal style of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the qualities of which include perfect legato production throughout the range, the use of a light tone in the higher registers and agile and flexible delivery.

¹⁴ A voice that beside all the characteristics of a dramatic voice – power, ample timbre, full voice – it also possesses the expressive lightness of a lyrical voice.

¹⁵ An invitation to a company to raise their glasses and drink; a song to this effect. Such songs, usually solos with choral response, are common in 19th-century opera; well-known examples occur in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*, Verdi's *Macbeth*, *La traviata* and *Otello* and Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*.

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and fifty times!”, “*Well, in about fifteen minutes it will be a hundred and fifty one times you have sung it!*, said the composer”; “*Verdi was a tyrant, adds the soprano, whom you had to obey...*”

It was obvious that Verdi wanted to elevate the level of the opera performances in Italy, both from a musical as well as a theatrical standpoint. There had also been some confrontational scenes with bass Michele Benedetti, who played the role of Banquo, who, once assassinated, refused to appear as a mute specter in the banquet scene. “*It would be ridiculous, said Verdi, to have an extra play the specter, for the public has to be able to recognize Banquo immediately.*”

For the staging part, Verdi got the information regarding the appearance of the kings within the witches’ scene straight from London. “*These kings do not have to be mannequins, but rather eight human beings made of flesh and blood, walking behind a grey veil, which turns opaque when it is lit from the front and translucent when lit from behind.*” This procedure, which is a classic method in staging fantastic plays, was virtually unknown in Italy before Verdi. The composer has the same attention to detail regarding certain sound effects. For the same scene, Verdi placed a musician group under the stage, with a flap door opened in such a way that it scattered the sound throughout the space, so that it would create a homogenous sound effect and not a localized one. “*The timbres do not have to appear to be opaque and veiled, only the bass clarinets, the bassoons and double bassoons, nothing else.*”

After three intense weeks of rehearsals, some days with up to four rehearsals, the premiere of *Macbeth* took place on March 14, 1847. The performance had a considerable effect on the Florentine public.

Fig. 3



La Pergola Theater in Florence

The version of this masterpiece played on stages today includes a few modifications in comparison to the premiere. In 1865, Léon Escudier¹⁶, Verdi's French agent suggests a translation of Macbeth intended for the Théâtre Lyrique, a version that would feature the traditional ballet fragment so coveted by the Parisian public. Verdi takes advantage of this opportunity to improve his work. "*Rereading Macbeth I have found many regrettable features*", he wrote in a letter from 1865. He changed these elements and at the same time composed a ballet for the witches' scene in the III act. These modifications were later added also to the Italian version performed today.

Fig. 4



From a Shakespearean tragedy to an opera libretto

As we mentioned earlier, Verdi's first opera based on a Shakespearean play had its premiere at La Pergola Theatre in Florence, on March 14, 1847. This opera has four acts and Francesco Maria Piave wrote its libretto. The work was dedicated to Antonio Barezzi¹⁷, to whom Verdi writes the following on March 25, 1847: "*Here now is this Macbeth, which I love in preference to my other operas, and thus deem more worthy of being presented to you. The heart offers it; may the heart receive it.*"¹⁸

¹⁶ Escudier, Leon; Verdi's French agent; the one who bought in 1845 the legal rights of "*Nabucco*" "*Ernani*" and "*I Lombardi*" in France, in 1862 he also buys the rights of "*Vespri Siciliani*".

¹⁷ Barezzi, Antonio (1787-1867); he was the one who had discovered Verdi's talent, firstly being his patron, and later his father-in-law. He also was the main musical and cultural patron of the city of Busseto, his house becoming the residence of the Busseto Philharmonic Orchestra.

¹⁸ Gatti, C., *Verdi*, vol. I-II, Milano, Ed. Alpes, 1931.

Fig. 5



Antonio Barezzi

Famous for its density, this play has remained in the collective memory as being the symbol of darkness, blood and barbarism. A primordial and unyielding tone reigns over the entire atmosphere of the play. One can find witches, specters, moving forests in this play that come alive in a manner of speaking only to warn those in danger of being toyed with by destiny. This mischievous universe leads the public inside of troubled consciences – Macbeth and his wife. Their obsession is brought upon them by murder or the murder itself is an obsession?

The 17 year old reign of Macbeth, the King of Scotland, is reduced to its crucial events, all filled with an extraordinary tension. Macbeth covets the throne, obtains it by murder, gets to rule over Scotland, and then dies without leaving anything behind that would bear his mark. Beyond the murders he has committed, the thoughts that tormented him there is nothing significant left to discern. Macbeth evolves toward the abnormal after the murder of Duncan. Everything changes in his behavior. His obsession with living takes over his entire being. His belief in people is replaced by his faith in the witches' prophecies. Similar to other tragedies, communicating with a different world takes on a fundamental quality. Macbeth is searching for another way to be. He has relinquished his noble behavior that characterized him prior to his murderous act by which he ascended to the throne. Next to him, Lady Macbeth is a hyperbolized projection of his own inner turmoil. The fact that in the end they both die is the result of impossibility of surviving only through deceit. The play is an exceedingly dense text that has a powerful effect on its public, which generates a permanent obsession in directors' mind who are preoccupied with finding the tragic symbol of the play as well

as its center of gravity. To capture and then convey the essential message of the play is not a simple task to perform, for the true events take place within the depths of a "*deranged soul*".

The tragedy forms a character in which human nature appears to be dislocated from its normal state of balance. Macbeth is a miserable and dangerous human conformation, which evolves toward the tragic. There is a battle going on inside of him between his conscience and the demon of his own Ego, a battle that ends in the fatal hardening of his heart. We are witness to a profound human degeneration, the tragic being brought on by the permanent conflicting state of the hero. Macbeth is not offended by anyone, nor is he attacked or provoked by anyone. He is initially surrounded by reverence and worship. However, the prophecies of the witches give birth to a powerful conflict that will cost many innocent lives. The crimes he commits are emptied of any emotional content, and his heart turns cold and insensate. His existence is not defined merely by his escape beyond emotional barriers, but also by the hallucinations he has, the blood he sees, the specter that sits on a chair during a feast. This may be an extension of the dementia that took over him, perhaps a flicker of conscience, and a primal sense of fear or drifting through the universe of these prophecies. His behavior alternates between his inner turmoil and the criminal acts. At first, he kills the king, then wants Banquo to disappear as well, engages murderers and waits; then experiences intensely the actual murder of Banquo, so much, so that it causes him to hallucinate.

Macbeth turns murder into a means to overcome his obstacles. The hero's path to this universe of cruelty and insensitivity is evolving continuously. His dementia will dominate his reasoning to the point where the act of killing will not even repulse him anymore. Everything is taking place within his inner world. It is here where all the conniving plans are born; those who stand in the way are sentenced to death; the shadows of potential future perils emerge, or the seeds of revenge are sown.

A world of specters, terror and hypothesis has been created deep within his soul, a world in which his inner sense of balance was replaced by an unfortunate conflict of human emotions and experiences. An intoxication of wealth and power emerged, along with contempt and arrogance, a defiance of human values, adversity towards anyone who dares to challenge his will, a feeling of uniqueness and omnipotence in the universe.

Drained from any humanity and governed solely by the passion of murder, this character becomes a monster in the face of which the human kind appears to be powerless, for that reason his demise will be in the hands of someone who was not born by a woman.

Macbeth is the fearless soldier, the action man, the war machine who is loyal to his king, but whose virtues will be fundamentally perverted towards evil, creating a never before seen lack of measure in committing evil deeds. Macbeth's metamorphosis takes place under the manipulation of some witches, who awake an immense thirst for power in him as result of

their prophecies. The title of king clouds his psyche and engages his will into action. After the emersion of this possibility, his existence becomes a terrible struggle, the cruelty of which dishonors the brave, fearless hero he was up until that point. After King Duncan names him heir to the throne, Macbeth irretrievably collapses into a world of darkness. Out of the substance of this character, previously very much attached to moral values, a giant mechanism of criminal actions emerges. Hesitant and cowardly in the beginning, he later transforms into a crime professional. No emotion could stop his criminal intentions. The man he once was had become irreparably transformed into a Prince of Darkness, under the burden of his immense ambition. The throne of Scotland has become an obsession. His path will be one of a lonely man, sickened by the lust for power and devoid of emotions. Macbeth becomes dreadful mainly because he is very much aware that he could never be wholesome again, being damned to plunge into the darkness of the world he himself has discovered. The knocking at the gate of the castle that announced the arrival of the forces of good makes him yell out in despair. His castle changes into his own Hell on Earth, in which he is condemned to live in continuous deception. Macbeth is sentenced to explore an unavailing, bitter, repellent world. He sinks into the fear and suspicion that will ultimately lead him to despair. At that instant, Macbeth returns to the witches that have changed his destiny through their prophecies. In that moment the second stage of his character-evolution begins, and the actions that follow will shed blood and provoke chaos in all of Scotland. Murder slowly becomes an “art form” – he invites Banquo to a feast even although he planned to have him murdered.

By unleashing the killer mechanism that makes the witches' prophecies come true, Macbeth thinks he can control fate, that he can deny the prophecies that do not suit him, that he can murder Banquo and Fleance in order to preserve the throne for his own descendants. However, destiny is impossible to overcome. His plan fails and Banquo is murdered, but Fleance escapes in order to fulfill the witches' prophecies. Banquo's specter appears at Macbeth's feast, bringing the king to the verge of despair. The suffering keeps growing deeper. The additional appearance of the witches makes him irreparably come unbalanced mentally. The one who thought can control his fate discovers the opposite. The witches' prophecies will come true, leaving Macbeth to realize his condition, to acknowledge the fact that he has destroyed his life and soul for nothing. Banquo's heir will reign over the Kingdom, while Macbeth will have to pay for the murder of Duncan. Seeing that all of the prophecies come true, Macbeth's cruelty turns into madness. Consequently, his tyranny becomes absolute and no feeling of mercy or compassion can survive.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare manages to turn his character into a tragic hero, thus leading him to the final stage of his evolution. In the end, Macbeth appears before us as someone toward whom we feel compassion but fear as well. In this play, in which so many lines and actions are filled

with ambiguity, Macbeth himself remains ambiguous. After killing Duncan, his life has lost any purpose. At the end of the play, the hero feels he should fall and rot such as a leaf. His pessimism is evident when the death of his wife is announced. In that moment, Macbeth says some brutally honest things. His final moments are consumed by the intention of taking his life in his own hands and rising to action. He dies with a sense of duty and has the burden of sins; he dies not as a man, but as a tortured fate, a fate that wanted to rise above its destiny.

Lady Macbeth is a character that has no sex, and has forgotten that she was born a woman. Much like her husband, she seems to be made "*after the devils own likeness*". Evil and ambition slowly takes possession of her soul and actions, weakening her conscience. We are witness to a decline process of despair, and slow death.

Lady Macbeth leads her husband to fulfill the witches' prophecies; an immeasurable ambition for becoming queen emerges in her.

She parts with her emotions, leaving behind an empty soul, which is insensitive to murder, a soul similar to that of her husband. When the opportunities that favor the fulfillment of the prophecies arrive, a demon with an iron will rises inside her. Lady Macbeth calls magic powers to her aid and wishes her chest be filled with poison. Consequently, she pushes her husband to commit murder. Although a woman, she is confident and has unrelenting strength. When Duncan arrives to the Castle, she is the one who is seemingly happy to welcome him and escorts him on his journey toward death. As a woman, she humiliates her husband on the night of the murder, reproaching his hesitance and cowardly attitude. The iron will of this woman crushes Macbeth's doubts. Lady Macbeth partakes in her husband's turmoil, she is pragmatic and ruthless, urging him to wash the blood off his hands, to leave the daggers in the guards' chamber in order to put the blame on them, and finally to put on their night clothes together to create the impression that the entire event has caught them in bed in the middle of the night. In other words, to erase every single trace of the murder. However, her confidence slowly starts to fade, while an inner tension gets hold of her behavior. Although she does not say much, he can feel that the exhaustion and despair wears her down.

Initially playing the role of instigator, Lady Macbeth in time becomes an exhausted woman, on the verge of insanity. She gets to the point where she can not even tell a story that makes sense, for inside her mind dreadful details appear that torture her brain. Her sighs become terrible, paving the way for an agony that will lead to her death. Lady Macbeth thought she can be as evil as she wanted, for in her eyes conscience was created only for cowards. She could not understand that evil is self-destructing. The feeling of guilt will be the one that will kill her. Confronted with this inner fire, her insanity takes hold of her, death being her only salvation. The one who dies will not be a woman, but a person dominated by a distorted sense of power.

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In part two of the analysis we intend to illustrate the close correlation between Shakespeare's text and Verdi's vision, and how the composer managed to musically depict The Bard's character portrayal.

(The follow-up of this study will be published in the number 2/2009 of the *Studia Musica Magazine*).

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