

The psychiatry of opera

Verdi's Macbeth

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Mark Jones continues this occasional series by examining Verdi's *Macbeth* of 1847 in the light of David Pountney's new production for the English National Opera premiered at the London Coliseum in April.

The ten year period 1840–1850 saw the appearance of ten operas by the young Giuseppe Verdi which now constitute his 'early' musical output. Not all the operas were equally successful and Verdi later acknowledged their inconsistencies; but here was the work of a genius who was to become the greatest composer in the Italian tradition, and at this time was thought of as a worthy successor to Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini.

Verdi the revolutionary

Verdi admired Shakespeare enormously, although he only read him in translation. His greatest ambition was to write an operatic version of *King Lear*, a subject which occupied him for his entire life, but never progressed beyond sketches. The *Macbeth* of 1847 (later revised for Paris with a ballet in 1865) can be said to sum up all that Verdi believed in during this period and much else of his life. He wanted to see Italy united and freed from the divisions inflicted by the French and Austrians. His chorus *Va Pensiero* from the earlier opera *Nabucco* virtually became a national anthem, expressing as it does the spirit of an oppressed people. In the politically sensitive and fragmented Italy his initials took on a new meaning: *Viva Emmanuel Re D'Italia*. Verdi loved the theatre, and through his operas he conveyed profound insights into characters' minds, their place in the world and their interaction with the Church and the State.

Between 1850 and the production of his last work, *Falstaff*, in 1893, Verdi was to compose music drama of the highest order. His works are ultimately about the human condition, and as a theatrical experience, on the rare occasions when opera works in its entirety, can be earth-shattering. Verdi took Shakespeare's play and asked his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, to gut it. The play was already short in Shakespearean terms, so gone are most of the soliloquies and minor parts. There is no sub-plot in *Macbeth*, and it could easily be described

as simplistic compared with *Hamlet* and *Lear*. Piave's version is especially notable for the loss of brotherly interplay between Banquo and Macbeth at the beginning of the opera, so that Banquo's later assassination by Macbeth's henchmen has no earlier reference point to pin our horror on. Yet what is in the opera is the core of the drama.

Synopsis

The story is well known. The action is set mainly in 11th century Scotland, and opens after the overture, with Macbeth's first meeting with the Witches who tell him he will soon be Thane of Cawdor and later King. Lady Macbeth reads the letter from her husband with the news of the Witches and begins to nurture her ambition "... come you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here". A brief exchange between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth before the arrival of King Duncan consolidates their ambition. The dagger scene is followed by Duncan's murder, Macbeth's horror and the discovery of the crime. Macbeth is now King and threatened by Banquo, who is quickly dispatched. His ghost appears at the banquet. Macbeth returns to the Witches for more prophecies and is found collapsed by Lady Macbeth. They vow to destroy Macduff. Macbeth reigns in Scotland with terror. Refugees with Macduff have fled to England where they are joined by Malcolm's army. Lady Macbeth is seen at Dunsinane where she sleep-walks and relives the murder of Duncan and attempts to wash off the blood which stains her hands. Macbeth hears that Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane and is killed by Malcolm. Macduff is proclaimed King.

Characterisation through music

Verdi's music drives the action forward and it confides in us those attitudes and thoughts which remain unspoken, the hidden fears, the ambition, the doubt and guilt, and finally the blood-bath crimes that threaten to engulf even the Macbeths. Lady Macbeth's decaying sanity is matched by Macbeth's strengthening resolve to face his destiny which he, aided and abetted by his wife's ambition, tries to



Jonathan Summers (*Macbeth*) and John Connell (*Banquo*). (English National Opera). Copyright Clive Barda Photography.

pervert. Macbeth is probably a better man than his actions would overtly reveal: the duet which follows Duncan's murder is a brilliant evocation of psychological terror; he ruminates on his misdeed while his Lady, now supremely powerful, lays the daggers back at the dead King's side.

In *Macbeth*, Verdi moved closer to his aim of drawing character through music. Macbeth's weaker resolve and his domination by both his wife and the Witches represent almost a *folie à trois*. The role of Lady Macbeth is dramatically and musically a perfect curve. From the opening aria and cabaletta, at first seductive then ferocious, through the unnerving events of Acts II and III to the wailing, downward spiral of the sleep-walking scene. It is unlikely that such behaviour was occurring in sleep. Such behaviours tend to be less complex than those exhibited by Lady Macbeth, whose ritualistic hand-washing and reliving the murders resembles the dissociative states, such as fugue. Janet believed that such individuals are escaping from an intolerable situation or suffering from a severe depression. Such behaviour is equatable with an act of suicide, being effectively free of worldly cares. The secondary gain is clear, yet she remains so tormented that she does eventually hang herself.

Pountney's production for the ENO

David Pountney's provocative production of *Macbeth*, designed by Stephanos Lazaridis, is one of four productions which ENO took on tour this summer to the USSR. This was the first time a British opera company had toured the Soviet Union. The production takes an ecological view-point highlighting the crimes against the natural order, with green blood on the shower tiles and daggers. Birnam Wood itself over-runs Macbeth in the final scene: the play



Kristine Ciesinski (*Lady Macbeth*). (English National Opera). Copyright Clive Barda Photography.

and the opera are not simply about the egocentric corruption of a line of kings, but also about the abuse of nature. Macbeth is tied to his destiny as shown by Banquo holding the reins of his equestrian statue astride his castle wall. Lady Macbeth's precarious emotional and sexual position is suggested as she delivers her first act aria from a bed which juts out from half way up the right hand wall. She dreams of power and teeters on the brink of manic grandiosity, enjoying the risk in killing Duncan, unable to foresee danger or disaster. Her judgement is impaired and her conscience freed of super ego whisperings because her ambition is such a powerful blinding force.

The analogy of Macbeth's crimes against the people and modern-day dictatorships is most clearly in evidence at the banquet; a large stand appears carrying the guests who are forcibly encouraged to kneel before Lady Macbeth by red-coated Generals and plain-clothes cops. This could be the world of Stalin or Ceaucescu. They are prevented from leaving when Macbeth hallucinates and sees the murdered Banquo. So often the mentally ill are feared, because they are perceived as dangerous and their behaviour odd and unpredictable. As Macbeth is increasingly persecuted by his conscience and verges on the psychotic, so he becomes increasingly dangerous. He and his wife have not achieved their

status through divine right, but through blood, and they more than anyone fear the same fate.

No distinction is drawn between the Witches, the ordinary people or the refugees, they are part of the same continuum. The supernatural is simply the natural order of things; it is present in 1940s suburban England as it is in Birnam Wood, the Witches are no more than housewives. The naked bodies that sit among the trees on the hill at the back of the stage still perplex me, but perhaps represent the closeness of man to the rest of the ecosystem. It is the branches from these trees which ultimately overcome Macbeth and he is destroyed only after a child has taken the sword from his hand and replaced it with a branch.

In the final act Macbeth asserts that life is empty and meaningless. Such a revelation only occurs after

his violent struggle to make sense of his life through environmental gain and he now seems near to defeat. He accepts that he must now fight again for his own life, as he must once have done as a General. Macbeth is again restored in his role of soldier and is seen to be resolute. He must fight or die, which is something Lady Macbeth never came to terms with. She has opted out, preferring insanity to fear and guilt playing on a rational mind, with all the responsibility that entails. The sleep-walking scene shows her ritually expunging her guilt by scrubbing her hands, and her unbalanced mind is illustrated further by the way she continuously rights a chair which she sits on and falls to one side. Her pitiful state is now in marked contrast to the accepting Macbeth who again takes up the challenge with the natural order and this time loses.

Current Opinion in Psychiatry

Database

This computerised database is now available in the College Library where the staff will carry out literature searches on behalf of members. The database

provides information on current psychiatric literature as assessed by experts throughout the world. Printouts of references can be provided.

Care of the elderly

The Institute of Human Ageing will be holding a conference entitled 'The Untouchables: Taboo Topics in Care of the Elderly' at Kensington and Chelsea Town Hall, London on 10 and 11 January 1991. A series of practice-based seminars on this subject will be held throughout the UK commencing

January 1991. Further information: Valerie S. Goldberg, Conference Organiser, The Institute of Human Ageing, University of Liverpool, PO Box 147, Liverpool L69 3BX (telephone 051 794 5074; fax 051 794 5077).

Courses

An intensive five day advanced course entitled 'Molecular and Cellular Pathology of Neurodegenerative and Neuropsychiatric Disease' will be held at the Institute of Psychiatry from 14–18 January 1991. Course fee: £400 (including lunch and refreshments).

A short course in neuroscience entitled 'Molecular

Neurobiology' will be held at the Institute of Psychiatry from 7–11 January 1991. Course fee: £150. Further information and registration forms for both courses: Mrs Lee Wilding, Conference Office, Institute of Psychiatry, De Crespigny Park, London SE5 8AF (telephone 071 703 5411, extension 3170).