

Macbeth by Nézet-Séguin in closing

Presented by

PROMUTUEL
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CANADIENNE

SUNDAY

2

AUGUST
7 P.M.

**AMPHITHÉÂTRE
FERNAND-LINDSAY**

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PROGRAM

GIUSEPPE VERDI

(1813 – 1901)

Macbeth (concert version)

Duration: 3 hrs

Act I and II

INTERMISSION – 20'

Act III and IV

ARTISTS

Choeur et Orchestre Métropolitain

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor

Julie Dufresne, chorus master

Étienne Dupuis, baritone (Macbeth)

Saioa Hernández, soprano (Lady Macbeth)

Alexandros Stavrakakis, bass (Banquo)

Matthew Cairns, tenor (Macduff)

Elizabeth Polese, soprano (Lady Macbeth's attendant)

Vartan Gabrielian, bass (A doctor, a servant)

Geoffroy Salvat, baritone (A herald, an assassin)

Owen McCausland, tenor (Malcolm)

SYNOPSIS

Act I

Scene 1. A wood, a deserted heath.

Witches gather and approach Macbeth and Banquo, returning from battle. They hail Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor, then future king, and tell Banquo that he will father kings. Messengers immediately confirm the first title.

Scene 2. A hall in Macbeth's castle.

Lady Macbeth reads the letter in which her husband reports the prophecy and vows to drive him to the throne. King Duncan comes to spend the night under their roof. Macbeth murders him in his sleep, and the crime is discovered in the morning amid general horror.

Act II

Scene 1. A room in the castle.

Macbeth is king, but the prophecy made to Banquo haunts him. Lady Macbeth calls on the night to cover the murder that must follow.

Scene 2. A park, with Macbeth's castle in the distance.

Murderers lie in wait in the shadows. Banquo senses the danger and falls under their blows, while his son Fleance manages to escape.

Scene 3. A magnificent hall, set for the banquet.

Lady Macbeth sets the festive tone with a toast. Banquo's ghost appears twice to Macbeth alone, whose distraction dismays the court. Macduff resolves to leave Scotland.

Act III

Single scene. A dark cavern, a boiling cauldron in the middle.

The witches prepare their spells and Hecate announces Macbeth's coming to them. Three apparitions warn him against Macduff, promise him that no man born of woman can harm him, and that he will remain invincible until Birnam Wood marches. A procession of eight kings descended from Banquo overwhelms him. Joined by Lady Macbeth, he swears to exterminate Banquo's line and Macduff's family.

Acte IV

Scene 1. A deserted place on the borders of Scotland and England.

Scottish refugees mourn their ravaged homeland. Macduff, whose wife and children have been massacred, calls for vengeance. Malcolm arrives at the head of the English troops and orders every soldier to cut a branch from Birnam Wood.

Scene 2. A hall in Macbeth's castle.

A doctor and a lady-in-waiting observe the queen walking in her sleep. Lady Macbeth relives her crimes and endlessly rubs her hands, which the blood will not leave.

Scene 3. A vast plain surrounded by hills and woods.

Macbeth measures his solitude and learns without emotion of the queen's death. The forest seems to begin moving, the enemy army surges forth, and Macduff, who was not born of woman, cuts him down in battle. The chorus hails the victory and the new king, Malcolm.

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PROGRAM NOTES

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Born in Roncole, October 10, 1813; died in Milan, January 27, 1901

Macbeth

William Shakespeare was Giuseppe Verdi's favourite playwright. Four Shakespeare plays inspired operas by Verdi: Macbeth, Otello and Falstaff (which drew on scenes from King Henry IV as well as The Merry Wives of Windsor). The adaptations Verdi had envisioned of Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest and Hamlet never came to fruition, nor did an adaptation of his favourite Shakespeare play, King Lear.

After his first international success, Nabucco, in 1842, the composer embarked on a series of twelve operas between 1843 and 1851, a period he would call his "galley years." Even so, Macbeth (1847) marks a turning point in Verdi's artistic development. It was his first attempt to adapt a Shakespeare play for the operatic stage, and the work is remarkable both for its fidelity to the original play and for its many revolutionary dramatic aspects.

Verdi was drawn to several of the work's themes. Above all, Macbeth displays an exceptional depth in the characterization and psychological complexity of the two principal characters: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Moreover, the play and the opera underscore the importance of guilt and conscience as dramatic tools. These elements are intimately bound up with questions of the usurpation of power as well as the responsibilities and dangers of power, themes that would become recurrent in Verdi operas such as Simon Boccanegra (1857) and Un ballo in maschera (1859). Macbeth is also a perfect example of Lord Acton's famous phrase: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Macbeth deals with shifts in the balance of power. At the start of the opera, Lady Macbeth shows the strength and determination needed to carry through the assassination of King Duncan, thereby allowing her husband to seize power. She keeps control of the dramatic

situation up to the great banquet scene, after which she sinks into madness while Macbeth moves from indecisive accomplice to unscrupulous, diabolical dictator. Verdi was also intrigued by the presence of witchcraft and the gothic atmosphere of Shakespeare's play. Sustained by their predictions, the witches are dramatic and psychological characters who make the opera so effective and compelling.

Verdi's Macbeth also contributed to Italian nationalism: the great chorus of Scottish peasants that opens Act IV, "Patria oppressa" ("Oppressed homeland"), in which they describe the despair caused by Macbeth's dictatorship, would have been perceived by many Italians in 1847 as a metaphor for their oppression by the Austrian occupiers in the late 1840s. This nationalist element in Verdi's opera had already appeared in 1842 with another chorus on the theme of oppression, "Va, pensiero" (Nabucco), and would become a constant in his works until Italian unification in 1861.

Macbeth marked a remarkable evolution in Verdi's musical and dramatic style. Rhythm is a decisive element of this opera. Although Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, the scenario Verdi drew up for his librettist Francesco Maria Piave shortens the play's length and heightens the dramatic progression of the action. Verdi constantly asked Piave to shorten his text in order to move the action forward. He even wrote the words of Lady Macbeth's memorable aria "La luce langue," in the second act (with the help of his friend Andrea Maffei), which was the main contribution to his 1865 revision of the opera for the Paris premiere. Macbeth also illustrates a dramatic feature dear to Verdi's heart, namely the idea that each work possesses its own tinta (colour). The atmosphere of Macbeth is dark, menacing and strikingly effective.

Macbeth also marks the first time Verdi was able to choose the singers who would be engaged for the premiere at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence. He insisted that he needed great singing actors, not simply the best vocalists, for the two principal roles. With the baritone Felice Varesi (who would go on to create the role of Rigoletto) and the soprano Marianna Barbieri-Nini, Verdi had the performers he needed to bring these complex characters to life. His instructions to Varesi and Barbieri-Nini were detailed and precise, and showed that he knew exactly what was required, particularly in the astonishing “murder duet” in the first act and the equally revolutionary banquet scene. The emergence of Varesi also marked the fundamental importance of the “dramatic” baritone as the psychological pivot of Verdi’s operas.

Verdi knew that with *Macbeth* he had created a new form of opera. For the musicologist Charles Osborne, he had also succeeded in producing a genuine masterpiece.¹

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¹ Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Verdi*, Londres, Victor Gollancz, 1969.