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Verdi, *Macbeth* (21M.013J) 26 September 2007

Verdi himself considered this opera a breakthrough, as documented in the many letters he wrote to his librettist and later to producers of the opera.

An early opera (Verdi was 34, but it was his 10th; he wrote 26): all the best known works to follow— *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, *Ballo in maschera*, *Don Carlos*, *Aida*, *Otello*, *Falstaff* (1893)

Verdi considered his *Macbeth* a fusion of music and drama, always emphasizing relationships between the production of his work and the theatrical tradition of Shakespeare's play. For example, he wrote to the singer playing Lady Macbeth:

“Lanari [the impresario at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence], I believe, will have written to tell you that you will sing in my new opera for Florence. I count myself truly fortunate, and I send you some numbers about which you will permit me to make some observations. First of all, the character of the part is resolute, bold, extremely dramatic. The plot is taken from one of the greatest tragedies the theatre boasts, and I have tried to have all the dramatic situations drawn from it faithfully, to have it well versified, and to give it a new texture, and to compose music tied so far as possible to the text and to the situations; and I wish this idea of mine to be well understood by the performers; indeed, I wish the performers to serve the poet better than they serve the composer.”

And to Barbieri-Nini, who sang Lady Macbeth at the premiere in Florence, he tried to explain why the opera does not follow the usual forms:

“From your letter, I saw how much you would have wanted a cantabile [aria] of the type in *Fausta* (by Donizetti). But observe well the character of this role and you will see that that could not be done without betraying it, and declaring open warfare on good sense. Moreover, it would be a profanation to alter a character so great, so energetic, so original as this one created by the great English tragedian. I believe I told you already that this is a drama that has nothing in common with the others, and we must all make every effort to render it in the most original way possible. Furthermore, I believe that it is high time to abandon the usual formulas and the usual procedures...”

Throughout the creation of this opera, Verdi directed (1) his librettist as he wrote (sometimes providing lines on his own),

To Piave: “Why the devil don't you know what to make the witches say when Macbeth has fainted? Isn't it in Shakespeare? Isn't there a sentence that help the aerial spirits to restore his lost senses? Oh poor me!! Farewell! Farewell!”

(2) the stage director (with specific instructions taken from his experience seeing the play in London),

To Lanari: “Banquo’s ghost must make his entrance from underground; it must be the same actor that played Banquo in Act I. He must be wearing an ashen veil, but quite thin and fine, and just barely visible,; and Banquo must have ruffled hair and various wounds visible on his neck. I’ve gotten all these ideas from London, where this tragedy has been produced continually for over 200 years.”

(3) the impresario on the choice of singers:

For example, he writes to the librettist and stage director of the revision of *Macbeth* for Naples production of 1849 of his surprise that the soprano Tadolini had been chosen for the role of Lady Macbeth:

“Tadolini’s qualities are far too good for that role! This may perhaps seem absurd to you!!... Tadolini has a beautiful and attractive appearance; and I would like Lady Macbeth to be ugly and evil. Tadolini sings to perfection; and I would like the Lady not to sing. Tadolini has a stupendous voice, clear, limpid, powerful; and I would like the Lady to have a harsh, stifled, and hollow voice. Tadolini’s voice has an angelic quality; I would like the Lady’s voice to have a diabolical quality! Submit these remarks to the management, to Maestro Mercadante, who will approve these ideas of mine more than the others will, and to Tadolini herself. Then do in your wisdom what you think best. the singers on their performance.”

Let me focus on one scene to illustrate the way in which Verdi transformed Shakespeare’s play realistically (verisimilitude) into music form: the duet between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth from the point Macbeth leaves the stage to kill King Duncan. This is what Verdi tells the singer playing Macbeth about this scene:

“Note that it’s night; everyone is asleep, and this whole duet will have to be sung sotto voce, but in a hollow voice such as to arouse terror. Macbeth, alone (as if momentarily transported), will sing a few phrases in full, expansive voice. But all of this you will find set out in your part. So that you’ll understand my ideas clearly, let me tell you that in the *enrie* recitative and duet, the orchestra consists of muted strings, two bassoons, two horns, and a kettledrum. You see, the orchestra will play extremely softly, and therefore you two will have to sing with mutes too.”

Here is a brief synopsis:

After Macbeth leaves the stage to kill Duncan (having sung the extended *arioso* (free recitative) “Is this a dagger I see before me”), Lady Macbeth enters. An English horn and bassoon evoke the cry of the owl (Verdi marks this “*lamentoso*”), and Macbeth cries out from Duncan’s room “Who’s there?” Lady Macbeth worries that he’s awakened the king before making the fatal blow, but Macbeth staggers on stage and sings “in a suffocated voice” (*con voce soffocata*) “it is done” (*tutto è finito*), catalyzing the first section of the duet.

1. The orchestra picks up on the inflected semitone and starts a whirring motive that, as Julian Budden so rightly puts it, drives the music/drama forward like a flywheel. For a while the couple whisper to one another in fractured phrases over this accompaniment, until Macbeth looks at his bloody hands and cries out in horror “Oh, horrible sight” (O

vista orribile). This changes the mood. Macbeth recalls, that on hearing the grooms pray in their sleep, he could not repeat the “amen.” As he tells this story, the whirring accompaniment momentarily ceases, but when Lady Macbeth calls him to his senses, saying he is foolish (*follie*), the whirring recommences. Lady Macbeth tries to shake him out of his seeming trance, but he can only repeat “why, why, why was I unable?”

2. A new cantabile section is then heralded with the return of the “tutto è finito” motive as if Macbeth has been sapped of all energy, all ability to get beyond that semitone, as Macbeth continues to recollect the immediately preceding events, singing the Shakespearean text “Methought I heard a voice cry, ‘sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep.” This minor key passage for Macbeth is colored by the use of trombones and bass drum. Lady Macbeth responds (not in Shakespeare) “but didn’t you hear another voice” urging him to move beyond these hesitations and shifts into a major key, trying again to move Macbeth forward. But his response is rather to burst forth full voice with Shakespeare’s “Duncan’s virtues will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued,” this outburst being the only time being the only time in the whole scene that Macbeth is given a beautiful and lyrical line. Once again, Lady Macbeth tries to shake him out of it with pointillistic staccato, but now Macbeth is not reduced to fragments, but repeats his lyrical line. This is the realization he can hold on to.

3. Returning to action, Lady Macbeth urges him to return to Duncan’s room to smear the blood on the guards so they will be blamed. Macbeth recoils in horror, and Lady Macbeth leaves to do it herself. She returns just as Macbeth’s rumination culminates in the outburst “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?” Knocking is heard at the door.

4. In the final duet [cabeletta] Lady Macbeth struggles to drag Macbeth from the scene, as Macbeth’s speech becomes once again increasingly fragmented. As the knocking gets louder and louder, Lady Macbeth becomes more and more insistent. Her last lines are: “Ah, no! Ah, no! come, come, come, come, come, come,” while Macbeth sings to the slain king how he wishes he could wake him from his deep sleep, at last only able to get out one syllable at a time: “a te spez- zar, spez- zar, spez- zar, a te spez- zar.”

PLAY Verdi, *Macbeth*, Act I, Gran Scena e duetto