



G L Y N D E B O U R N E

School's Resource Pack

Macbeth

CONTENTS

[The Characters](#)

[The Plot](#)

[The Synopsis](#)

[The Production](#)

[The Story of Macbeth](#)

[The Composer](#)

The Characters



Duncan - *a silent role*

King of Scotland, and Macbeth's first victim.

Malcolm - *tenor*

Duncan's son and king of Scotland after Macbeth.

Macbeth - *baritone*

The central character, manipulated by his wife, Lady Macbeth, and the witches into a power struggle to become King of Scotland.

Banquo - *bass*

Macbeth's friend and fellow general in Duncan's army, who Macbeth turns against and has murdered.

Lady Macbeth - *soprano*

A powerful character, who encourages Macbeth towards his final goal of establishing power for him and his descendants.

Macduff - *tenor*

Another general who eventually kills Macbeth, but only after Macbeth has murdered his wife and children.

The Witches - *chorus*

Verdi considered the chorus of witches to be almost one character, and of equal importance in the opera to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.



The Plot

The story is set in Scotland, and follows the original Shakespearean play closely. The two generals; Macbeth and Banquo, are met by the witches (who form a large chorus, as opposed to the small group of 3 witches found in the play). The witches foretell that Macbeth will be King of Scotland after Duncan, but that Banquo's descendants will reign after.

On hearing this, Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to kill Duncan during his royal visit to their castle. Macbeth is named king, and has Banquo murdered.

However, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are haunted by what has happened. After further warnings from the witches that Banquo's family will take the throne, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth launch a campaign of tyranny and slaughter. Lady Macbeth, haunted by visions of Duncan's blood, descends into madness and dies.

Macduff, whose family have been murdered on Macbeth's instructions, and who has fled to England, returns with a rebel army. He defeats Macbeth's forces and kills him. Duncan's son Malcolm is proclaimed king.

Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1

Macbeth and Banquo – two generals in King Duncan's army – meet three groups of witches. The witches greet Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and as King of Scotland. They greet Banquo as a father of Kings, who himself will never reign. The witches disappear and messengers arrive.



The Thane of Cawdor has been executed for treason and Macbeth has been appointed to succeed him. Macbeth is disturbed by the swift fulfilment of the witches' prophecy. All leave and the witches return. They predict that Macbeth will return to them.

Scene 2

Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth describing his encounter with the witches. She is determined that Macbeth will find the courage to murder King Duncan. It is announced that the King is imminently to arrive. Lady Macbeth appeals to dark forces to assist her.

Macbeth enters and Lady Macbeth urges him to kill the visiting King. King Duncan, Malcolm, his son, Banquo and Macduff are received by the Macbeths. Alone and troubled, Macbeth hallucinates, seeing a blood-stained weapon. He enters the King's chamber to kill him. Lady Macbeth appears, listening intently. Macbeth reappears and describes the murder to Lady Macbeth. She tells him he must return to smear the King's grooms with blood in order to implicate them in the crime. Macbeth is paralysed with remorse – so Lady Macbeth goes into the chamber herself. The couple then leave to wash blood from their hands. Banquo, his son Fleance, and Macduff enter. Banquo is uneasy. Macduff discovers the body of King Duncan. The assembled nobles, including Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, call for divine vengeance upon the murderer.



ACT II

Scene 1

Lady Macbeth confronts Macbeth: he is avoiding her. Macbeth is burdened by the witches' prophecy that Banquo's line will endure and reign. Encouraged by Lady Macbeth, Macbeth resolves to murder Banquo and Fleance. Alone, Lady Macbeth euphorically meditates on night, murder, and the crown.



Scene 2

Murderers, hired by Macbeth, wait to attack Banquo and Fleance. Banquo – fatalistic and overwhelmed – is killed. Fleance escapes.

Scene 3

The Macbeths are greeted by the assembled nobles. While Lady Macbeth makes a toast, the murderers report Banquo's death and Fleance's escape to Macbeth. Returning to the nobles, Macbeth believes he sees the dead Banquo. Lady Macbeth attempts to resume the toast but Macbeth insists he sees Banquo once more. The atmosphere descends into suspicion, fear and hallucination.

ACT III



The witches pour vile ingredients into their cauldron and dance. Hecate, the Queen of the Witches, appears. She signals that the witches may tell Macbeth about his destiny but must not tell him how he will finally meet his end.

Macbeth arrives – anxious to consult the witches. He sees his future through three visions. First, a helmeted head urges him to beware of Macduff. Second, a blood-stained child assures him that no one born of a woman will harm him. Lastly, a child holding a branch assures Macbeth that he cannot be conquered as long as Birnam Wood does not move. Following these visions Macbeth sees eight Kings: Banquo and his descendants.

Macbeth faints and the witches summon airy spirits to revive him. Waking, Macbeth informs Lady Macbeth of the visions. Together, they make a genocidal resolve – every one of their enemies must die.

ACT IV

Scene 1

Macduff's wife and family have been murdered and the refugees from Scotland grieve for their country. Malcolm arrives from exile. He urges the refugees to cut branches from Birnam Wood to disguise them advancing on Macbeth.



Scene 2

The doctor and the lady-in-waiting observe Lady Macbeth sleepwalking. She obsessively tries to wash blood from her hands.



Scene 3

Alone, Macbeth understands himself to be feared, hated and unloved. Women bring news of Lady Macbeth's death: Macbeth is unaffected. Soldiers report that Birnam Wood has started moving.

Macbeth now understands the witches' prophecy and prepares for battle. He is confronted by Macduff who tells him he was not 'born of woman' but 'ripped from his mother's womb'. Cornered, Macbeth comments ironically about kingship. He is killed and Malcolm is proclaimed King.

© *Richard Jones*

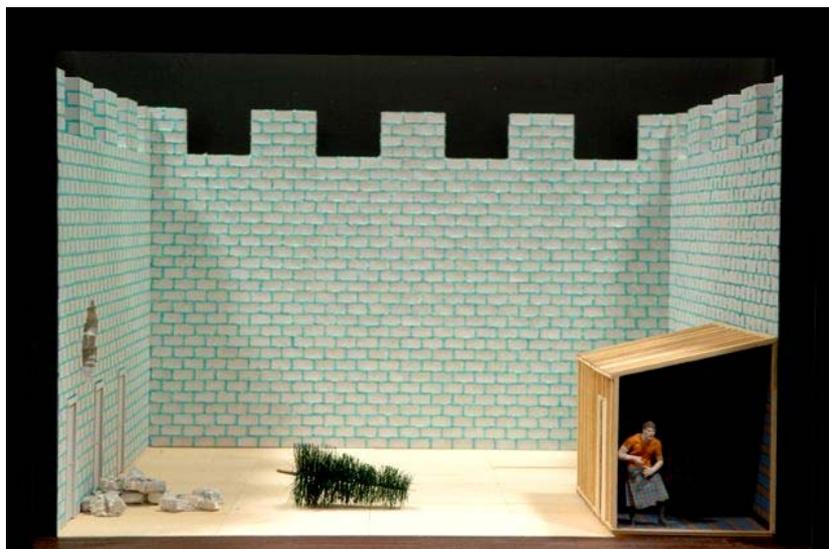
The Production

Glyndebourne first staged *Macbeth* in 1938, and this was also the first professional production to be staged in Britain. This new production is very different to the original staging, and uses concepts of staging which would have been unheard of when the previous productions were created.

You can see the contrast between the new production created this year and the 1972 production in the photograph below. The scene in the photo shows a very traditional interpretation of the witches appearing to Macbeth. Compare this with the image of the witches at the beginning of the synopsis above.



Or this design for the set of the new production below:



The Glyndebourne production follows the changes which Verdi made in 1865, except for the final scene where Glyndebourne has borrowed the end of the 1847 version. In that early ending, Macbeth dies on stage, whereas the spectacle demanded by the audiences in 1865 had Macbeth dying off stage, the opera ending with a chorus of Scottish Bards instead.

The pictures which you see in this pack will give you an idea of the set and costumes which Richard Jones and the production team have chosen to use.

The performance opens with a prologue, depicting the end which Macbeth is going to face. This scene is exactly the same as the final scene of the opera – possibly suggesting a predestined fate for Macbeth.

When you first see the witches, they are based in a caravan. They represent people on the edge of modern day society; however, most of the other scenes from the production are set in the mid 20th century. When asked, Richard Jones said that the opera is set “about a generation ago”.

When you watch this production, you will be struck by the extensive use of brightly-coloured tartans. Tartan is a very important symbol of power and sense of belonging in the opera – each family has its own tartan, and the Macbeths decorate everything (including the walls) in their castle with their particular pattern.



In fact, generally speaking, the design of the set is dominated by bold, dramatic images which are either in large sweeps of bright colours (such as the use of the tartan pattern), or repeated patterns (such as the brickwork of the castle walls).



You will also notice that there are some unusual images on stage during key scenes. For instance, the dagger has been replaced by axes, the witches conjure up their spells on an old gas oven, and Lady Macbeth has a seemingly endless supply of white gloves which she washes endlessly because, in her madness, she believes that Duncan's blood is continually seeping through and staining them.

Look out for these images and many others such as Banquo's ghost...



The Story of Macbeth

The original story of the life of Macbeth first appeared in *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Ireland* by R. Holinshed (published in 1587). Holinshed tells the story of Macbeth, King of Scotland from 1040 to 1057.

When Shakespeare wrote his version of the story of Macbeth in around 1606, he condensed Holinshed's account into a five-act play, which Verdi then later fashioned into a four-act opera.

Holinshed's chronicles go into great detail about the reign of King Duncan and the wars Duncan was engaged in. When he arrives at the story of Macbeth, he and Banquo, are marching from a battle to meet King Duncan;

It fortun'd as Macbeth and Banquho journied towards Fores, where the king then laie, [...that] suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world, whome when they attentivelie beheld, wondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said; All haile Makbeth, thane of Glammiss [Macbeth was, in fact, thane of Glammiss]. The second of them said; All Haile Makbeth thane of Cawder. But the third said; All haile Macbeth that hereafter shalt be king of Scotland.

Soon after this encounter, Macbeth was declared Thane of Cawdor, and of course then he couldn't stop imagining how he might become King of Scotland. Lady Macbeth next enters the story;

The words of the three weird sisters also greatlie encouraged him unto [the murder], but speciallie his wife lay sore upon him to attempt the thing, as she that was verie ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene.

Macbeth, encouraged by his wife, killed Duncan and for some years he ruled as a good and just king. The chronicles then go on;

Shortlie after, he began to shew what he was, in stead of equitie practising crueltie. For the pricke of conscience (as it chanceth ever in tyrants[...]) caused him ever to feare, least he should be served of the same cup as he had ministred to his predecessor.

Macbeth feared that he would lose his crown and due to the witches' prophecy that Banquo would be the father of Kings, slaughtered Banquo. Once that murder had taken place his fear and paranoia seemed to take over. He became more and more afraid that he would be assassinated in turn, and increasingly bloody and tyrannical in his reign.

Holinshed's chronicles state that;

At length he found such sweetnesse by putting his nobles thus to death, that his earnest thirst after blood in this behalfe might in no wise be satisfied.

The chronicle then continues up to the invasion of the English armies led by Duncan's son, Malcolm, Macduff and other exiled Scottish nobles.

Below is a synopsis of Shakespeare's plot, adapted a few years after Holinshed's account, and a comparison to Verdi's much simplified plot written some 250 years later:

Shakespeare	Verdi
<p>ACT 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sc.i: the witches appear on the heath • Sc.ii: Duncan meets his captains • Sc.iii: the witches meet Macbeth and Banquo, and make their prophecies • Sc.iv: Duncan greets Macbeth and makes him Thane of Cawdor • Sc.v: Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's letter, and Macbeth returns home • Sc.vi: Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle • Sc.vii: Macbeth contemplates the murder, and Lady Macbeth encourages him 	<p>ACT 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orchestral Prelude • the witches meet Macbeth and Banquo, and make their prophecies • Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's letter, and Macbeth returns home • Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle (this scene is mimed – as Duncan is a silent role)
<p>ACT 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sc.i: Macbeth meets Banquo. The image of the dagger then appears to him, and he exits to kill Duncan • Sc.ii: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth confer • Sc.iii: the gate and porter's scene is followed by the discovery of Duncan's body • Sc.iv: Macduff confers with Ross 	<p>ACT 1 continues . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The image of the dagger appears to Macbeth, and he exits to kill Duncan • Macbeth and Lady Macbeth confer • a knocking at the gate is followed by the discovery of Duncan's body and a dramatic final chorus
<p>ACT 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sc.i: Banquo airs his suspicions. Macbeth invites Banquo to a banquet • Sc.ii: Macbeth arranges the murder of Banquo and his son, Fleance • Sc.iii: Banquo is murdered • Sc.iv: banquet scene • Sc.v: the 3 witches meet Hecat (the queen of the witches) • Sc.vi: Lennox and a lord express their suspicion of Macbeth 	<p>ACT 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to have Banquo and Fleance murdered • a chorus of assassins murder Banquo • banquet scene (with large chorus) <p>ACT 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chorus of witches, followed by the witches' ballet (where Hecat, Queen of the witches appears)

<p>ACT 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sc.i: Macbeth meets the witches again and sees the apparitions • Sc.ii: Lady Macduff and her children are murdered onstage • Sc.iii: Macduff and Malcolm lament their fate and plan their attack 	<p>ACT 3 continues . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ballet continues, Macbeth enters and sees the apparitions • the dance of the spirits and apparitions • Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth of the apparitions and they swear death to their enemies <p>ACT 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the chorus of refugees • Macduff laments his murdered family • Malcolm arrives and plans the attack
<p>ACT 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sc.i: Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene • Sc.ii: the exiled Scottish lords march to meet the English forces • Sc.iii: Macbeth hears of the English army's approach • Sc.iv: Malcolm and the English army cut down branches of trees to use as cover, and prepare their assault • Sc.v: Macbeth hears of Lady Macbeth's death, and the approach of Birnham Wood • Sc.vi: Macbeth and Macduff fight. Macbeth is killed onstage and Malcolm is crowned king. <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Fine</i></p>	<p>ACT 4 continues . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene • Macbeth's aria of realisation • Macbeth hears of the approach of Birnham Wood • Macbeth and Macduff fight. Macbeth is killed onstage (<i>as in Verdi's 1847 version</i>). He sings his final aria and dies. <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Fine</i></p>

You will notice in the scene-by-scene comparison of the opera and the play that in the opera, the plot is simplified and reduced compared to the play. This is necessary due to the mechanics of an opera. It takes much longer to sing something than to say it.

Consequently Verdi had to get rid of a number of the scenes in the play. Verdi was also writing for a specific cast, and the balance of the roles had to match the positions of the singers in the opera house hierarchy. This explains why some less important characters are reduced or eliminated entirely, and the emphasis is much more on the two main roles.

Although the plot of the opera is quite condensed in comparison to the play, it is not condensed in terms of *time*, just in terms of content – you still have to sit there for two and a half hours, despite there being less text in the opera than in the play. This means that the music in the opera has a chance to say a great deal about what is happening. The descriptive music almost replaces the missing text and elements of the story.

The reduction of plot presents a real challenge to a director, because it changes the balance of sympathies within the story, and of course Shakespeare is a master of characterisation and has crafted this balance of sympathies to perfection. In the opera, it is quite difficult to develop the characters of Duncan, Banquo and

Fleance, Macduff and his wife, and Malcolm, because they just don't have enough time onstage. All these are victims, in one way or another, of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's cruelty, and it is important that an audience has sympathy for them. Richard Jones (*the director of the Glyndebourne production*) has tried to address this problem, in particular with regards to Macduff.

Macduff has a beautiful, lamenting aria in which he mourns his wife and children, and it is a challenge to make it convincing in the opera. In the play, there is a whole scene with Lady Macduff and her son, and then they are murdered by hired assassins right in front of the audience, but in Verdi's score Lady Macduff is absent. Richard Jones has her appear with Macduff from early on in the opera, and develops their relationship as much possible within the restrictions of the score. He also emphasises her and her children's death, so that Macduff's aria of lament has added poignancy in this production.

Apart from affecting the balance of sympathies, the condensation of plot also greatly increases the claustrophobia and introspectiveness of the story. The opera focuses on the two main protagonists to an even greater extent than the play – we don't have the commentary on Macbeth's kingship that Lennox, Ross and the other lords give us in the play. In other words, most of what we're presented with in the opera is an exploration of the relationship between the central couple, their machinations, and their oppressive and introverted view of the world.

(Analysis written by Sinead O'Neill)

The Composer

Giuseppe Verdi (1813 – 1901)

Verdi was born in Italy and became one of the most influential composers of the 19th century as well as being one of the most important composers of opera of all time.

He initially struggled to become recognised as a musician, but quickly shot to fame as a composer working for the ‘La Scala’ opera house in Milan.

He faced a terrible tragedy when his son, daughter and wife all died in 1840. However despite the depression he suffered afterwards, he carried on composing, producing many more works.

In 1874, he retired from composing, turning to politics (he was elected to the Italian senate) and farming.

Of Verdi’s many operas, *Macbeth* is one of the most important and most regularly staged. He wrote it in 1847, but made many significant changes to the score in 1865 (due to changes in fashion and what audiences expected to hear).

It was his first Shakespearean opera – later in his life, he would write *Otello* and *Falstaff* (the latter based on the *Merry Wives of Windsor*). He knew *Macbeth* through an Italian translation of a German version of the play, so it was not a hugely authentic adaptation, but he was drawn to the dramatic potential of the narrative, which he saw as vital in a successful opera libretto.

Consequently some of the subtleties of the play are lost, but the spirit remains – the opera describes the disintegration of the relationship and sanity of the Macbeths following their bloody deed.

In terms of characters, Verdi was interested especially in three main elements – the witches, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Duncan, Macduff, Malcolm and even Banquo are supporting roles which shed light on the main trio. The three Witches of Shakespeare become three covens in the opera. Operatic convention dictated the need for large choral scenes and by converting the witches into a gaggle and the murderers of Banquo into a gang, Verdi fully utilised the forces at his disposal (i.e. the large operatic choruses). But these witches are not Hammer-Horror nasties, they are mischievous gossips with a mind to cause trouble and Verdi’s music reflects this. The witches have bawdy, folk-like, playful music, which has often been criticised for being too simplistic. Drones, dance rhythms and cheap melodies characterise their music.

Lady Macbeth is a difficult role to cast. Verdi wrote the part for a dramatic soprano, which requires the singer to be an astounding vocal athlete – the part features a huge range, lots of fast runs and coloratura. But he also wanted the singer to be a talented actor who could convey the horror of the role. He said “I

want Lady Macbeth to be ugly and evil...I don't want [her] to sing at all. I want for the Lady a harsh, strangled, grim voice". Her music is steely and jagged.

Verdi saw Macbeth as noble but flawed. He has some very approachable, romantic music which encourages the audience to sympathise with him right from the start. His final aria reveals that he is aware of the monster that he has become, but is unable to change course.

School's resource pack written by Glyndebourne Education
Photographs copyright Mike Hoban and the Glyndebourne Archive