

# THE OPERA MACBETH by GIUSEPPE VERDI

Presentation by **George Kurti Plohn**

Dmitri Hvorostovsky – Macbeth – Act 4: Pietà, rispetto, amore  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgWbdf8nhg>

This opera is the first that Giuseppe Verdi composed, in 1847, based on a Shakespeare drama. It will be followed much later by other two other Shakespeare-based operas, namely using Shakespeare's *Othello* as the basis for his *Otello* (1887) and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as the basis for *Falstaff* (1893). To write a Shakespearean opera was a far more of a risk in 1847 than we might assume to be the case today, for at that date the English playwright was not yet a part of the mindset of the majority of educated Italians, having previously been dismissed as examples of "fantastical" literature. But Verdi liked Shakespeare dramas, so much so that he put the complete works of Shakespeare by his bed. After Verdi succeeded in 1841 with his opera, "Nabucco," he worked even harder. The world premiere of his Macbeth in 1847 was a great success, and the only 34 years old Verdi was called up to the stage thirty-eight times.

The leading character of this opera, Macbeth, was an actual person. Macbeth indeed reigned Scotland from 1041 to 1057. The real Macbeth, as king of Scotland took the throne after killing his cousin, King Duncan I, in battle in 1040. In 1046, Siward, Earl of Northumbria, unsuccessfully attempted to dethrone Macbeth in favor of Malcolm. In 1054, Macbeth was forced by Siward to yield part of southern Scotland to Malcolm. Then three years later, Macbeth was killed in battle by Malcolm, with assistance from the English. What a bloody history!

In the opera, Macbeth is described as a weak person. He wavers between hope and fear over the witches' predictions. And he is upset by the murder he later commits. But then Shakespeare and Verdi created the character to be greater than the actual person.

One of this opera's characteristics is the dark world, for example, witches, negative prophecies, and murder. Verdi gave directions for maintaining an utmost dark stage. And, the leading character, Macbeth, isn't sung by a tenor, as would be customary, but by a baritone. As for the main roles, Verdi used the music to illustrate the murderous ambitions of the unhinged Lady Macbeth and the anxious complicity of her browbeaten husband. By the end, even Lady Macbeth is overcome by feelings of guilt.

## **Synopsis**

### Act 1

In the year 1040, in Scotland, the two Scottish generals Macbeth and Banquo who serve the king of Scotland, Duncan, meet a group of witches in the wilderness. Here Verdi, instead of using three witches as in the play, there is rather a large female chorus of witches. The witches tell Macbeth that he will be the future Lord of Cawdor, a title in the Peerage of Scotland. and he will be later the King of Scotland, while for Banquo, they predict will be the father of kings. Then, messengers arrive to announce the news that the Lord of Cawdor died, and that the King of Scotland has named Macbeth the new Lord of Cawdor. So the witches' first prediction has come true with uncanny speed.

Meanwhile Lady Macbeth received a letter from her husband about the encounter with the witches. She is determined that the second prophecy will also come true and persuades her husbands to murder King Duncan. It so happens that that night, King Duncan arrives to the castle of Macbeth. Lady Macbeth persuades her husband to kill King Duncan, and Macbeth eventually stabs the King to death. The blood of the King sticks to the hands of Lady Macbeth, too.

### Act 2

King Duncan's son, Malcolm fled abroad and is believed, therefore, that he has murdered his father. Macbeth is inaugurated as King of Scotland, but the witches' prophecy is haunting him, and so he and his wife plan Banquo's death. Hired assassins lie in waiting for Banquo and his son. Banquo is killed, but his son Fleance manages to escape. During a banquet Macbeth is seeing Banquo's ghost, his confused babbling allowing Macduff, a Scottish nobleman subordinate, to guess the truth. Lady Macbeth tries in vain to save the situation.

### Act 3

Macbeth returns to the witches again. The witches give him another prediction, namely that he should be cautious of Macduff, the Scottish nobleman, although no man born of a woman will ever be able to kill him, so they say, and that he would be defeated only when the forest Birnam Wood marches against him. Hearing that, Macbeth and his wife decide to kill Macduff, his wife and children.

### Act 4

On the border of England and Scotland, Scottish refugees gather, among them Macduff, who grieved for his family, all of whom having been murdered by Macbeth.

Meanwhile Malcolm, the son of previous king Duncan, has assembled an army with which he plans to march against Macbeth. In order to camouflage themselves, his soldiers carry branches cut from the trees in Birnam Wood. Lady Macbeth in the meantime, wanders through the castle, being tormented by feelings of guilt, is trying to wash away blood that she imagines that stains her hands. Ultimately, she dies in a frenzy of fear.

The news that his wife is dead cannot, however, shake Macbeth's resolve, so confident is he of victory. He sings now the most famous aria of this opera, "Pieta, rispetto, amore" (Compassion, honor, love).

Only when he is told that Birnam Wood is approaching is he seized by terror. On the battlefield he meets and fights Macduff, who reveals that he was not born of woman but was cut from his mother's womb.

Macbeth falls in battle and all acclaim the rightful ruler in the person of Malcolm, the son of murdered King Duncan.

This DVD, celebrating Verdi's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday (1813), is a live recording from Teatro Regio di Parma, Italy, under the baton of Bruno Bartoletti, with the Italian baritone Leo Nucci in the title role and the French dramatic soprano Sylvie Valayre as Lady Macbeth.

Duration of the entire DVD is 2:48. Because of its length, we will present it in two installments, namely today Act 1 and Act 2 for 1:20 and next Sunday Act 3 with Act 4: 1:28.



Verdi in 1859