

Verdi's *Macbeth* was the first opera ever performed at the Edinburgh International Festival, and Teatro Regio of Turin's imaginative new version promises to be a highlight of its 70th anniversary edition, writes **David Kettle**

It seems only fitting that the Edinburgh International Festival's very first opera, staged way back in 1947, was Verdi's *Macbeth*. You can't help but imagine the festival's founders – chief among them artistic director Rudolf Bing – seeing an uncanny relevance for Verdi's brooding recasting of the Scottish Play for a brand new cultural celebration that was itself happening north of the Border.

It's understandable, too, that today's Festival organisers were determined *Macbeth* should also form one of the 70th anniversary's grand operatic centrepieces. "I consider it one of Verdi's top three operas," says conductor Gianandrea Noseda, who flies in his company from Turin's Teatro Regio for the 2017 production, part of a multi-evening residency that also includes Puccini's *La bohème* and Verdi's cataclysmic *Requiem*.

But *Macbeth*'s aptness aside, back in 1947 it was also a matter of practicality. Bing was also running Sussex's summer opera festival at Glyndebourne. And what he brought to Edinburgh in 1947 was the Glyndebourne production from 1938.

Putting together that first International Festival production was hardly straightforward, however. The 79-year-old Arturo Toscanini was approached to conduct *Macbeth* but quickly declined, to be replaced by Tullio Serafin, who was himself later replaced by George Szell. Szell, however, felt increasingly dissatisfied by the singers Bing had assembled.

Things came to a head at a rehearsal with tenor Walter Midgeley, singing Macduff, who reportedly struggled to memorise his part. Szell asked icily: "Mr Midgeley, when are you going to sing some of the notes Verdi provided?", then quickly departed. The opera's final – and much acclaimed – conductor, however, was Berthold Goldschmidt. As a composer Goldschmidt had had his music banned by the Nazis, making him a canny choice in a new, post-war festival celebrating cultural inclusiveness.

Yet *Macbeth* was in some ways a strange choice for the Festival's first opera. It was hardly a well-known work – the 1938 Glyndebourne production had been its first professional UK performance. And there were concerns about how Verdi had tackled Shakespeare's psychological subtleties.

According to Noseda, however, the opera is a meeting of two great minds: "I consider Shakespeare one of the creative geniuses that humanity has received from God, and I consider Verdi at the same level. The meeting of these two giants couldn't produce anything but sheer excellence."

There's no doubting the excellence of *Macbeth*'s invention, but it's very dark, too, radical in its musical forms, ear-tweaking in its orchestral writing, at times harrowingly intense in its vocal displays. "Verdi describes the story of *Macbeth* in a completely new language," Noseda continues. "Nothing in the operas that precede

Italian director Emma Dante's version of Verdi's *Macbeth* nods equally to classical art and modern cinema, main and right



The production has been praised for its invention and its almost hallucinatory imagery



Photographs: Franco Lammio



ways that duet is built up – they capture you from the first note until the last. When you hear the last note, you think ‘Thank God that’s over.’”

It’s clearly an opera that Verdi himself felt strongly about, leaving copious requests as to how it should be staged, and the kinds of voices it required. Most famously, he indicated that the singer playing Lady Macbeth should have “the voice of a devil”, one that was “harsh, dark” and capable of a very wide range and enormous expression, rather than simply beautiful. “Of course you have to bear in mind Verdi’s requests,” says Nosedà, while he admits stopping short of following them to the letter. He points to other details, however, that serve to underline Verdi’s dramatic mastery: “There are many moments where he indicates that lines should be sung *sotto voce*, very softly, except for a few

notes sung with an open voice. If you try to respect that in performance, it becomes even more ghostly, more mysterious – less beautiful, maybe, but more dramatically right.”

Emma Dante, director of the Turin production, is more direct in her own approach to Verdi’s staging requests. “I think that over time, especially in terms of staging, Verdi’s operas have become emancipated from him. God creates the world and over centuries it begins to run by itself, walking on its own legs, at times even forgetting that he exists.”

She’s a respected actor, film-maker, writer and director, with a string of well-received if idiosyncratic opera productions to her name. With its striking, flamboyant set-pieces that nod to classical art and modern cinema, her intense *Macbeth* has been widely praised for its free-wheeling invention and its almost

hallucinatory imagery. And for her, perhaps inevitably, work started with the original play. “I worked on this staging for a year,” she explains. “The starting point was Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* because it came naturally to me, beginning with the spoken play script. But Verdi’s music beautifully fills the gaps that the Shakespeare libretto might have.”

She brings up intriguing differences between approaching a spoken play and a sung opera, especially in the role that music plays. “Alongside the theatrical plot there is also a musical plot that tells the story of the characters’ psychology and feelings. So there are two emotional strands: apart from the story itself, there’s also the sound of the remorse and pain inside the characters’ heads. Verdi’s *Macbeth* takes place mentally.”

It’s the third time that Nosedà has conducted the work, and his perspective has, he feels, only deepened. “I conducted it at New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 2012, and also a few months ago in Zurich. At the Met I respected the opera hugely, and now I can simply say I love it. You know, respect sometimes puts a wall between you and the music. I certainly don’t regret how we did it at the Met, but here it’s more direct, more cruel. I pay less attention to the ornamental parts, and I go straight to the core of the piece.” ▲

***Macbeth* is at the Festival Theatre, 18-20 August, 0131-473 2000 / www.eif.co.uk**