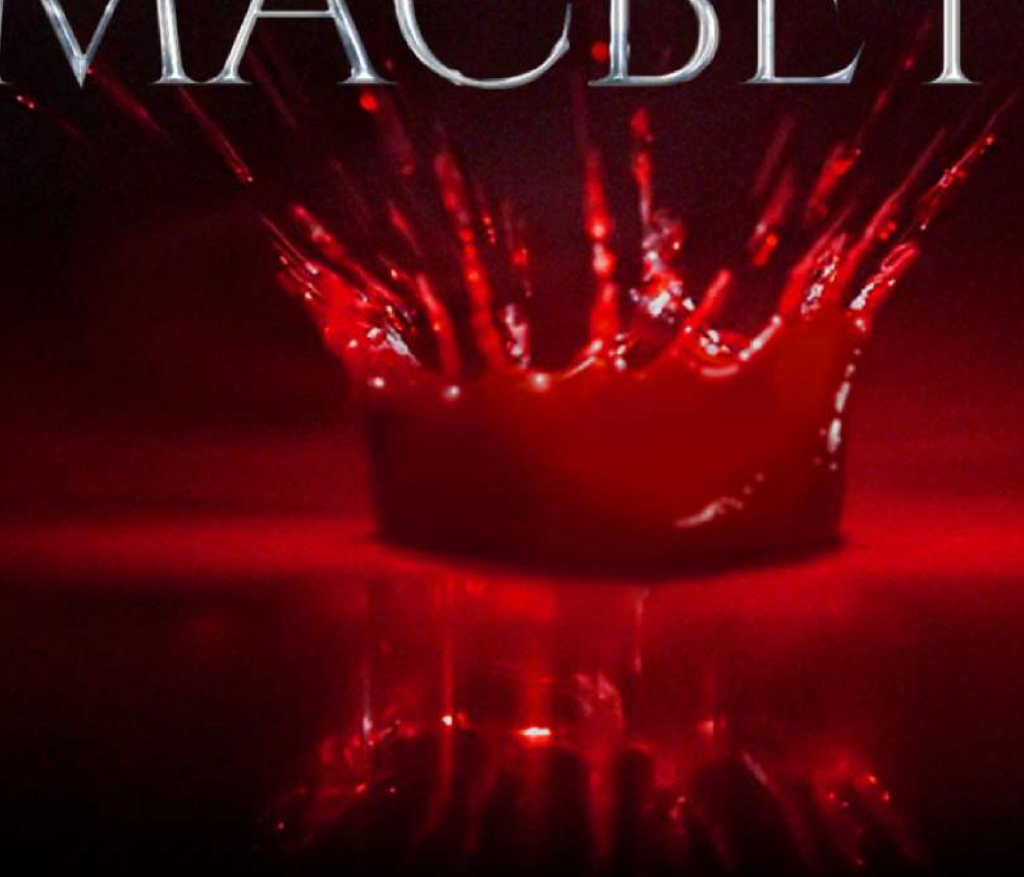


A GRAND OPERA BY GIUSEPPE VERDI

MACBETH



EDUCATION RESOURCE
FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS



STATE OPERA
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What is Opera?	3
Opera Singers	3
About the Opera: Macbeth	4
Grand Opera	4
The Creators	5
The Characters	6
Synopsis	7 - 8
Adapting Plays into Operas	9
Let's Get in the Pit	10
Attending an Opera	11
From Play to...	12
Opera Glossary	13

State Opera South Australia's productions are possible thanks to



Government of South Australia
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FIRST THINGS FIRST

What is Opera?

Opera is a type of theatre which combines drama, music and elements of dance with exciting costumes and innovative set design.

However, in opera, the actors are trained to sing their lines instead of speaking them!

A librettist writes the libretto - the words that are to be sung, like a script. Often, the plot of the opera is taken from stories in books, or plays, or real world events. A composer writes the music for the opera singers and orchestra.

An orchestra accompanies the opera singers, whilst a conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians.

An easy way to think of opera is that it is a story told with music. In a lot of operas, the people on stage sing all the way through. Imagine having all your conversations by singing them!



The Turn of the Screw, 2022
Photo: Frankie the Creative

Opera Singers

It takes a lot of training to become an opera singer. A lot of aspiring opera singers will take this route: Sing in choirs, volunteer for solos, take singing lessons, study singing and music at university, then audition for the chorus or roles in operas.

Opera singers hardly ever use a microphone, which means that they train their voices to be heard by audiences, even over the top of orchestras.

Resource:

An introduction to opera's voice types (The Royal Opera)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLfvkwTnJVM>



Pirates of Penzance, 2023
Photo: Frankie the Creative

ABOUT THE OPERA

Macbeth is a four act opera based on William Shakespeare's play of the same name, written by Giuseppe Verdi, with an Italian libretto by Francesco Maria Piave. Premiering on 14th March 1847, during what Verdi described as his "Galley Years", *Macbeth* was his 10th opera and the first (but not only) opera he wrote based on Shakespeare's works.

The operatic interpretation of *Macbeth* sees the story largely unchanged from the original Shakespeare play, save for the witches, which are instead cast as three separate female choruses singing in harmony. The success of *Macbeth* in the years following its premiere prompted Verdi to revise the opera in 1865. Sadly, this revision was not as well received. Even today, the 1847 version of the opera is often the preferred version for modern performances.



WHAT IS GRAND OPERA

Grand Opera (or Spectacular Opera) is the most extravagant of all the opera styles. It is characterised by elaborate sets, lavish costume designs, and complex stage effects. Grand opera is often related with themes of royalty, heroism and chivalry, and generally consists of 4 or more acts. Operas of this style tend to be long and dramatic, with plots often deriving from great historical events. Giuseppe Verdi is one of the most famous composers of grand opera, often combining this style with other opera styles such as Bel Canto and Opera Seria.



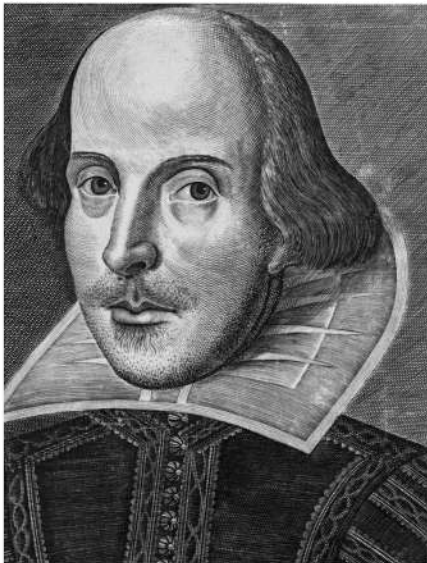
La Traviata, 2022

Photo: That Photography Place

The Creators

**ORIGINAL
PLAY**

The Writer

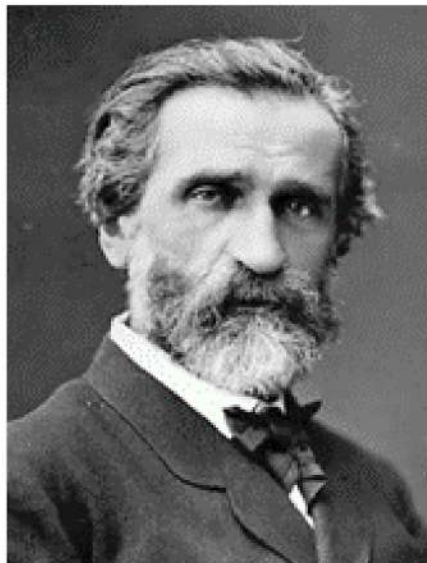


**William
Shakespeare**

William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) was an English playwright, poet and actor. His work spans across 39 plays, 154 sonnets and 3 long narrative poems. His most famous works include *Hamlet*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and of course, *Macbeth* - all of which are still performed today!

**OPERATIC
VERSION**

The Composer



**Giuseppe
Verdi**

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi (1813 - 1901) was an Italian composer who is considered one of the best operatic composers of all time. Heavily influenced by the likes of Rossini and Bellini, Verdi contributed many great works to the Italian opera canon including *Nabucco*, *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and perhaps most famous of all, *La Traviata*.

The Librettist



**Francesco Maria
Piave**

Francesco Maria Piave (1810 - 1876) was an Italian opera librettist who was born in Murano in the lagoon of Venice. His career spanned over 20 years, throughout which he worked with many prolific composers, but most notably the great Giuseppe Verdi. Piave wrote 10 librettos for Verdi, including *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*.

The Characters

Macbeth (Baritone) – A Scottish general who is led to wicked thoughts after hearing a prophecy stating that he will become king of Scotland. Upon hearing this prophecy, he and his wife Lady Macbeth murder King Duncan, setting in motion a series of dark and sinister events that ultimately lead to his death at hands of Macduff.

Lady Macbeth (Soprano) – A deeply ambitious woman who's lust for power and position compel her and her husband Macbeth to seize the crown at any cost. However, she soon falls victim to guilt and madness over the things she has done. Her conscience eventually gets the best of her and she takes her own life to alleviate the guilt.

Banquo (Bass) – The noble general whose children will inherit the Scottish throne, according to the three witches prophecy. A group of assassins (sent by Macbeth) murder Banquo and attempt to murder his son Fleance, who escapes. Banquo's ghost then returns to haunt Macbeth and drive him into a guilt ridden insanity.

Macduff (Tenor) – The Scottish nobleman who Macbeth is warned about in his second visit to the three witches. Macbeth pre-emptively sends assassins to murder Macduff and his family, but only succeeds in murdering the latter. Macduff swears vengeance on Macbeth, ultimately killing him in the final act of the opera.

Other Supporting Characters:

The Witches - The ones who prophesize Macbeth's reign and eventual downfall.

Malcolm - The son of King Duncan who is wrongly accused of murdering his father.

King Duncan - The king of Scotland who is murdered by Lady Macbeth at the beginning of the opera.

Fleance - Son of Banquo who escapes assassination and flees Scotland.



Photo: James Rogers/West Australian Opera

Synopsis

SPOILER ALERT!

ACT I

Macbeth and Banquo, leaders of the Scottish army, meet a group of witches who prophesise the future. Macbeth is to be named Thane of Cawdor and will later become King of Scotland. Banquo is told that he will father the next 8 generations of Scottish Kings. The witches disappear and a messenger arrives to tell Macbeth that King Duncan has indeed made Macbeth Thane of Cawdor, confirming the first part of the witches prophecy.

In Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband telling her of the events that have transpired. Lady Macbeth's ambition consumes her, and upon Macbeth's arrival back to the castle, she tells him he must kill the king to claim the throne. Macbeth has a vision of a dagger and contemplates his choices before leaving to kill King Duncan. The deed is done and Macbeth returns to Lady Macbeth, feeling frightened, to which she tells him he needs to be more courageous. Banquo and Macduff, a Scottish nobleman, discover the body of King Duncan and alert the castle.



Photo: James Rogers/West Australian Opera

ACT II

Macbeth has been named king of Scotland and Duncan's son Malcolm, suspected of having murdered his father, flees to England. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are now convinced that the witches prophecy has begun to unfold, and both are desperate to stop the prophecy told to Banquo about fathering the next 8 generations of Scottish Kings. Macbeth hires a group of assassins to murder Banquo and his son Fleance. Banquo is murdered but Fleance manages to escape the assassins and flees Scotland.

In the banquet hall, Lady Macbeth hosts a feast and sings a Brindisi (drinking song) to welcome her guests. Macbeth is informed of the murder of Banquo and moves to sit in what would have been Banquo's seat at the feast, when he is greeted by a terrifying apparition of Banquo's ghost, back from the grave to haunt him. The appearance of Banquo's ghost causes Macbeth to go mad, and although she tries, Lady Macbeth cannot calm her husband. This causes the guests to question Macbeth's ability to rule, and convinces Macduff to leave the country, fearing for the kingdom's wellbeing.



Photo: James Rogers/West Australian Opera

Synopsis

Beware of Spoilers!

ACT III

The witches gather again and Macbeth seeks them out to demand more prophecies. They warn Macbeth to be wary of a nobleman by the name of Macduff, assure him that no man born of a woman can harm him, and that he will be invincible until Birnam Wood marches on his castle. Macbeth has another vision, this time of a procession of future kings followed by yet another apparition of Banquo to further torment him.

Macbeth collapses and awakens back at the castle. After telling Lady Macbeth of his most recent visit to the witches, they both resolve that the only way to prevent this prophecy is to have Macduff and his family murdered. Once again, Macbeth sends assassins to carry out the murder, but they only succeed in murdering Macduff's family.



Photo: James Rogers/West Australian Opera



Photo: James Rogers/West Australian Opera

ACT IV

Filled with grief and rage at the murder of his family, Macduff joins the rebellion on the Scottish border waiting to overthrow Macbeth. Malcolm appears with British troops and leads them to invade Scotland. They infiltrate the castle by chopping down the trees from Birnam Wood and using them as camouflage in the night.

Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and is haunted by the things she and her husband have done. She resolves that the only way to relieve her guilt is to take her own life. A messenger brings news to Macbeth, telling him of Lady Macbeth's death and that Birnam Wood is marching towards the castle.

The English soldiers appear in Macbeth's court and remove their camouflage. Macduff confronts Macbeth and in the midst of their battle, reveals that he is not born of a woman, but was a caesarian birth. Macbeth is killed by Macduff, who then proclaims Malcolm the King of Scotland.

ADAPTING PLAYS INTO OPERAS

The idea of taking great literature and adapting it into a stage production is common practice in the arts.

Some of the most famous operas drew their source material from plays including *Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss, *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, and of course *Macbeth* by Giuseppe Verdi.

Adapting the literature element to a stage production of any kind, be it a play or an opera, is not without its challenges. Some storytelling techniques that are completely acceptable in literary form can be difficult to translate onto the stage for a variety of reasons.

For example, jumping between various locations in the written work means that multiple scene changes must be accounted for, or when a minor character has a significant role in the story that is not cost effective to include in the stage production.

It is for these and other reasons that often the composer/adaptor will have to make necessary changes or omissions to the stage production to allow the show to work in the new storytelling format.

Thankfully for Verdi, adapting a play to an opera meant that a lot of these problems have already been accounted for and solved. However, setting a play to music does not come without its own set of limitations and problems. Verdi had to write the music with the stage production in mind so as to ensure that:

- The opera singers had enough time to sing their parts and move to their next mark while still allowing the movements to look natural and not rushed or forced.
- If the opera singers were acting in awkward positions (such as bent over or lying down) that they are able to comfortably hit the notes with the correct timbre and articulation
- The music still suited the mood and feel of each scene

With these considerations in mind, putting music to plays can also provide some advantages when done correctly (and cleverly!). Verdi makes use of music to help fill time in between the scene changes, allowing the cast and crew more time to move the production along while also giving the audience something to focus on as this happens.



Photo: Andrew Beveridge

LET'S GET IN THE PIT

Have you ever stopped to think just how many musicians make up an orchestra? From the booming, thunderous melodies to the soft, whisper like ambience, around 100 musicians come together to create these incredible sounds. A modern full-scale symphony orchestra is generally made up of:

- 16 1st Violins
- 16 2nd Violins
- 12 Violas
- 12 Cellos
- 8 Double Basses
- 4 Flutes (one of which specialises in Piccolo)
- 4 Oboes
- 4 Clarinets (one of which specialises in Bass Clarinet and another who specialises in High Clarinet)
- 4 Bassoons
- 5 Horns
- 4 Trumpets
- 4 Trombones (one of which specialises in Bass Trombone)
- 1 Tuba
- 4 Percussionists
- 1 Harp
- 1 Piano
- 1 Conductor (who is often changed with each production)



Photo: Frankie the Creative

Alongside this list, more musicians who specialise in other instruments often join the orchestra when the music calls for them. This is seen most commonly in concertos, special projects and scores with extended sections (such as brass or percussion sections).

ATTENDING AN OPERA

Before the performance:

It is a good idea to do at least a little research about the opera that you are about to attend. Taking 10 minutes to review the plot or listening to excerpts from the piece, for example on YouTube, will make sure you are familiar with what you are about to see and help you to better enjoy all that is happening on-stage.

Find out where the theatre is, where you collect your tickets from, and aim to be there at least twenty minutes before the opera starts.

What do I do during the performance?

Enjoy the show and take it all in!

Respond as you would in a movie theatre. The story might make you laugh, it may make you cry. Please turn off all phones.

Be aware that any filming, recording and photography is strictly prohibited.

Be considerate of all other opera-goers, so keeping quiet and not tapping along is encouraged.

How do I understand what is going on?

Macbeth was written and is performed in Italian, so there will be surtitles (not subtitles!) on screens hung above the stage in the theatre. These will provide a script so you won't miss any of the action while reading.

However, it is always advisable to familiarise yourself with the production before the performance, for example by reading the synopsis and understanding who the characters are.

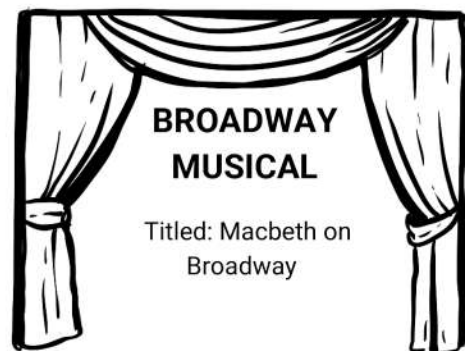
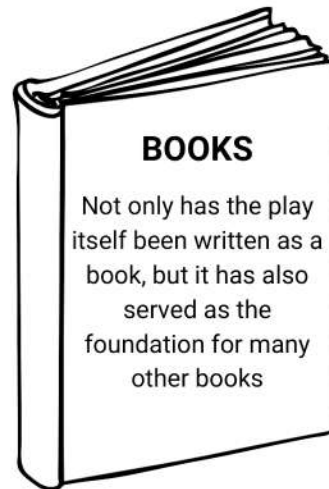
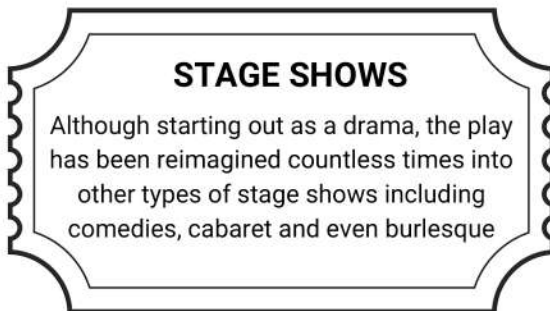
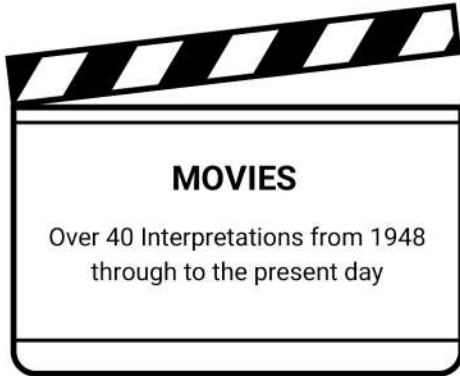
After the performance:

- Discuss it with friends, teachers and parents
- Attend a live opera when you can
- Watch an opera on YouTube. either a whole one or just the highlights
- Read books about the composers, conductors, opera singers or other topics we have mentioned
- Ask your parents or teachers for advice on where they think you could find more information



FROM PLAY TO...

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has been adapted into many different artforms, including:



AND MANY MORE!!

Opera Glossary

The below terms may be helpful in understanding opera better:

ACT – a major section (like a chapter of a novel) of a dramatic production. Each act may consist of a number of scenes. An opera has one or more acts.

ACCOMPANIMENT – the music that supports or plays a secondary role to the melody. The accompaniment can be sung or played.

ARIA – a solo piece.

COMPOSER – the musician who writes the music of the operatic piece.

CHORD – more than one note sounded at the same time (simultaneously).

ENSEMBLE – a group of musicians. In opera, an ensemble can refer to any music written for two or more voices.

HARMONY – any combination of notes that are sung or played simultaneously. Usually the word harmony refers to a pleasing combination of those sounds (but not always).

KEY – the presence of tonality.

LIBRETTO – the lyrics or text of the opera.

LYRICIST (LIBRETTIST) – a writer who transforms prose into something suitable for a song setting. This writer has the skills of a poet to structure the text into verses.

MAJOR/MINOR – the modality in harmony. These can be demonstrated by simple triads or coloured by extra notes.

OPERA – A work for the stage that combines music with dramatic and theatrical elements. An opera can be of any length, combined with instrumental forces of any size, and can be based on stories of any type. An opera in the 16th century can be very different from those created in the 20th century.

TEXTURE – the layers of sound. Different combination of pitches and of instruments can create interesting sound that can be described as heavy or light, thick or thin.

THEME – a melody belonging to a passage of music or assigned to a dramatic character.

TIMBRE – the character or quality of a musical sound or voice.



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