

VERDI AND SHAKESPEARE OPEN IN FLORENCE

Verdi calls Shakespeare “Master of the human heart.”

On March 14, Maestro Verdi’s *Macbeth* opened at the Teatro della Pergola to a libretto by Francesco Piave. The composer said that he is extremely pleased to have set Shakespeare’s play, as he has been an admirer of the British dramatist for many years and keeps two well-read translations of his works in the bookcase by his bedside. Adding that he hoped to work with other plays by Shakespeare in the future, Verdi emphasized that he and his librettist had taken pains to be faithful to the story and the spirit of Shakespeare’s masterpiece.

Our critic agrees that they have succeeded, and much poetry in the libretto is taken directly from the play (modern note: subtitles should improve). A few departures have been necessary to fulfill the demands of the opera medium. The enhanced role for Lady Macbeth should satisfy any prima donna who undertakes it, and in this case was ably performed by Marianna Barbieri-Nini. (See Madame Barbieri-Nini’s comments on the dress rehearsal below.) In fact, Verdi gave us an exclusive insight into his ideas for the future, remarking that in any revision, he would include yet another aria for the Lady in Act II, his working title: *La luce langue*.

The public received the new work well, despite its departure from the romantic theme of thwarted love now so popular; and its supernatural dimension, since witches are not so traditional a part of our Italian folklore as they are in England.

As to that final dress rehearsal, Madame Barbieri-Nini recounts that the guests were already seated, and she and Felice Varesi, the baritone who sang Macbeth, were in costume. Verdi called them and demanded yet another rehearsal of the Act I duet, in the foyer! {Maestro Verdi is well-known for his meticulous attention to all aspects of the performance, and has even been referred to as the “Bear of Busseto.”} Signor Varesi protested that we had

already rehearsed the duet at least 150 times. The Maestro replied, “I wouldn’t say that again, for within half an hour it will be 151!”

Editor’s note: While the newspaper article itself is fiction, all is based on fact. Verdi did revise the opera in 1865 for Paris, and this is the version usually performed now. The incident of the duet rehearsal in the foyer is taken from the prima donna’s memoirs. Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester

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