

SALZBURG FESTIVAL 2011



Giuseppe Verdi

Macbeth

This coming summer, Peter Stein returns to the scene of his triumph: during his time as Director of Drama, he discovered the Felsenreitschule, directing Shakespeare's Roman dramas there. Now Peter Stein will work at the former summer riding school, which has just been given a new roof, as the director of Giuseppe Verdi's Macbeth. With Karin Kathrein, he spoke about his preparatory work with Riccardo Muti.

Peter Stein's relationship with opera is a beautiful love story which is not free of conflict: it began in the 1970s with a spectacular cancellation [Wagner's *Ring* for the Bayreuth Festival]. This was followed by a "horrible" episode, which led him to decide: "Never again!" He remained true to this resolution for ten years [*Rheingold* in Paris]. In the midst of the 1980s, however, an invitation to Cardiff provided a fresh spark, and for a while, the great theater-maker even gave preference to opera. He worked with conductors like Pierre Boulez and Kirill Petrenko, Claudio Abbado and Ingo Metzmacher, and has unusually positive things to say about them. Stumbling blocks often lie in the way of his accepting opera productions, but after an intensive period of preparation, Stein now speaks with great enthusiasm about the cooperation with Riccardo Muti on Verdi's *Macbeth* at the Felsenreitschule.

It did, indeed, require several attempts, for Muti had suggested the opera to him twice already, one of them as opening night of La Scala Milan. But Stein, whose obvious starting-point was Shakespeare's tragedy about the craving for power, was mainly disturbed by a ballet of witches which the conductor was unwilling to cut. The Festival's Artistic Director, Markus Hinterhäuser, however, was convinced that some sensitive preparatory work would succeed in bringing the two artists together. Thus, Stein finally designed a four-step plan. "After I had worked very carefully on the text and the score," he says, "Muti gave me the opportunity to encounter the score from his perspective, by playing it at the piano and singing it for me in Italy. Six hours without a break. That was wonderful, the way he did that. I only interrupted occasionally to ask questions."

Together, they worked on their own version. "Muti paid heed to my suggestions in an amazing way. First they were aimed at designing an operatic event that is as theatrical as possible, as close to Shakespeare as possible, in a tougher performance mode which breaks with convention. That is something Muti also wants in musical terms, and I encouraged him there. After all, two versions of the opera exist, and I recommended using the finale of the first version. He agreed – and that means that the end comes very quickly: Macbeth dies onstage, not offstage as in the second version; and the opera ends immediately, with a few measures dedicated to the crowning of the rightful King Malcolm. Otherwise, our basis is mostly the second version."

With one other change, though: Verdi's *Macbeth* had its premiere in Florence, and he later rearranged it for Paris, reworking mainly Act III and adding the ballet that was indispensable for the French opera stage. This was the toughest obstacle for Stein. "Therefore, I suggested that we move the ballet in Act III up one scene, so that it becomes like an overture for the third act. Thus, the opening can show the witches' scene without being interrupted by the ballet. When Macbeth faints at the sight of his successors, whom the witches conjure up, some kind of elves will be called again to help him get up. That's part of the game. I have to come up with some idea for that."

In the next phase of their cooperation, Stein introduced the conductor to his work in Munich. "We constructed a huge model of the Felsenreitschule, and I presented the complete production to Muti in minute detail. Then we mainly discussed the problems: the musical ones, the acoustic ones, the problems the chorus has with the very broad stage, the problem of

distances, which also affect the sound profoundly. Finally, I suggested using the strip in front of the orchestra pit, the passage between Toscanini-Hof and Karl-Böhm-Saal, for the scenic action. For example, the chorus could be stationed there, it could be the road the fugitives from Scotland sing on.”

Stein explained “every detail, including every musical detail, for two hours,” and Muti accepted. “The wonderful music really serves the drama, but there are problems too, especially in the long arias. My colleagues seek salvation in a theater of busyness. That is completely alien to me. It is the form. The singer must create fascination, through the music, his voice, his personality. That is the essential part. I still have enough to do as stage director. For example, the women’s chorus appears not as witches, but as a forest, as the grove in which the witches work. Furthermore, I have to ask about 30 men from the chorus to learn to fence, as I want a stage fight. After all, it is part of the piece.” In general, he wants a lot of movement in the chorus, “to make the impulses and rhythmical elements of the music visible on stage”.

For the third phase of preparation, Stein has asked Muti to come to Salzburg for the first two days of the scenic rehearsals with the singers, in order to go through the score with them. “Just as he did with me. The idea is for him to say the things that are important to him in my presence, for me to explain my priorities, and for us to perform together, so to speak. And then, Phase 4, my rehearsal work, begins.”

Translation: Alexa Nieschlag