



**Society** : St. Albans Operatic Society  
**Production** : Macbeth (Verdi)  
**Date** : April 1994  
**Venue** : Alban Arena  
**Report by** : Dorothy Lawson - London Area Councillor

## Report

I have often applauded the committee of this society in showing imagination and courage in their choice of shows and, in particular, for offering their audiences the triennial treat of a grand opera.

Having sung in extracts of Verdi's setting of "the Scottish play" at the NODA Operatic Summer School, I am very fond of the piece and appreciate its possibilities for a strong singing society such as this. Although it does not have the very familiar tunes of some of the later Verdi works, it is nevertheless very melodic and for me the music serves to enhance the drama from start to finish.

From the first notes of the overture, I became aware that we were in for a thrilling evening of the highest standard. In my experience it is rare to find in amateur opera such a good balance of principals who can act as well as they sing and also a production which makes such dramatic sense.

The tableaux of scenes of mourning during the overture gave an immediate focus accompanied by some beautifully balanced orchestral playing.

I was particularly struck by the excellent diction of the witches ladies chorus. The second group was perhaps slightly weaker vocally when singing separately but in the tutti passages there was a good overall balance. Their movement was well drilled and confident and there were some interesting individual reactions within the groups. I thought the variety of hairstyles for the girls was much more effective than to have all of them in the ubiquitous "pantomime witch" wigs.

The men's chorus, although not quite so prominent as the ladies, was impressive both musically and numerically - particularly the sub-groups of messengers and murderers. The dramatic impact of their final "Macbeth is no more" was superb.

I have admired the performances of Stuart Harding in a range of parts in the past and this title role is another to add to his laurels. From his first appearance his diction was exemplary (which can hardly be said the last time I heard this opera at ENO - they could have been singing in Italian!) There were so many moments of excellent character development - the reaction to the witches, the nervy singing of the second verse of the Brindisi, the changes of mood in the dagger scene and the singing of the final soliloquy with superb vocal colouring of the word "freezing".

Sally Cooper Dyson was just the kind of singing actress for ideal casting of Lady Macbeth. Her first aria demonstrated the power of both ends of her voice. The build up of the desire for power in Act 1 Scene 2 was very well done as was the sleep walking scene - wonderful vocally with some equally wonderful facial expressions. One minor distraction was a wig which created too severe a line around her expressive face - some softening of the line by teasing out strands of her own hair might have helped here.

I was much impressed by the performance of young Matthew Gregory as Banquo, having seen him in several productions at Harpenden. He had a strong

physical presence and his rapidly developing bass blended well with Macbeth and was shown at its best in his aria just before his death.

Alison Mills made a credible character of the Lady in Waiting and also removed the props competently and unobtrusively. Richard Seaward as Macduff sang well and successfully portrayed a character growing in confidence through the opera. He dominated the Refugees' scene in contrast to the less experienced Mike Fooks as Malcolm.

The three apparitions were distinctively portrayed and Robert Wigram made a good Fleance, responding well to his father in Act 2, Scene 2.

I have already mentioned that Yvonne Harding's production made dramatic sense - after the green blood and the elevated bed of the ENO production I was so pleased about that! There was always an understanding of the musical demands - eg. frenzied movement from the witches only when a group was not singing. The chorus groupings and movements were always interesting - I particularly liked the entrance of the Refugees. The dancers were most effectively used, notably at the opening of Act 3 - there were super gymnastic moves and individual use of the floor level. The calls - so often neglected in opera productions - were neat and obviously well rehearsed - the only sign of raggedness being, surprisingly, in the dancers' call - perhaps they were just glad it was all over!

There were some excellent players in the large orchestra - something I have come to expect at St. Albans. Some particularly impressive moments were the clarinet and oboe passage before the sleep walking scene and the string playing in the final scene.

Adrian Brown was always firmly in control, giving clear direction of the sudden, and more subtle, changes of tempi and dynamics. The "minimalist" set designs were most effective and the ramps were managed well. I liked the variety of effects in King Duncan's procession. The setting up of the Banquet in the long introduction to Act 2 Scene 3 worked well. There were several opportunities for imaginative lighting effects - I particularly liked the opening of Act 3.

It must have been quite a challenge to gather together the costumes, none of the costume houses having a "set" for this opera. Congratulations, therefore to Mary Myers and her team -everything looked super, even down to the details such as the bags on the feet!

Well, you can tell that I thoroughly enjoyed my evening - I hope that the company enjoyed their experience of this challenging undertaking and that the audiences did too. I can't wait for the next!