

**Review of Somerset Opera's Production of 'Macbeth' at King's College, Taunton  
Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

The thought of Somerset Opera tackling one of Verdi's great dramatic operas was an intriguing one. This is grand opera in every sense of the word and this reviewer wondered whether it could be done outside of a grand setting. The studio theatre of King's College is an intimate space and some ingenious adjustments would have to be made. Director Sebastian Petit's solution was clever and incredibly successful. The challenge of scenery was replaced by the creative use of lighting (together with the judicious use of a bit of smoke) and that allowed the audience to focus on the characters, the drama and the music. The minimalist approach was a triumph and an object lesson in the adage of less is more.

Oliver Gibbs in the title role tackled the vocally demanding part with only the slightest sign of tiring in the second act but then produced plenty in reserve for his final scene. He sang with elegant beauty throughout but with the necessary dramatic attack when called upon. Mari Wyn Williams was brilliantly cast as Lady Macbeth. Her powerful bright mezzo voice could cut steel on a cold day and she left us in no doubt as to who was in charge whenever she was on stage. Roderick Hunt was a sonorous Banquo who relished the bass line of his part whilst tenor Dean Ward turned on the ardent charm of his Macduff. Smaller parts were admirably delivered by Darren Chalmers, Toni Bishop, Harold Mead, Stephen Grimshaw and Stuart Symonds. Particularly effective was the treatment of the three witches which Verdi multiplied into a whole chorus. Their ghoulish costumes and expressive movement, which could have been the cause of much tittering, was utterly convincing. The chorus and young performers were outstanding. They produced a sound worthy of any professional chorus. My only quibble of the production was the inclusion of the ballet. This was included for 'commercial reasons' during a revision for the Paris Opera in 1865. It interrupts the dramatic flow and adds nothing of any worth. That said, the young dancers did not disgrace themselves with Balanchine-style choreography. This reviewer was pleased when the opera proper was resumed!

One of the biggest challenges was the scaling down of a big orchestra to forces suited to a small venue. This was achieved admirably by Chris Cooper. Set off to one side, the Italian-style band included all of the elements of a full-orchestra. At no point did you feel that the music had been watered down. The singers were well integrated with the orchestra and the balance between both excellent. Much of this is to the credit of Christopher Balls' conducting which was confident and well-judged in all respects. Somerset Opera and Sebastian Petit should be congratulated in their ambition and in their success of producing a grand opera without compromise.

**Wayne Bennett**