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“Double, double, toil and trouble”: Producing Macbeth in Mid-Victorian Britain

Paul Rodmell

By 1860 Verdi’s popular reputation in Britain was largely secured. In London the consecutive successes of Rigoletto, La traviata, and Il trovatore in the mid-1850s undermined the suspicious view of Verdi held by many hitherto, and although some critics still expressed reservations about Verdi’s music, audiences anticipated productions of his latest operas with enthusiasm—a happy coincidence for Verdi since British interest in Italian opera was then at its height. With the establishment of this triumvirate, performances of his earlier works declined in frequency, however, with the best known, Ernani, only rarely being given in Britain between 1855 and 1873; most of the others pre-dating Rigoletto were not performed at all.

It was long believed that Macbeth was one of these neglected works and that its first mainland British performance was at Glyndebourne in 1938, with a lone Irish production in Dublin in 1859. More recent research, however, has shown that there were English performances of Macbeth in Manchester and Liverpool in 1860, although the opera remained unperformed in London until 1976. This article has two purposes: first, to document that there was an earlier English premiere of Macbeth than those noted so far—in Birmingham—and second, to ask whether, ironically, the Dublin performances scuppered the planned London premiere of the opera in 1859 and if the English provincial performances of 1860 also contributed to the non-appearance of the opera in London for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Birmingham 1860

The British mainland premiere of Macbeth took place at Birmingham’s Theatre Royal on 27 August 1860, just a few weeks before the performances in Manchester and Liverpool. It was a spontaneous and independent production, neither associated with any of the established opera companies nor involving any famous singers, and was undertaken by Giovanni Operti, supported by a small company comprising Signora Zamboni, Miss Styles, and Signori Mercuriali and Loghi. The venture had its origin in a selection from the opera, performed at Birmingham...
Town Hall on 2 August 1860. That concert had been advertised in the *Birmingham Daily Post* beginning on 17 July and was inspired by charitable and political sympathies:

Concerts of a high class have of late been “few and far between” in Birmingham, consequently that on Thursday evening was an oasis in the desert of our musical world, and when, in addition to its artistic attractions, the proceeds were to be devoted to the aid of the brave Garibaldi and his band of heroes, it may well be expected that the hall was crowded. Signor Operti, the conductor, both as musician and composer, proved that his high distinction as “pianist to the King of Sardinia” was not an empty honour, and ... in the interval of the performance Signor Operti presented the Mayor [Arthur Ryland] with an Italian flag in graceful acknowledgement of his sympathy with the cause of Italian independence.7

The warmth of the reception Operti received—mid-Victorian Birmingham, like other industrial British cities, was well-known for its progressive politics and support of liberal causes—spurred him on: “The great success of Signor Operti’s recent concert ... has induced him ... to engage the theatre for four nights for the benefit of the Ladies’ Garibaldi Benevolent Association, when Verdi’s grand opera of *Macbeth* will be represented for the first time in England with the requisite dramatic effect.”8

Whether or not Operti sought the approval of Verdi or of the copyright holder Ricordi for the production is unknown. The first review (cited below) makes it clear that the orchestral parts were derived from a vocal score (with what accuracy is unclear, for the work was completed rapidly as the time-lapse between concert and opera was less than four weeks). Operti himself played Macbeth, and it appears he also took on both production and direction.

Two reviews contain very different perceptions of the first performance. The local correspondent of the *Era* was complimentary:

> Lady Macbeth was represented with great dramatic power by Signora Zamboni, who gave the music in an effective and finished style. The drinking song in the banquet, a beautiful florid melody, was delightfully given, and the sleep-walking scene was an exquisite piece of acting. Signor Operti, whose fame rests on his merits as a pianist and composer, gathered fresh laurels from his representation dramatically as well as vocally, of Macbeth ... Signor Mercuriali made the most of Banquo, and Macduff had also an able representative in Signor Loghi. The choruses, which form a great feature, were given with precision and effect, particularly that at the end of the first act. The splendid dresses provided by Mr May were of the most elegant description, and the arduous task of leading the enlarged orchestra was ably executed by Mr Humphrys.9

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7 *Era*, 5 August 1860. Arthur Ryland (1807–1877) was a lawyer, brass manufacturer, and reformer who served as Birmingham’s Lord Mayor in 1860.
8 *Era*, 12 August 1860.
9 *Era*, 2 September 1860.
A far more substantial review appeared in the *Birmingham Daily Post*; it was far less positive in tone.\(^{10}\) The reviewer was impressed by neither the piece ("the opera can lay little claim to relationship with Shakespeare’s magnificent work") nor its performance ("of which we must speak with considerable reserve") and was ambivalent about the enthusiasm of the local populace ("the attendance, although not equal to our anticipations, was in the dress circle and boxes above average of New Street experience; but the pit and gallery were even more conspicuous in the opposite degree, and the general aspect of the audience was consequently far from inspiriting"). According to a critique of the opera, except for the first half of Act II (no. 9 [Scena ed Aria {Lady Macbeth}], no. 10 [Coro di Sicari], and no. 10½ [Gran Scena {Banquo}] in Ricordi’s 1847 vocal score) the whole work was performed and in its original keys, except for the Act II *brindisi* (transposed down a minor third), (Act II, no. 17) Macbeth’s “Vada in fiamme” (transposed up a minor third), and (Act III, no. 19) Macduff’s “Ah la paterno mano” (transposed down a minor third).\(^{11}\) (Although the review below always refers to numbers by their Italian incipits, the performance was advertised in the *Birmingham Daily Post* as taking place in English.) The reviewer had mixed feelings about the opera:

The musical merits of the piece are by no means on a par with those of the libretto. The overture is little more than a symphonic introduction, as in the case of *La Traviata*, and its principal *motivo* is of yet more slender construction. The opening chorus of the witches, prefaced by an orchestral storm, is characteristic and promising, and the whole of the first scene well conceived, however indifferently executed last evening. The weird character of the witches’ music is well sustained throughout, though exhibiting little imagination or originality, and necessarily restricted very much by the composer’s limited perceptions of harmony, and his privations of those resources of instrumentation which contribute so materially to the effect of Weber’s, Mozart’s and Mendelssohn’s efforts in supernatural music. Lady Macbeth makes her first appearance, as in the drama, with the opened letter of her husband in her hand, and finds a vent for her ambitious longings in the florid *aria d’intrata* [sic], “Vieni t’affretta,” followed by the exulting air in E major, “Or tutti sorgete,” remarkable for its ill-judged accompaniment to the concluding passages, which are completely drowned by the unison of the brass instruments. The rustic music, *tempo di marcia*, which introduces the procession of King Duncan, on his arrival at Macbeth castle, is melodic and effective, and the murder scene which follows closely upon it is dramatically conceived and executed—the duet “Nel sonno udii” in A flat major, touching Macbeth’s violation of sleep, “innocent sleep” being particularly worthy of commendation. The succeeding duet in the same key, “Sei vano o Macbeth” … is likewise a tuneful and artistic piece, introducing some novel and legitimate instrumental effects, and the staccato exit of the guilty couple at the sound of the knocking is scarcely less deserving of praise, and dramatically considered even more effective. The finale of the first act … is one of the finest things in the opera, and was deservedly applauded.

\(^{10}\) *Birmingham Daily Post*, 28 August 1860.

\(^{11}\) There may have been further transpositions as well, but it is clear that some numbers were performed in their original keys; see the *Birmingham Daily Post*, review of the performance, 28 August 1860. It is, unfortunately, impossible to deduce from the review how adeptly these transpositions were managed.
In the second act, the first musical feature is a brindisi in the banqueting scene, "Si colmi il calice," in G flat major, by Lady Macbeth and chorus, in which a very attractive melody is very skilfully set. The finale to the same act is likewise highly and effectively wrought. The third act opens with the Witches' incantation, introducing a singular barcarole movement strongly suggestive of a well-known air in [Donizetti's] *Marino Faliero*. Macbeth's application for further prophetic hints affords an opportunity for some spectacular effects in the introduction of the various apparitions of the cauldron and the eight ghostly kings. A lugubrious air for Macbeth, "Oh mio terror," in F major which ensues, does not call for special remark; but a subsequent effort in C, "Vada in flamque" [sic], which concludes the act, is worthy of notice for its spirited and martial character.

Act 4 opens with the chorus of Scotch exiles, "Patria oppressa," full of character and melody, and second only to the remarkable finish to the second act in dramatic and musical interest. A plaintive air for Macduff, in B flat minor, "Ah la paterno mano" was deservedly encored; and a martial strain for Macduff and chorus "La patria tradita" experienced also a very favourable reception. The sleep-walking scene is dramatically but not musically interesting; and after this there is little to remark but the finale, which consists of an indifferently planned skirmish between Macbeth's followers and the English soldiers, to an appropriately indifferent symphony, on both of which the fall of the curtain greets us a happy release.\(^{12}\)

Clearly the Birmingham production had weaknesses, although it does not appear to have distorted the original work to a greater extent than other performances of other operas in the British provinces (and sometimes also the capital) in this period.\(^{13}\) Significantly, though, it was a spontaneous production that was unlikely to have a major impact on British operatic culture, for it did not feature well-known singers and was not intended to be repeated. It was, however, the first English production and certainly good enough, by the standards of the time, to be an event worthy of note.

**Dublin 1859**

Unlike Operti's Birmingham production, the other British performances—in Dublin, Manchester, and Liverpool—were all mounted by the same company. The impresario Willert Beale claimed credit for their appearance.\(^{14}\) Beale's reason for choosing *Macbeth* was simply that he thought it worthy as a piece of art: "the opera contains some of Verdi's best music. It is melodious and dramatic throughout."\(^{15}\)

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\(^{12}\) *Birmingham Daily Post*, 28 August 1860.


\(^{14}\) See Beale, 1:288. Beale claimed that the opera was given in Dublin in March and autumn 1859, but the autumn performance took place in 1860.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
Critical assessments of the Dublin premiere on 30 March 1859 and its two subsequent performances on 6 and 13 April were at best mixed. Beale himself was very pleased, at least with the principal singers Francesco Graziani and Pauline Viardot-Garcia:

[I]t is impossible to imagine or to describe the intensity and power of [Viardot’s] Lady Macbeth as a whole. The impression it left upon the mind was that of a weird imposing picture, the accessories of which were all in harmony with a highly dramatic and original conception carried out by the intuitive force of genius. Graziani’s Macbeth was excellent—his splendid voice making great effect. He showed discretion in not over-acting the part, and in listening to Madame Viardot’s advice at rehearsal, which advice contributed much to the success he won.¹⁶

Luigi Arditi, who conducted this performance, concurred with Beale’s judgment with regard to Viardot, but was more circumspect about the production in general, noting that “the whole performance was so far from being perfect that all the singers and members of the orchestra had to remain hard at work in the theatre from early morn until the last available moment.”¹⁷ Dramatic impact was undermined by an incident in the fourth act that temporarily halted the performance, as Beale noted:

The sleep-walking scene ... is introduced by a singularly characteristic symphony, during which the violoncellos and double basses give forth much beautiful although lugubrious music. The house is darkened. The scene on the stage represents the door of Lady Macbeth’s sleeping apartment. A nurse and doctor are seated at the door ... anxiously waiting the rentée of Lady Macbeth, when a voice in the gallery calls out to the well-known leader of the band, “Ah! hurry now, Mr Levey! tell us, is it a boy or a girl?”¹⁸

The Dublin Daily Express was positive about, if perhaps carried away by, Dublin’s achievement in mounting the first British performance:

[Viardot and Graziani] have now established on the stage a new opera. Its success cannot be doubted. It is plainly destined to popularity. It has but one defect, in which it resembles its prototype, that of too great length. From the first two acts it would be impossible to cut without injury; but parts of the third and fourth acts may be curtailed with great advantage in its reproduction. Too much

¹⁶Ibid. At least some of Verdi’s music was transposed in Dublin (as had been done in Birmingham); see the letter from Viardot to the conductor Arditi about the transpositions she routinely made (Arditi, 58–61, cited in Rosen and Porter, 364–365). Viardot’s concern to approaching and leaving transposed passages sensitively is noted by Arditi.

¹⁷Arditi, 57. Arditi’s description of Viardot’s Lady Macbeth as being of “picturesque weirdness” is curiously similar to that of Beale.

¹⁸Beale, 1:290–291 (also cited in Rosen and Porter, 365); the same story, with slight variations in detail, is related in Arditi, 63. Levey was the well-known leader of the Theatre Royal orchestra.
honour cannot be given to all concerned in the arduous task of surmounting the
difficulties of a first reproduction.\(^{19}\)

A review in another Dublin paper, *Saunders's Newsletter*, suggested reasons why *Macbeth* had not already been performed in London: “The choruses and concerted airs constitute the best and most striking portion of Verdi’s *Macbeth* ... [but] The great want in the opera is of solos or duets, which would have some record upon the memory, and be hummed over after the falling of the curtain.”\(^{20}\) Reflecting on the third Dublin performance, *The Musical World* was still less flattering and included a pointed comparison with Flotow’s *Martha*, given on the following evening:

The fact is, that for want of pervading melody, elegantly contrived concerted
pieces, and those delicious fragments of tune that haunt the listener for days, *Macbeth* cannot become popular. That it was popular there can be no gainsaying. But this was, in a great manner, owing to the excellent stage arrangements, and mainly to Madame Viardot’s inimitable impersonation of Lady Macbeth ... That *Macbeth* had a fair trial in Dublin with every stage and artistic requirement is a fact, and that the general impression is, that notwithstanding its many merits, it is heavy and long drawn out, is equally certain, and so we shall leave it for a London judgement [sic]. It was curious to observe with what cheerfulness Flotow’s pretty opera, *Marta* [sic], was received after the ponderous work of Verdi. Here all is tuneful, agreeable, and vocal, and, if not music of a high order, certainly wrought with that skill or lucky in that secret charm that takes the general public—though they cannot tell why or wherefore.\(^{21}\)

The *Era*, by contrast, was unhappy with the Dublin performance, but more positive about the music:

The libretto is, with a very slight variation, similar to the great original as far only
as the plot. The language we shall not dwell upon. With regard to the music, it
has the usual characteristics of Verdi. His instrumentation, as far as we could judge, from the orchestra being incomplete and defective, bears the impress of his style and manner as displayed in the *Lombardi*, *Nabuco* [sic], and others of his earlier works. Viardot, as Lady Macbeth, revelled in her roulades, and Verdi could never have recognised his score had he heard the “Vieni[,] t’affretta” or the
“Or, tutti sorgete.” The second grand aria, “Trionfai [!] securi,” she omitted. The
brindisi, “Si colmi il calice” was loudly applauded ... We do not believe for a
moment that Lady Macbeth will add to her well-earned reputation, gained in days
gone by, either as a singer or actress. It was the form of Lady Macbeth, but not
the spirit, being deficient in profundness and lofty feeling, as exhibited by Helen
Faucit, Mrs [Ellen] Kean etc. in this renowned character ... Signor Cossi, the
tenor, who played Macduff, by his sweet and artistic rendering of a simple aria,

\(^{19}\)*Dublin Daily Express*, 31 March 1859, quoted in *The Musical World*, 16 April 1859, 247.


“Ah, la paterna Mano” gained the only encore of the evening. The interpretation of the opera, with the above exception, was very unsatisfactory. The chorus, both in acting and singing, was insupportably bad, to the sacrifice of the concerted music, whilst the stage management was equally objectionable. Let our readers imagine the scene “A wild heath” with two wings in front of a drawing-room [backdrop], with an imitation of damask curtains, the ensemble completed by the witches being clothed in dresses and petticoats of a modern date, grouped in a manner on the stage that gave the semblance of a most ridiculous burlesque. Surely the management could have accorded a trifle to mount a new opera respectably, and not have allowed the production of a work to be so mutilated by such discordant materials and anomalous eccentricities. The ballet music is in Verdi’s usual style—gay and sparkling, and will, no doubt, become popular. On this occasion the music was executed in the third act minus the dancers—a most important feature in the scene—while Macbeth is recovering from a swoon. There is, however, some nice writing in Macbeth, some elegant instrumentation, and some original ideas. Its principal defects are in the want of individualization, in the lack of spontaneous imagery, and in the deficiency of fancy and imagination.  

Manchester and Liverpool 1860

Beale did not include Macbeth in his provincial tour of autumn 1859, since the absence of Viardot from his company rendered it an almost impracticable proposition. But, with her once again available in 1860, the opera was replayed in Dublin (and then introduced to Manchester and Liverpool). Neither the qualified reception accorded to Operti’s performances in Birmingham (assuming Beale knew of this) nor the adverse press reaction to his own production in the previous year deterred Beale from giving Macbeth again. A second company, managed by James Mapleson, and fronted by Therese Tietiens and Antonio Giuglini, was also touring the provinces in autumn 1860; Beale may have believed that the presence of a novelty would give his troupe an advantage over Mapleson’s. Consequently, Beale gave a single performance of Macbeth at Dublin on 11 September, but to “a scanty audience” when, a local reviewer believed, “one would have naturally supposed that Madame [Viardot-]Garcia’s Lady Macbeth would have attracted a large assemblage.”

The company crossed the Irish Sea shortly thereafter and Beale’s first performance of Macbeth in England was given at Manchester’s Theatre Royal on 2 October 1860, a little less than six weeks after Operti’s Birmingham production. Bad luck, however, led to a flawed rendition and attracted adverse criticism of both work and performance, although (in his final paragraph) the reviewer tried to sweeten a bitter pill:

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22 Era, 3 April 1859. Verdi added his ballet music for the 1865 Paris revision; here clearly the reference to ballet music must be to Act III, no. 16, Coro e ballabile, especially the brief orchestral passage at the beginning.

23 Mapleson’s rival touring company had the potential to make an adverse financial impact on Beale. The latter’s company, led by Giulia Grisi and Giovanni Mario, also included another unusual offering, Gluck’s Orfeo (then rarely performed), in its repertory.

24 Era, 16 September 1860.
A second series of Italian operas was commenced last night—we regret to say somewhat inauspiciously—with a performance of Verdi's *Macbeth* ... A true and great genius can alone interpret the purpose of so great a dramatist [as Shakespeare]; and it is our opinion, whatever points of beauty on further hearing the music of Verdi's *Macbeth* may unfold, that looking at it as a whole, the composition is inadequate to embody that full meaning and power of the poet. ...

Indulgence was claimed for the characters of Macbeth and Banco, Signor Dragone being unable to appear, and this gentleman's substitute having undertaken the part of very short notice. With such unfortunate changes; with the voice of the prompter—especially in the choruses—at times louder than those of the performers; with many important portions of the opera wholly omitted; with a painful indecision and uncertainty throughout in both choral and concerted pieces—it is needless to say that a less satisfactory performance has rarely been our fate to chronicle—and the audience did not fail to give audible and frequent tokens of their opinion upon the point. ...

Signor Ciampi ... most kindly volunteered to sing the music of Macbeth. Ciampi is a buffo singer of first class merit, yet on this occasion he showed how the true artist is not confined to one particular class of art. His conception of the character might have been studied with advantage by many of our English "Macbeths" ... The same must be said of Signor Coselli, who undertook the part of Banquo, and who had accidentally joined the company. Without this courtesy, the audience must have been disappointed and the theatre closed ... If the history of the performance of last night could be here thoroughly explained, it would be considered amongst some of those extraordinary efforts which we read of in dramatic annals—it was a marvelous piece of work. The band is full, and of excellent quality, and it is conducted by Signor [Auguste Charles Léonard François] Vianesi in a manner which would do honour to any musician.25

The same illness prevented Dragone from appearing in Liverpool and Ciampi again played Macbeth, while Banquo was played by Fallar.26 The critic of the *Liverpool Daily Post* wrote:

As a musical illustration of Shakespeare’s tragedy it is feeble, and its want of power can never escape notice, the great conceptions of Shakespeare being stamped indelibly on the mind of every English listener. But as a composition *Macbeth* has much merit, and this modified commendation applies to almost every part of the opera ... the whole opera would bear hearing again. A good portion of it was cut last night. All the best passages were well received, and we

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25 *Manchester Guardian*, 3 October 1860. The passage referring to Ciampi and Coselli is quoted in Beale, 289–290, who also explains the sudden presence of Coselli in the company.

26 Dragone was advertised as playing Macbeth in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, 5 October, but it was Ciampi who was billed as Macbeth in the same newspaper, 8 October.
regret that no opportunity will be afforded us, for some time at least, of renewing our acquaintance with so curious and interesting a work.27

The same newspaper noted later that Macbeth and Gluck’s Orfeo had “excited much curiosity, drawing excellent houses” and praised “the Lady Macbeth of Garcia, the singing and acting of which were equally perfect.”28

London 1859

Although Beale was not deterred by the adverse press reaction to his first Dublin performances, it seems possible that they contributed to the non-appearance of Macbeth in London in 1859. Beale always confined himself to concerts in the capital,29 but the impresario E. T. Smith announced in March that he was hoping to give both Macbeth and I vespri siciliani at Drury Lane that season.30 Although the London opera prospectuses of this period were notorious for promising more than they delivered, it seems that the proposal was taken seriously, for the libretto, with parallel translation, was published in the series “Davidson’s Musical Opera Books.”31 Conversely, however, it appears that no application was made to the official licensing authority, the Office of the Lord Chamberlain, for approval of the libretto, so it seems unlikely that rehearsals took place.32 (In fairness to Smith, he had declared that of the nine new operas listed in his prospectus, he would produce five, and it was I vespri siciliani that represented Verdi rather than Macbeth.)

The adverse press reaction to Beale’s Dublin performances was not the only issue. Viardot did not sing in London in 1859 so the only person with whom the role had become associated in the British mind was unavailable. It surely would have been ill-advised to introduce to London an opera with neither glowing nor famous credentials—and one by a composer over whom critics routinely disagreed—without a singer of great stature and reputation as a drawing card.33 Additionally, the opera’s leading two roles are extremely demanding and somewhat unconventional; it thus would have required a courageous prima donna and primo uomo (in this instance, a baritone) to take on the roles, while the absence of a prominent tenor part may also have been perceived to be to the opera’s disadvantage.34 I vespri siciliani (Smith’s

28 Liverpool Daily Post, 14 October 1860.
29 This may have been because his father’s sole attempt at promoting opera in London in 1847 had been a financial disaster.
30 The Musical World, 19 March 1859, 192.
31 The libretto was issued as no. 47 in the series; it is undated and bears the overly optimistic statement “as represented at the London Italian Opera Houses.” It is clear from the dates given on books in the same series published shortly before and after that the libretto of Macbeth was printed in anticipation of Smith’s 1859 production.
32 No authorized version is contained in the Lord Chamberlain’s Collection of Plays in the British Library. This may imply that Opereti’s Birmingham performances were technically illegal, as indeed were Beale’s in Manchester and Liverpool. The Lord Chamberlain’s authority did not extend to Ireland.
33 Viardot had already appeared (unknowingly) for the last time on London’s operatic stage in 1858; she retired entirely from opera in 1863, although she appeared in concerts in London until 1870.
34 In 1870 Gye and Mapleson announced that Therese Tietiens would play Lady Macbeth as part of their second “coalition” season at Covent Garden, but although Tietiens had sung for Smith in 1859, she was not proposed for the role.
choice for a Verdi opera) had the advantages of conventional casting and of complete newness vis à vis Macbeth, and a musical style closer to that of Rigoletto, La traviata, and Il trovatore. A more abstract stumbling block was the pedigree of Macbeth’s dramatic source: Shakespeare’s iconic status was absolute in Victorian Britain. Several of the reviews quoted above compare Verdi’s setting with Shakespeare’s play, and none views the opera as being worthy of its source. This was bound to be a difficult issue. The critics, at least, clearly thought that the British had a superior grasp of how Shakespeare could and should be performed and adapted—and Verdi’s version did not fit their preconceptions. Nor, in one instance cited above, did Viardot’s characterization of Lady Macbeth appeal, and, significantly, it was compared unfavorably to that of leading contemporary actresses. Quite how the bulk of the operatic audience would have reacted is impossible to gauge, but Smith obviously decided not to take the risk. 35

Although Smith and other impresarios seem to have had their reasons for not performing Macbeth in London, there was some consternation among critics that provincial cities had stolen a march on the British capital. Italian opera was extremely popular in Dublin in the 1850s and 1860s, but, as one commentator expressed, “it is surprising that the honour should have been left to a Dublin manager of first introducing an acknowledged favourite to these countries. Twelve years have elapsed since its first production at the Pergola, in Florence, and yet neither London nor Paris has yet heard it!” 36 Not only Dubliners were surprised: “Few people would suspect Birmingham of undue tendencies towards modern Italian opera, or indeed opera of any kind; nevertheless, it will be the duty of history to record that an unknown opera by the most popular of modern Italian composers first saw the light of English publicity at the New Street Theatre in this town.” 37 The productions were symptomatic of the increased provincial touring of Italian opera companies; encouraged by the popularity of the star singers and growth in railway provision, London-based companies travelled regularly into the provinces outside the traditional metropolitan season. In the offices of The Musical World this trend was applauded—as long as the capital was not upstaged: “Whatever the merits of [Macbeth] ... it should not have been left to provincial managers or enterprising speculators to introduce it to the English public out of London.” 38 This resentment was misplaced: the provincial performances of Macbeth did not initiate a trend and London retained its position as Britain’s first operatic city.

The opera was rapidly discarded; London audiences wanted novelty and were soon caught up in the craze for Gounod’s Faust, which swept across Europe. While to date no evidence has come to light to suggest that the English provincial performances of Macbeth in 1860 directly influenced the attitudes of the London-based companies, this seems a distinct possibility: had the opera been unequivocally acclaimed outside London, either Mapleson or Gye would surely have been tempted to mount a production. 39 Verdi’s extensive revisions to

35 Operatic adaptations of Shakespeare were not popular at this point: only Rossini’s Otellos played regularly at the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden in the 1850s and it too was largely discarded in the 1860s. Conversely, though, the Italian translations of Shakespeare (including Macbeth) enacted by Adelaide Ristori and her company were well received.

36 Dublin Daily Express, 31 March 1859, quoted in The Musical World, 16 April 1859, 247. The “Dublin manager” is John Harris, the lessee and manager of the Theatre Royal.

37 Birmingham Daily Post, 28 August 1860.


39 Charles Santley referred to a projected production by E. T. Smith at Crystal Palace in 1861 with Santley playing Macbeth and Grisi Lady Macbeth. Although the season was mentioned in the musical press (including the projected construction of a theater within the Crystal Palace), the proposed repertory does not appear to have been advertised. Smith soon fell into difficulties and his enterprise collapsed. See Charles Santley, Student and Singer:
Macbeth for the 1865 Paris revival did not help the opera’s case in the British capital, where his operas dating from the 1850s were preferred. Although proposed as a new production by Gye and Mapleson in the second of their two famous “coalition” seasons at Covent Garden in 1870, Macbeth was not performed that year and by that time in any event it was too late: the star of Italian opera was beginning to wane; within ten years its supremacy would be swept away on the Wagnerian tide and Macbeth would be left unrevived in Britain for nearly eighty years. As Lady Macbeth might have put it, “Stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once.”

The Reminiscences of Charles Santley, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1893), 190-191; The Musical World, 23 February 1861, 119, and 16 March 1861, 169. This is the production referred to by Loewenberg, Annals of Opera.