

The libretto in brief

Act I

A wood.

Three witches are seen against a background of thunder and lightning, intoning a chorus that culminates in an infernal dance. Enter Macbeth and Banquo, generals of the Scottish army, to whom the weird sisters foretell a propitious future: Macbeth will soon be named thane of Cawdor by Duncan, king of Scotland, and will later ascend to the throne. Banquo, though without ever reigning, will have royal descendants. The two men's amazement reaches its pitch when the king's messengers inform Macbeth that Duncan has created him Thane of Cawdor. When the two generals have left the scene with their retinue, the witches chant the "stretta dell'introduzione".

A hall in Macbeth's castle.

Lady Macbeth enters, reading a letter from her husband in which he tells her of the witches' prophecies. The Andantino of her Cavatina expresses her deep yearning for power. Having heard from a servant that her husband is on his way to the castle with king Duncan who is to be their guest for the night, Lady Macbeth gives vent to her criminal designs. She has in fact taken it into her mind to murder Duncan so that her husband will become king of Scotland. Macbeth enters with the king's retinue, looking hesitant. Only his wife's determination gives him the strength to commit the crime. The scene culminates in a duet by the evil pair during which Macbeth, seized with remorse, dares not take the dagger back to the scene of the crime. Lady Macbeth tears the bloodstained weapon from her husband's hands and has no hesitation in returning it herself to the room in which the king was slain, so that the blame will fall upon the guards. When the murder of Duncan is discovered, the noble Macduff in horror informs the courtiers. The act closes amidst general dismay.

Act II

A room in the castle.

Enter Macbeth, now king, and Lady Macbeth. The second prophecy has also now come true, for Malcolm, son of Duncan, has fled to England, thus arousing suspicions that it was he who killed his father. The witches, however, predicted that the throne would go to the son of Banquo: both must therefore be eliminated. The queen, left alone, invokes Satan to hide this "new crime".

A park.

Hired assassins are lying in wait to ambush Banquo. The general enters with his son Fleance, "full of sad foreboding and suspicion". Banquo is slain, but Fleance manages to escape.

A magnificent hall.

During a banquet, Macbeth is informed of Banquo's death and of his son's escape. In the meantime the queen entertains their guests, who crowd into the rooms of the castle, singing a toast. But the festivities are soon interrupted by the menacing apparition of the ghost of Banquo, who, invisible to all, is seen only by Macbeth. In vain Lady Macbeth attempts to restore calm among their guests. The Finale closes with a dismayed *concertato*, during which Macbeth decides once again to consult the witches about his future.

Act III

A dark cave.

The weird sisters chant their magic spell. Macbeth enters and hears their prophecy. The answers they give him partly reassure Macbeth, for whilst warning him to beware of Macduff, the witches tell him that no man born of woman can defeat him and that his power shall increase until Birnam Wood moves against him. Macbeth prepares to murder Macduff and to massacre his family.

Act IV

A deserted spot on the border between Scotland and England.

The scene opens with a chorus of refugees who have fled from persecution by Macbeth in Scotland. Malcolm has put his trust in England's help, but has gathered an army to invade Scotland. Macduff too, after the murder of his family, has joined the invaders. Malcolm exhorts them all to hide their presence from the enemy by advancing under the cover of branches cut from the nearby Birnam Wood.

A room in Macbeth's castle.

"Sleepwalking scene." A prey to nightmares and madness, Lady Macbeth relives in a dream the murder of king Duncan, thus confessing the crimes she has perpetrated.

A room in the castle.

Informed of his wife's death, Macbeth prepares to face the enemy army. When it is announced that "Birnam Wood is moving", the king realises that the witches' prophecy is coming true.

A plain surrounded by highlands and woods.

The battlefield. Malcolm's army throw down the branches cut from Birnam Wood and attack Macbeth's men, forcing them to retreat. The king is confronted by Macduff who, before drawing his sword, reveals that he was not born of woman but was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped". Macduff kills Macbeth and the victorious army acclaims Malcolm king of Scotland.

(Traduzione di Rodney Stringer)