

Revisiting Lady Macbeth – prologue and epilogue: An audio essay on playing, listening, reading and talking our way to a reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s character

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Prologue

Our audio essay *Revisiting Lady Macbeth* presents an interpretative discussion about the character Lady Macbeth, based on guitarist Georg Gulyás’s interpretation of Hans Werner Henze’s (1926–2012) piece *Mad Lady Macbeth* in *Royal Winter Music*. (Henze, 1979). Henze’s piece, in turn, was inspired by William Shakespeare’s (1564–1616) play *Macbeth* (1623).

The interpretative discussion features Georg Gulyás, guitarist and senior professor of guitar at *Ingesund School of Music*, Karlstad University, Sweden; Katarina Ellborg, senior lecturer in business administration at Linnaeus University, Sweden, as well as an actor and playwright; and Anna Schulze, senior lecturer in creative writing at Linnaeus University, Sweden and a novelist, with a background as a professional violinist. Based on Henze’s composition and Shakespeare’s play, we developed our own interpretation of Lady Macbeth – her motivations and motives. This essay reviews the conversations we had during a dozen meetings in 2024, together with samples of Gulyás’s musical interpretation and recited quotes¹. To describe our joint interpretation according to the different fields in which we work, we used Engeström’s (2001) activity model, which is described at the end of this text. To provide context for the essay, we next briefly describe Shakespeare’s play and Henze’s composition.

Macbeth

Macbeth is based on a story from Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1578). The play is considered the bloodiest of Shakespeare’s tragedies. The first known performance took place in 1611 in London, and it was first printed in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare’s death. The play is about Macbeth, a Scottish lord who, at the beginning of the play, is loyally serving his king, Duncan. In the first act, he meets three witches who prophesy that Lord Macbeth will himself gain the throne. He tells his wife, Lady Macbeth, about what happened, seeing it mostly as a strange experience and something that is unlikely to ever occur. Lady Macbeth, however, sees how the two of them together can control their destiny. Lord Macbeth is initially reluctant but is manipulated by Lady Macbeth into carrying out her plan. When King

¹ The quotes are examples of Lady Macbeth’s lines, performed for the audio essay by Katarina Ellborg.

Duncan visits them, Lady Macbeth gets his guards drunk so that their plan can be executed, and Duncan is murdered. Lord Macbeth is immediately struck by terrible guilt after the murder, something Lady Macbeth sees as a sign of weakness. The only thing she acknowledges is that they have rationally risen to power. Soon, however, Lady Macbeth begins to sleepwalk and act strangely. Among other things, she is convinced that her hand is stained with blood, which she desperately tries to wash away. In this scene, she says the famous words “*Out, damned spot! Out, I say!*”² while seeming to wash her hands. In the final act, realizing that all is lost and tormented by guilt, she takes her own life. Shortly thereafter, an army attacks Lord Macbeth and takes his castle. In the final scene, Macbeth’s head is carried onto the stage by one of Duncan’s loyal servants. In the last line, Duncan’s son vows to avenge all who served Macbeth.

Hence, in Shakespeare’s drama, Lady Macbeth plays a crucial role. She is one of the Shakespearean characters whom Hans Werner Henze refers to in *Mad Lady Macbeth*, the last movement of his composition *Royal Winter Music* (1979).

Royal Winter Music and Mad Lady Macbeth

Hans Werner Henze composed these two sonatas for solo guitar between 1976 and 1979. The suite’s title, *Royal Winter Music*, derives from Gloucester’s monologue in Shakespeare’s play *Richard III*. It begins with the famous line “*Now is the winter of our discontent*”, and later in the monologue, Gloucester mentions a lute. Henze wanted to represent Shakespeare’s characters through the sound of a lute transferred to a modern guitar. The work as a whole takes an hour to perform and has been described as an opera for solo guitar. Harding (1997, p.11) recalls the how the American guitarist David Tanenbaum describes it as “*The closest we will ever come to having a full blown opera on a solo guitar*”.

In Henze’s (1998) autobiography, he describes the English guitarist Julian Bream’s (1933–2020) high expectations of the work: “*Bream said, ‘What the Hammerklavier Sonata is to pianists and the keyboard repertory, the Royal Winter Music must be to the guitar.’ He wanted to explore the innermost essence of the instrument with me and see it become the most colorful and fascinating of our time.*” (Henze, 1998, p. 344).

The composition is inspired by a range of characters from Shakespeare’s plays. In Sonata I, among others, Romeo and Juliet, the air spirit Ariel from *The Tempest*, and the fairy king Oberon from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are portrayed. Sonata II consists of three movements: *Sir Andrew Aguecheek* (from *Twelfth Night*), *Bottom’s Dream* (Bottom is another of the characters in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) and *Mad Lady Macbeth*. The refined detail and insightful exploration of the guitar’s possibilities to give voice to these diverse personalities from the world of theatre make the piece unique of its kind.

In his research, Gulyás explored how a text can increase the understanding of how to provide new impulses for the creation of a performance interpretation of the composition. In this case, Henze spoke clearly about what inspired him: it was Shakespeare’s character Lady Macbeth whom he portrayed, and he included the indicative adjective ‘mad’ before her title and name.

² Act 5, scene 1.

Audio essay: Revisiting Lady Macbeth

Listen to the audio essay by clicking on the doi-reference below:

Schulze, A., Ellborg, K., & Gulyás, G. (2024). Revisiting Lady Macbeth: An audio essay on playing, listening, reading and talking our way to a reinterpretation of Shakespeare's character. *Art, Culture & Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 2. <https://doi.org/10.15626/ace.240109>

Epilogue

Work Process

As mentioned, the shape of our audio essay emerged through recurrent meetings in which we discussed concepts and interpretations based on our respective perspectives. For these meetings, Gulyás prepared PowerPoint slides and audio presentations in which he shared examples from the score, recordings of different parts of Henze's composition, quotes from the play and inspiring images from different film adaptations of the play. Gulyás shared his thoughts on our previous conversations and how he further developed his interpretation based on them. This prompted further conversations and expanded our view of both Shakespeare's character and how Henze portrayed her in his composition. In this way, our cycle of thoughts and interpretations continued over several months. We recorded our meetings and shared a folder in which we could read and comment on each other's texts and listen to Gulyás's recordings. Thus, we worked very transparently and iteratively. Gulyás focused on the musical interpretation, Ellborg concentrated on the entrepreneurial theme and Schulze, as an author of novels about complicated relationships, focused on Lady Macbeth's psychological constitution and relationships with others.

As an analytical framework for our collaboration, we used Engeström's (2001) activity theory for expansive learning (see Figure 1).

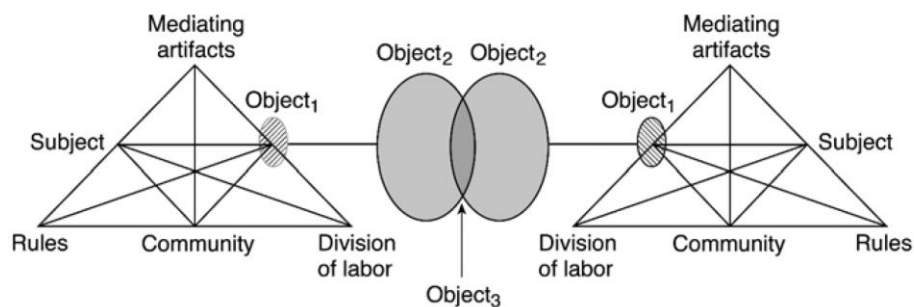


Figure 1. Engeström's (2001) activity theory for expansive learning. (Reproduced from Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

In Engeström's original model, an activity system (represented by a triangle) contains a *subject*, which is the individual engaged in the activity, and an *object*, which is the goal or purpose of the activity (i.e. what the subject aims to achieve). In addition, the subject has physical or symbolic

means used to perform the activity (i.e. the *mediating artefacts*). Norms, laws and guidelines (i.e. the *rules*) govern how the activity is carried out. The *community* is the social group or context in which the activity takes place, and the *division of labour* describes the distribution of tasks and responsibilities within the community. In the extended model, several activity systems interact and together aim for further joint objects. Engeström (2001) describes horizontal learning in dialogues between different traditions, where additional meaning is created in the ‘third space’ beyond the respective activity systems. Hence, the third objective becomes multi-voicedness.

In our work, the three of us represent our own activity systems: Gulyás’s interpretation of *Mad Lady Macbeth* is one object; how theories in entrepreneurship can influence and be influenced by artworks is another; and the endeavour to add new insight in the field of entrepreneurship by studying the Shakespearean character Lady Macbeth as an entrepreneur is a third. All have the aim of creating a new object in the form of an audio essay. How we have approached this object from our respective disciplines can be heard in the audio essay. Figure 2 (see page 74) is a schematic figure of how we interacted, based on Engeström’s (2001) model.

The base of this interdisciplinary research project on Lady Macbeth is Henze’s composition and the guitar. Gulyás’s interpretation influenced the aspects we highlighted in our conversations, just as our conversations influenced Gulyás’ interpretation. One of the most important themes was the question of Lady Macbeth’s madness and the concept of madness. In the score, there are several indications regarding vibrato (see Figure 3).

The image shows a musical score for 'III Mad Lady Macbeth' by Henze. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff is marked 'Fiercely' and '♩ = ca. 112'. The lyrics 'a i m a i m' are written below the first staff. The second staff is marked 'proud' and 'un poco'. The third staff is marked 'meno mosso' and 'p'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *fff*, *f*, and *mf*. There are also circled numbers 1 through 6 indicating specific measures or techniques. The copyright notice at the bottom reads '© B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz, 1983'.

Figure 3. Music example: Henze, H. W. (1979, p.15). Copyright © 1980 by Schott Music, Mainz, Germany

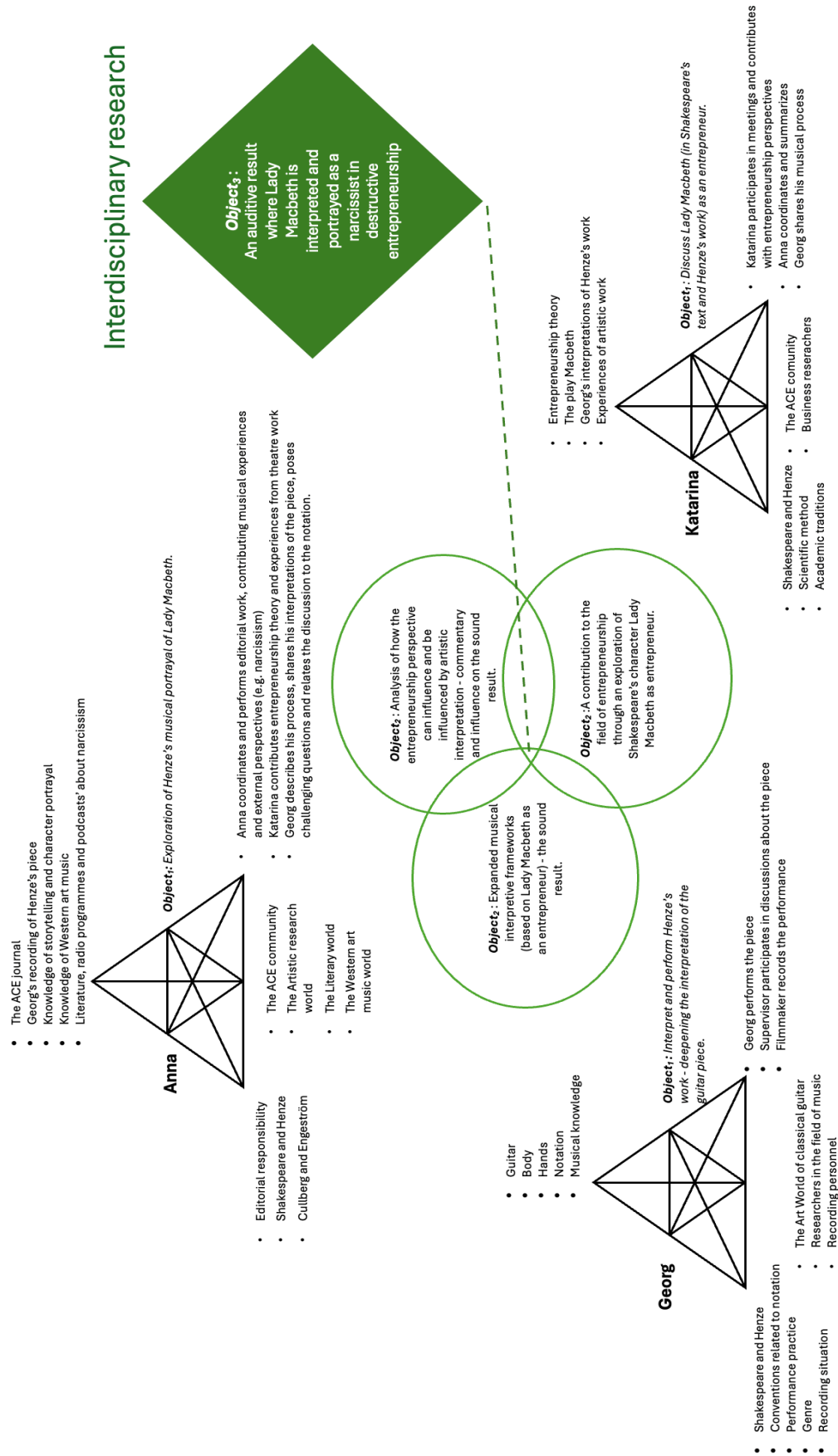


Figure 2. Process overview. Our own model, inspired by Engeström (2001)

At one of our meetings, we listened to about 10 prominent guitarists playing specific bars where vibrato was indicated. The interpretations showed a great variety of expressive possibilities. Most performed the vibrato with great amplitude – something that can be heard as an expression of the transgressive and uncontrolled – an expression of madness. Our conversations in which we increasingly landed on the interpretation that Lady Macbeth is not mad in general, but suffers from a narcissistic personality disorder and represents destructive entrepreneurship, led Gulyás to reduce the amplitude of his vibrato in favour of a more sensitive sound – an expression of the narcissistic personality’s inner vulnerability.

During the first acts of Shakespeare’s play, Lady Macbeth shows no sympathy for the king or his bodyguards. She seems to believe that she is worthy of taking over the kingdom and that she is above the morality that normally governs human behaviour. In her lines, we can sense that she looks down on weakness, indecision and remorse. However, in the first scene of Act 5, when Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking, she says the famous words “*Out, damned spot! Out, I say!*”³ while performing actions that look like she is washing her hands. The very fact that she performs this ritual of conscience in her sleep can be seen as a manifestation of an inner conflict: the conscious self is not aware of one’s conscience, but in sleep, when the unconscious manifests itself in dreams, one’s conscience is present, and the compulsive act of trying to wash away the blood and shame is performed over and over again. An example of how this dualism in Lady Macbeth’s character is portrayed in “*Mad Lady Macbeth*” is that at the beginning of the piece, Henze includes the character description “*Proud*” (see Figure 3), while at the end of the piece he uses the description “*Weeping*” (see Figure 4).

The image displays three staves of musical notation for guitar. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. It contains several measures of music with various chord voicings and melodic fragments. Dynamic markings include 'ff' (fortissimo) and 'p' (piano). The second staff continues the piece, featuring a section marked 'weeping' with 'ppp' (pianissimo) dynamics. The third staff includes a 'rall.' (rallentando) section and ends with 'ppp' and 'art. 12°' markings. The notation includes fingerings, accidentals, and articulation marks.

Figure 4. Music example: Henze, H. W. (1979, p. 21). Copyright © 1980 by Schott Music, Mainz, Germany

During our conversations, we placed much emphasis on the weeping. Before our collaboration began, Gulyás interpreted the weeping both in the play and the composition as Lady Macbeth being a mad person who cries madly. After our discussions, he began to see this weeping as an

³ Act 5, scene 1.

expression of Lady Macbeth’s sensitivity, and the guitar’s “weeping” took on a more fragile quiet sound, followed by a calm, thoughtful and sensitive sound. If one accepts the idea that entrepreneurial and narcissistic traits have common factors, this sensitivity can also be seen as part of Lady Macbeth’s entrepreneurial side. Many guitarists play the main theme quite slowly, while Gulyás focuses on drive and agency.

Our discussion about Lady Macbeth as a person with drive and agency, rather than a madwoman, also coloured Gulyás’s interpretation of the recurring main theme in the piece, which could indicate that Lady Macbeth is nagging or attempting to persuade (see Figure 5). Gulyás argued that he now saw these sections as expressions of her strong will, which, in turn, gave him the energy to maintain intensity and strive for a distinct and vigorous sound, depicting Lady Macbeth as a determined entrepreneur.

17

The image shows a musical score for guitar, consisting of three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with various dynamics: *f*, *p*, *sf*, *p*, and *sf*. There are fingerings indicated by numbers 1-4 and 7. A slur covers the first few notes, with an 'a' above it. The second staff continues the melodic line, with dynamics *p*, *sf*, and *pp*. It includes fingerings 2, 3, 4, and 5. A section marked 'Andante con moto' begins with a double bar line and a 'II' section marker. The third staff shows a more complex texture with chords and a melodic line, with dynamics *p* and *sf*. It includes fingerings 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. A section marked 'XIII - XII' is indicated by a double bar line and a 'II' section marker. The piece ends with a 'pizz.' (pizzicato) instruction and a *sf* dynamic.

Figure 5. Figure 4: Music example: Henze, H. W. (1979, p. 17). Copyright © 1980 by Schott Music, Mainz, Germany

Conclusion

To view Lady Macbeth as an entrepreneur in the modern sense, or as a person with narcissistic traits, is an anachronism. Despite this, our joint works suggests applying these perspectives to Shakespeare’s character in both the original play and in Henze’s interpretation in his composition. Our model for interdisciplinary collaboration has been useful in enhancing the understanding of artistic works through dialogue, developing the interpretation of an artistic work, and finding new angles within a research field.

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