

GIUSEPPE VERDI

AIDA

Opera in quattro atti · Opera in four acts
Oper in vier Akten · Opéra en quatre actes

Libretto / Livret: Antonio Ghislanzoni

Conductor
JAMES LEVINE

Il Re dell'Egitto **DIMITRI KAVRAKOS**
The King of Egypt · Der König von Ägypten · Le Roi d'Égypte

Amneris **DOLORA ZAJICK**
sua figlia · his daughter · seine Tochter · sa fille

Aida **APRILE MILLO**
schiava etiopica · Ethiopian slave
äthiopische Sklavin · esclave éthiopienne

Radamès **PLÁCIDO DOMINGO**
capitano delle guardie · captain of the guards
Hauptmann der Palastwache · capitaine des gardes

Ramfis **PAATA BURCHULADZE**
capo dei sacerdoti · chief of the priests
Oberpriester · grand-prêtre

Amonasro **SHERRILL MILNES**
re d'Etiopia, padre di Aida · King of Ethiopia, Aida's father
König von Äthiopien, Aidas Vater · roi d'Éthiopie, père d'Aida

Un Messaggero **MARK W. BAKER**
a messenger · ein Bote · un messenger

Sacerdotessa **MARGARET JANE WRAY**
High Priestess · Priesterin · Prêtresse

Metropolitan Opera Ballet
Choreographer: **RODNEY GRIFFIN**

Metropolitan Opera Chorus
Chorus Master: **DAVID STIVENDER**

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

Stage Production
SONJA FRISELL

Set Designer
GIANNI QUARANTA

Costume Designer
DADA SALIGERI

Lighting Designer
GIL WECHSLER

Musical Preparation
JOAN DORNEMANN · JOHN KEENAN

Assistant Stage Directors
CATHERINE HAZLEHURST · DAVID KNEUSS

Stage Band Conductor
GILDO DI NUNZIO

Prompter
JOAN DORNEMANN

The Metropolitan Opera 



Individuality and the Italian Tradition: "Aida" as Stylistic Challenge

JAMES A. HEPOKOSKI

Verdi's *Aida* is so familiar to us today as a touchstone of the "grand opera" experience that it is tempting to take it for granted. Yet at the time of its two premières (first in Cairo on 24 December 1871, then in Milan on 8 February 1872) it was a work bristling with stylistic challenge. Its first Italian performances, in particular, ignited a firestorm of debates in the national press about the possible decline of Verdi's powers and the future of Italian music. Viewed within the historical tradition of the *Ottocento*, *Aida* may be considered a watershed work. It is the divider separating two worlds of Italian opera: the traditional world of the "melodic" Italian style with its standard, closed forms, which Verdi himself had done so much to legitimize in the 1840s and 1850s; and the more self-consciously complex, aesthetic and symphonic operatic world of the century's end.

The basic facts of the opera's complicated history are well known. Towards the end of 1869 the Viceroy (or Khedive) of Egypt was eager to commission a major work from Verdi to celebrate the opening of that country's new opera house. After Verdi had turned down an offer to compose an ode, he was successfully enticed into an even larger project after receiving an Egyptian operatic scenario forwarded to him the following May by Camille du Locle – a friend who had helped to complete the *Don Carlos* libretto and was now about to become the co-director of the Opéra Comique in Paris. Du Locle had received the *Aida* scenario from Auguste Mariette, a celebrated Egyptologist in the service of the Khedive. By June Verdi had committed himself to the project, and together he and du Locle drafted an extensive prose-libretto for *Aida*. This would be recast into operatic poetry – versified, although with constant advice and calls for modifications from the composer – by one of Italy's foremost librettists, Antonio Ghislanzoni, from July to November.

Having now begun to compose the opera, Verdi signed the necessary contract with Egypt in August 1870 and promised that the work would be completed in time for a performance only five months later, at the end of January 1871. *Aida* was to be a swiftly composed work, drafted simultaneously with Ghislanzoni's versifying of the libretto. The rapid timetable, however, was stalled by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war and the subsequent siege of Paris; through du Locle, Paris was deeply involved in the upcoming Egyptian production. Although the unorchestrated, short-score version of *Aida* was completed by November 1870 (for Verdi this was "la parte inventiva" – the "creative part"), it became evident shortly thereafter that the première would have to be postponed until the following season. Verdi was therefore able to orchestrate the work at his leisure in 1871 and to call for a few refinements and changes in the libretto, such as the alteration of the beginning of Act III to include *Aida*'s strophic idyll, "O patria mia".

What illuminates all of this is the context in which it occurred. In the 1860s the traditions of Italian opera had become a topic of controversy. The textual, melodic and structural conventions had begun to impress musical progressives (such as the poet and composer Arrigo Boito and the critic Filippo Filippi) as stiff and antiquated, while traditionalists began to insist on them as emblems of Italian nationality. Stylistic choice took on political overtones: to select an operatic style was to adopt a position both on the continued viability of the

Italian tradition and on the claims of musical superiority being made by Germany and France. Moreover, in the 1860s Verdi – whose clear, focussed operatic center had always been Italy – moved decisively in the direction of a more eclectic style in *La forza del destino* (1862), written for St. Petersburg, and in *Don Carlos* (1867), a grand opera written in French for Paris. Now, with *Aida*, his spinning away from the purely Italian style seemed even more pronounced.

During the same period Italy's own theatres were moving towards more international fare. Milan's La Scala had mounted Gounod's *Faust* in 1862, 1863 and 1865; Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* in 1867–68; and Meyerbeer's *L'Africain* in 1866, 1867 and 1870–71. Most ominous of all was the first performance of a Wagnerian opera in Italy – *Lohengrin*, in Bologna on 1 November 1871, only three months before the Milanese *Aida* première. The advent of Wagner's music was widely viewed as a direct challenge to Italian opera, and its impact was heightened by the publication in the Italian journals one week later of a letter from Wagner to Boito that called for operatic reform in Italy, but on pointedly Germanic terms: Wagner was proposing a "new marriage of the genius of peoples...the genius of Italy and the genius of Germany." The battle-lines between the old and the new were now sharply drawn. It was inevitable that *Aida* would be heard in the shadow of the French operas and of *Lohengrin*. Verdi's new opera would be scrutinized as the composer's most recent statement about the relationship of Italian traditionalism and current notions of musical progress.

Verdi seems to have been unprepared for the squabbles that flared up after the Milanese première. On the one hand, progressives were delighted with the formal and melodic novelties of the opera. In *La perseveranza* Filippi could scarcely contain his delight: "In *Aida* the attempts at emancipation, at progress, are far bolder than in any prior Verdian opera. ...To deny that Verdi has felt the influence of Meyerbeer, Gounod, and Richard Wagner would be to deny that the sun shines. And yet this same *maestro* preserves an immense affection for the past, and especially for his own past. ...In *Aida* there is an indisputable fight between the old and the new Verdi." In the *Nuova antologia* Francesco D'Arcais defended the work ardently; but felt obliged to demonstrate by the production of dates that "the score was finished and sent to the Khedive ... considerably before *Lohengrin* made its appearance in Italy, and Verdi could not have judged its effect on the Italian public in advance." While generally pleased with the opera, the progressives did notice that here and there *Aida* was stylistically inconsistent in its stark juxtapositions of the old and the new. Act III was inevitably singled out as beginning successfully – in the new style – but lapsing into the old for the *Aida*-Radamès duet, and particularly for its "old-fashioned" cabaletta, "Sì, fuggiam da queste mura", the opera's most criticized piece in 1872. Ultimately the progressives' strategy was to insist that for all of its modernisms *Aida* was still an "Italian" work: it could still pass the political test of nationalism; the nation should have no qualms about embracing the *maestro* as one of its own.

But traditionalists, those for whom, as D'Arcais put it, "*Un ballo in maschera* marked the limit beyond which Verdi ought not to have stepped," found the work

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Modern listeners may be alternately puzzled and annoyed by these quarrels, for we are armed with the knowledge of Verdi's post-*Aida* works (especially the Requiem, *Otello* and *Falstaff*) and are thus inclined to hear *Aida* as one of the definers of the mainstream Verdian style rather than as a problem within it. Still, we may begin to sense the opera's unusualness if we compare it only with Verdi's earlier works. In *Aida* the composer who had earlier established a reputation for rapid-paced work driven by the obsessive heat of the emotional moment now strove to produce something else: a work with pronounced emphasis on cool, static tableaux and monumental decoration fused with exotic local color. Notwithstanding the traditional love-versus-honor conflict in *Aida*, its predominating "Egyptian" ambience contrasts markedly with the time and place of European topics of Verdi's earlier works. An ambience was clearly the opera's *raison d'être* and an immediate aesthetic cause of its massive, archaic immobility, as if the *maestro* were now adopting a form of the archetypal or hazily legendary – more Germanic than French concerns than Italian ones. The critic D'Arcais put his finger directly on the nationalistic point: the principal task of this opera is truly to transport us to regions very different from our own ... to force the listener to distance his mind from the object ordinarily surround it."

Exoticism was by no means new to European music in the early 1870s. On the contrary, it was becoming increasingly fashionable, but it was not a natural part of the Italian tradition. After some of the early "Turkish" effects of Mozart, Beethoven, Weber and others, essentially comic or playful – an exoticism of an earnest or contemplative tone had taken root in Italy with such works as Félicien David's *Le Désert* (1805) which Verdi first heard in 1845, and in such operas as 1860s as David's *Lalla Roukh* (1862), Gounod's *Reine de Saba* (1862), Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Vanice* (1863), and Meyerbeer's much-awaited *L'Africain* (1865) – an instant classic and the immediate model for *Aida*. The central effect of this new exoticism, as Dahlhaus has pointed out, lay not in its claim to stylistic authenticity, but rather in its invitation to be perceived as alien to the standard European style. This "otherness" (and related "others", such as folkloric local color in general) was an opportunity for oriented listeners to suspend the press of elapsing time and to experience static sound-blocks of vibrant coloristic harmony and shimmering timbre. The adoption of exotic stillness for significant blocks – the Consecration Scene (Act I, scene 2), the chorus of Act II, the ballets, the exotic orchestra of the opening of Act III followed by the sinuous obbligato in *Aida*'s "O patria mia" (which was "of the odor of Egypt," as Verdi put it), and so on

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Modern listeners may be alternately puzzled and amused by these quarrels, for we are armed with the knowledge of Verdi's post-*Aida* works (especially the Requiem, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*) and are thus inclined to hear *Aida* as one of the definers of the mainstream Verdian style rather than as a problem within it. Still, we may begin to sense some of the opera's unusualness if we compare it only with Verdi's earlier works. In *Aida* the composer who a decade earlier had established a reputation for rapid-paced drama driven by the obsessive heat of the emotional moment now strove to produce something else: a work with a pronounced emphasis on cool, static tableaux, on monumental decoration fused with exotic local color. Notwithstanding the traditional love-versus-honor conflict in *Aida*, its predominating "Egyptian" ambience contrasts markedly with the time and place of the European topics of Verdi's earlier works. And that ambience was clearly the opera's *raison d'être* and the immediate aesthetic cause of its massive, architectural immobility, as if the *maestro* were now adopting aspects of the archetypal or hazily legendary – more Germanic or French concerns than Italian ones. The critic D'Arcais put his finger directly on the nationalistic point: "The principal task of this opera is truly to transport us into regions very different from our own ... to force the listener to distance his mind from the objects that ordinarily surround it."

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this opera apart from its more kinetic predecessors and encourages its listeners to accept the "Egyptian" tone that the composer desired.

Other aspects of the opera, too, are recognizably non-Italian in inspiration. Few early audiences could fail to hear that the opera was built from more or less continuous music without the usual clear breaks for applause, and that it stressed orchestral motifs (especially associated with *Aida*, Amneris and the Priests), a concern that went beyond anything that Verdi had attempted before. As important as the mere existence of motifs might be, Verdi's tendency to treat them "organically," as buds that germinate into melodic and contrapuntal branches, seems to signal the full acceptance of a compositional principle that is ultimately Germanic in origin, although the procedure had long been adopted in France as well. In the atmospheric Prelude, for example, a single line, the *Aida* Motif, generates a second line, then a third, and so on. It is followed by the Priests' Motif treated to contrapuntal, imitative entries, whereupon the *Aida* Theme is combined contrapuntally with it, thus foreshadowing the dramatic conflict of *Aida* and the priests. Similar textures of single-line, sinuous growth may be found in the Prelude to Gounod's *Faust*, which might have served as something of a model here, as Filippi suggested in *La perseveranza* only five days after the Italian première of *Aida*.

The inserting of dances and *divertissements* was a long-standing French preference, not an Italian one, and *Aida* contains Verdi's only untexted stage-dances not specifically composed to meet French-audience expectations. The interspersed dances, moreover, are integral parts of the "Egyptian" tone: they are essential to the opera in a way that the more detachable French ballets of his earlier works had not been. Similarly, the famous Triumphant Scene (the "Gran Finale secondo", Act II, scene 2) participates in the French grand-opera tradition of monumental spectacle, crowd-scenes, and processions placed at the center-point of the opera. The equivalent in *Don Carlos* had been the *auto-da-fé* scene; in *La forza del destino* it had been the Inn Scene. Their models are to be found in such works as Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophète*, and parallel echoes are to be heard in several of Wagner's earlier works as well.

Verdi's orchestral writing in *Aida* also shows the influence of the more supple and sensuously contoured French models. Virtually banished by now are the simpler accompaniments of his operas of the *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore* years – now rejected in favor of smoother-edged, more active orchestral lines. In *Aida* timbre itself is used as a powerful structural element: the fanfare trumpets near the opening of Act I recur prominently with the entry of the King, Ramfis and the Priests in the following scene, then as a backdrop to the chorus, "Su! del Nilo al sacro lido", and again in the grand Act II Finale; the harp at the beginning of the Act I scene 2 recurs at the beginning of Act II and – with great effect – towards the opera's close in the "Immenso Fihà" reprise; the breathy low-flute timbre, heard first in tremolos at the center of Radamès's *romanza* "Celeste *Aida*", recurs in three flutes in the "Sacred Dance of the Priestesses" (Act I, scene 2) and, along with the harp, near the end of the opera. The strings are given various special effects throughout, most notably in the exotic sound-sheet that opens the third act by combining muted sounds, harmonics and *arco*, *pizzicato* and tremolo effects with an undulating, persistent G natural that skips up and down in semiquavers (16th-notes) through four octaves.

Still, the crux of the *Aida* controversy lay in Verdi's treatment of melody, for it was ultimately on the pre-eminence of melody that an Italian opera was expected to define itself. To Italian conservatives of the early 1870s "melody" was synonymous with the delivery at clearly defined and prepared moments – solos, duets and the like – of complete, stylistically consistent, clearly framed "lyric forms" (usually square-cut *aba* or *aab* patterns, not unlike the structures of many popular songs

of our own century). In *Aida* – although Verdi had provided a number of precedents in his earlier works – many of the spots in which audiences had come to expect straightforward melodic units seemed halting, unfulfilled or fussily complicated, as the composer sought instead to convey the fluidity of the changing moment. Some critics interpreted this negatively, as an abandoning of melody. But D'Arcais once again leapt to Verdi's defense: "*Aida* does not lack melodies; it only lacks the standard forms that some confuse too readily with melody, as if this were something bound by certain geometrical laws."

A good example of the problem for 1872 traditionalists may be found in *Aida*'s Act I solo piece, beginning with the words, "Ritorna vincitor!" The initial generic signals are clearly those of recitative, normally a predictor of the imminent onset of a slow, closed lyric form. But where does the anticipated *romanza* actually begin? As we proceed through the piece there seem to be two aborted minor-mode beginnings, both of whose tempi are abnormally fast ("L'insana parola, o Numi, sperdete!" and "I sacri nomi di padre ... d'amante"), and these are followed by a slower, more "successful" major-mode beginning ("Numi, pietà") that, paradoxically, is also a clear ending. Moreover, the two minor-mode beginnings are separated by a completely different texture, an unusually reflective Andante based on the *Aida* Motif (first heard in the Prelude, and presented here primarily in the clarinet). Once we have experienced these things and reflected upon them, they may begin to clarify, but they do so only in retrospect. The whole piece, for example, may be heard as flexible recitative with an embedded *arioso* – or an abandoned lyric form – up until "I sacri nomi"; the *romanza* proper probably begins here, but at the point where we expect a concluding phrase, "Numi pietà" blossoms instead into a separate lyric form (one whose melodic contours are clearly a simplified form, in the major, of the "I sacri nomi" melody).

This is the sort of intellectualized "combination" and "manipulation" that displeased Perelli and gave many listeners the impression of a music reluctant to unfurl itself in standard ways. Verdi's larger dramatic point, for which the goal of conventional music is sacrificed, is that *Aida* is too distracted to behave normally. Now that she is alone and released from the need to put up a public front, the structure of her music parallels that of the free play of her emotions. It proceeds not by consistency but by contradiction, with melodic beginnings and rebeginnings, and finds its peace (or its completed "lyric form") only in the appeal for mercy – and death – from the gods. With *Aida* Verdi was concerned not merely with overriding the default gestures of Italian opera – that had been a concern of his for some time – but with overriding them in increasingly unpredictable, flexible and *ad hoc* ways. We may see in all of this the composer's ever more emphatic desire to individualize his works, to make of each a non-repeatable, individual experience rather than a spectacularly successful example of a given genre. Verdi was in pursuit here of what he called *Dramma* – the theatrical effect of the whole to which all aspects, including musical convention, were to be subordinated. As he put it in a famous letter to Ghislanzoni while engaged on the opera, "It is sometimes necessary in the theatre for poets and composers to have the talent *not* to write poetry or music." Or again, to Arrivabene in September 1871: "In music one must not be exclusively a *melodist*. In music there is something more than melody, something more than harmony. There is the music!" Principles such as these gave Italy *Aida* in 1872. But they also help us to understand why the work seemed at the time so disturbingly to challenge the Italian traditions.

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8] Scena: "Ritorna vincitor!" (*Aida*)
Left alone, *Aida* is overcome between love for Radamès and love for her native land.

Scene Two: In the Temple

Grand Scene of Consecration
9] "Possente Fthà"... "Tu chi" (*High Priestess, Chorus*)
The chanting of the priest within, alternating with the priests onstage.

10] Sacred Dance of the Priestess
"Mortal, dilettato" (*High Priestess, Chorus*)
Radamès receives the sacrifice of the god Fthà, which are enemies in battle and act.

11] "Nume, custode e vindice" (*Ramfis, Radamès, Chorus*)
All present pray to the god of Egypt.

SIDE 2

ACT TWO

Scene One: In Amneris'

Introduction:

1] Scena and Women's Chorus
"I plausi" (*Chorus, Amneris*)
The solemn celebration of the Ethiopians is about to begin. Amneris, awaiting slaves, Amneris awaits Radamès.

2] Dance of the Moorish Slave
"Piovano" (*Chorus, Amneris*)
Unable to banish her desire, Amneris tries to cheer her Moorish slaves. When she dismisses her slave,

Scena and Duet:

3] "Fu la sorte dell'armi" (*Amneris, Aida*)
Tormented by jealousy, *Aida*'s true feelings. At feigned kindness but the shock at the news strengthened that her slave loves her, confirmed beyond all doubt when Amneris reveals she is alive. *Aida* can barely contain her reaction of pride to Amneris reveals her royal original composure and simply and to existing solely from

4] "Sul del Nilo al sacro lido" (*Chorus, Amneris, Aida*)
Festive fanfares announce the celebrations. Amneris, taking revenge on her paying any attention to

Scene Two: A gate of

Finale II:

5] "Gloria all'Egitto, ad" (*Chorus*)
The population is exulting over the Ethiopians.

SYNOPSIS

SIDE 1

1] Overture

ACT ONE

Scene One: Room in the palace of the King at Memphis

2] Introduction and Scena: "Sì, corre voce che l'Etiope ardisca" (*Ramfis, Radamès*)
Ramfis, the high priest, tells *Radamès* that Egypt is being threatened by the Ethiopians: war seems inevitable.

3] Romanza: "Se quel guerrier io fossi... Celeste Aida" (*Radamès*)
Radamès, a young captain of the guard, hopes to be nominated as commander-in-chief of the Egyptian forces. His dream is to gain victory on the field of battle and to return covered in glory to *Aida*, the Ethiopian slave with whom he is secretly in love.

4] Duet: "Quale insolita gioia nel tuo sguardo!" (*Amneris, Radamès*)
Amneris, the King's daughter, enters. She loves *Radamès* but fears that his heart belongs to another woman. Then *Aida* comes forward, her true identity unknown to all. She is in fact the daughter of *Amonasro*, King of Ethiopia. Upon seeing *Aida*, *Radamès* suddenly becomes disturbed, a fact which does not escape the attention of *Amneris*, who begins

to suspect that the Ethiopian slave-girl could be her rival.

5] Trio: "Vieni, o diletta, appressati" (*Amneris, Aida, Radamès*)

Amneris, however, succeeds in hiding her jealousy and approaches *Aida* with mock expressions of affection. Meanwhile the two lovers try not to reveal to her the secret they bear in their hearts.

The wall at the back opens, revealing a large hall.

Scena and Ensemble:

6] "Alta cagion v'aduna" (*The King, a messenger, Radamès, Ramfis, Chorus, Aida, Amneris*)

The King enters, accompanied by *Ramfis* and the entire court. A messenger confirms the fact that the Ethiopians, led by *Amonasro*, have begun to invade Egypt and are marching towards Thebes. The King declares war upon the invaders and names the man chosen by the goddess *Isis* to be the Egyptian commander: *Radamès*.

7] "Sul del Nilo al sacro lido" (*The King, Ramfis, Chorus, Aida, Radamès, Amneris*)
Having received a standard from *Amneris*, and accompanied by the acclamation of the King and the court, *Radamès* proceeds to the temple of *Vulcan*, where he will take up the sacred arms.

The wall closes again; scene as before.