GIUSEPPE VERDI

AIDA

Opera in four acts

Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni

Saturday, January 10, 2015
1:00–4:40 PM

The production of Aida was made possible by a generous gift from Mrs. Donald D. Harrington

CONDUCTOR
Marco Armiliato

PRODUCTION
Sonja Frisell

SET DESIGNER
Gianni Quaranta

COSTUME DESIGNER
Dada Saligeri

LIGHTING DESIGNER
Gil Wechsler

CHOREOGRAPHER
Alexei Ratmansky

STAGE DIRECTOR
Stephen Pickover

GENERAL MANAGER
Peter Gelb

MUSIC DIRECTOR
James Levine

PRINCIPAL CONDUCTOR
Fabio Luisi
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The 1,144th Metropolitan Opera performance of
GIUSEPPE VERDI’S
AIDA

CONDUCTOR
Marco Armiliato

IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

RAMFIS
Dmitry Belosselskiy

RADAMÈS
Marcello Giordani

AMNERIS
Violeta Urmana

AIDA
Tamara Wilson

THE KING
Soloman Howard

A MESSENGER
Eduardo Valdes

A PRIESTESS
Jennifer Check*

AMONASRO
George Gagnidze

SOLO DANCERS
Jennifer Cadden
Scott Weber

Saturday, January 10, 2015, 1:00–4:40PM
Graduate of the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program

Yamaha is the Official Piano of the Metropolitan Opera.

Latecomers will not be admitted during the performance.

Chorus Master  Donald Palumbo
Musical Preparation  Joan Dornemann, Dennis Giauque, Gareth Morrell, and Howard Watkins
Assistant Stage Director  J. Knighten Smit
Stage Band Conductor  Gregory Buchalter
Met Titles  Christopher Bergen
Prompter  Joan Dornemann

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Synopsis

Egypt, during the reign of the pharaohs

Act I
SCENE 1 An antechamber in the palace in Memphis
SCENE 2 A throne room in the palace
SCENE 3 An antechamber in the palace
SCENE 4 The temple of Vulcan

Intermission  (AT APPROXIMATELY 1:40 PM)

Act II
SCENE 1 Apartments of Amneris in the palace at Thebes
SCENE 2 A public square

Intermission  (AT APPROXIMATELY 3:05 PM)

Act III
The banks of the Nile

Pause

Act IV
SCENE 1 Forecourt at the hall of judgment
SCENE 2 Outside the hall of judgment
SCENE 3 A tomb below the temple

Act I
At the royal palace in Memphis, the high priest Ramfis tells the warrior Radamès that Ethiopia is preparing another attack against Egypt. Radamès hopes to command his army. He is in love with Aida, the Ethiopian slave of Princess Amneris, the king’s daughter, and he believes that victory in the war would enable him to free her and marry her. But Amneris loves Radamès, and when the three meet, she jealously senses his feelings for Aida. A messenger tells the king of Egypt and the assembled priests and soldiers that the Ethiopians are advancing. The king names Radamès to lead the army, and all join in a patriotic anthem. Left alone, Aida is torn between her love for Radamès and loyalty to her native country, where her father, Amonasro, is king. She prays to the gods for mercy.

In the temple of Vulcan, the priests consecrate Radamès to the service of the god. Ramfis orders him to protect the homeland.
Act II
Ethiopia has been defeated, and Amneris waits for the triumphant return of Radamès. When Aida approaches, the princess sends away her other attendants so that she can learn her slave’s private feelings. She first pretends that Radamès has fallen in battle, then says he is still alive. Aida’s reactions leave no doubt that she loves Radamès. Amneris, certain she will be victorious over her rival, leaves for the triumphal procession.

At the city gates the king and Amneris observe the celebrations and crown Radamès with a victor’s wreath. Captured Ethiopians are led in. Among them is Amonasro, Aida’s father, who signals his daughter not to reveal his identity as king. Radamès is impressed by Amonasro’s eloquent plea for mercy and asks for the death sentence on the prisoners to be overruled and for them to be freed. The king grants his request but keeps Amonasro in custody. The king declares that as a victor’s reward, Radamès will have Amneris’s hand in marriage.

Act III
On the eve of Amneris’s wedding, Ramfis and Amneris enter a temple on the banks of the Nile to pray. Aida, who is waiting for Radamès, is lost in thoughts of her homeland. Amonasro suddenly appears. Invoking Aida’s sense of duty, he makes her agree to find out from Radamès which route the Egyptian army will take to invade Ethiopia. Amonasro hides as Radamès arrives and assures Aida of his love. They dream about their future life together, and Radamès agrees to run away with her. Aida asks him about his army’s route, and just as he reveals the secret, Amonasro emerges from his hiding place. When he realizes that Amonasro is the Ethiopian king, Radamès is horrified by what he has done. While Aida and Amonasro try to calm him, Ramfis and Amneris step out of the temple. Father and daughter are able to escape, but Radamès surrenders to the priests.

Act IV
Radamès awaits trial as a traitor, believing Aida to be dead. Even after he learns that she has survived, he rejects an offer by Amneris to save him if he renounces Aida. When he is brought before the priests, he refuses to answer their accusations and is condemned to be buried alive. Amneris begs for mercy, but the judges will not change their verdict. She curses the priests.

Aida has hidden in the vault to share Radamès’s fate. They express their love for the last time while Amneris, in the temple above, prays for Radamès’s soul.
Giuseppe Verdi

Aida

Premiere: Cairo Opera House, 1871
This grandest of grand operas features an epic backdrop for what is in essence an intimate love story. Set in ancient Egypt and packed with magnificent choruses, complex ensembles, and elaborate ballets, Aida never loses sight of its three protagonists: Amneris, the proud daughter of the pharaoh; her slave, Aida, who is the princess of the rival kingdom of Ethiopia; and Radamès, the Egyptian warrior they both love. Few operas have matched Aida in its exploration of the conflict of private emotion and public duty, and perhaps no other has remained to the present day so unanimously appreciated by audiences and critics alike.

The Creators
Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) is the composer of 28 operas that premiered over a period of 54 years. His works continue to form the core of the international opera repertory, cherished equally for their unforgettable music and their humanity. The story of Aida was the creation of Auguste Mariette (1821–1881), an extraordinary French archaeologist who was the founder of the Egyptian Museum of Cairo (and whose reputation for great archaeological successes was somewhat tainted when he accidentally blew up an intact tomb). Camille du Locle (1832–1903), who collaborated on the scenario with Mariette and suggested the story to Verdi, had worked with the composer on the libretto of Don Carlos. An opera impresario in Paris, he commissioned Carmen from Georges Bizet for the Opéra Comique in 1875. Aida’s librettist, Antonio Ghislanzoni (1824–1893), was a novelist and poet as well as the creator of some 85 librettos, most of which are forgotten today. He had previously worked with Verdi on the revision of La Forza del Destino (1869).

The Setting
The libretto indicates merely that the opera takes place in “ancient Egypt, in the time of the pharaohs.” This may sound vague, but it was a clear direction to approach the drama as myth rather than anthropology or history. Europe’s fascination with the ancient Nile civilization had been piqued with stories from Napoleon’s Egyptian expedition at the end of the 18th century, and continued into the mid-19th century with the numerous archaeological discoveries being taken from the sands of Egypt and shipped to museums in the European capitals.
The Music
The score of Aida is a sophisticated example of Italian Romanticism, imbued with a convincingly mysterious and exotic hue. Making no claims to authenticity (nobody knows what music in ancient Egypt sounded like), Verdi created a unique musical palette for this opera. The grandeur of the subject is aptly conveyed with huge patriotic choruses (Acts I and II) and the unforgettable Triumphal March in Act II. These public moments often serve as frames for the solos of the leading tenor and soprano: his grueling “Celeste Aida” right at the beginning of Act I, her demanding “Ritorna vincitor!” that follows, and her great internal journey, “O patria mia,” in Act III. Perhaps most impressive in this drama of public versus private needs are the instances of solo voice pitted directly against complex ensembles and vast choruses: the tenor in the temple scene in Act I, the mezzo-soprano in the judgment scene in Act IV, and especially the soprano in the great triumphal scene in Act II.

Aida at the Met
The opera came to the Met during the “German Seasons” of the 1880s and was performed in German until 1891. (The Met’s 1883–84 season was a financial disaster, so for a few seasons the company hired less expensive German singers and had them sing in their native language.) Aida has been among the most popular operas in the Met’s repertory since those early days. Conductor Arturo Toscanini inaugurated his Met career with a spectacular new production of Aida (even though the previous production was only a year old) for opening night of the 1908–09 season. That performance featured the Met debut of Czech sensation Emmy Destinn (who would sing the title role 52 times at the Met through 1920), American mezzo Louise Homer (who sang Amneris 97 times between 1900 and 1927), Enrico Caruso (91 performances as Radamès at the Met between 1903 and 1919), and the great baritone Pasquale Amato (79 appearances between 1903 and 1919). Other unforgettable and frequent Aidas at the Met include Zinka Milanov (75 performances, 1938–1958), Elisabeth Rethberg (67 performances, 1922–1942), and the legendary Leontyne Price (42 performances from 1961 until her farewell appearance at the Met in 1985). The current production by Sonja Frisell, with sets by the acclaimed film production designer Gianni Quaranta (A Room With a View), premiered in 1988 with James Levine conducting a cast headed by Leona Mitchell, Fiorenza Cossotto, Plácido Domingo, Sherrill Milnes, and Paul Plishka.
Many writers dealing with 19th-century European opera have remarked how strong the lure was for composers to write for the Opéra in Paris. Not only were the musical standards supposed to be the highest, the forces that created and performed the works the most estimable, and the fame that could be gained the most lasting—the financial rewards for the composition and performance of an opera were considered the largest a European house had to offer. Verdi had worked for the Opéra on two occasions during the 1840s and ’50s: Jérusalem, a reworking of I Lombardi, premiered in 1847, and Les Vêpres Siciliennes followed in 1855. But it is no wonder that he thought of his five-act opera on Schiller’s Don Carlos (1867) as something of a culmination of his career in the theater.

Having dealt with the forces of the Opéra over a period of some 20 years, he was not over-eager to compose a fourth work for that institution. Nevertheless, shortly after the premiere of Don Carlos he found himself being requested by Camille du Locle, one of its librettists, to write another opera for Paris. In a famous letter to du Locle, dated December 8, 1869, Verdi outlined his reasons for not wishing to work there again. It is a precious document, one from which we can glean some idea of how the composer was determined to work from this point on and to what standard: “Hélas! It is not the toil of writing an opera nor the judgment of the Parisian public that holds me back, but rather the certainty of not being able to have my music performed in Paris the way I want it.” He then goes on to say why this is so: there are too many self-ordained savants in the French opera houses, “every one wants to judge according to his own lights and tastes, and what is worse, according to a system, without taking into account the character and individuality of the composer.” Verdi believes in inspiration, the French “in construction…. I admit your right to criticize, but I want enthusiasm, which you lack in hearing and judging.” And, he goes on, “I want art in whatever manifestation of it, not amusement, artifice, and system, which you prefer.” Verdi feels each artist has the right—indeed, the obligation—to write according to his own lights and not cut his cloth to others’ tastes, especially those of the Opéra. “Each one wants to give an opinion, wants to utter a doubt, and a composer living for a long time in that atmosphere of doubts cannot help, at least in the long run, be slightly shaken in his convictions and end up correcting, adjusting, or even better, spoiling his work.” In short, he will have none of it.

All this serves to explain why Verdi was reluctant to take on a new work for any theater, let alone the Paris Opéra, with all its supposed ability and rewards. It also, even more importantly, gives us an idea of the criteria he had in mind when he eventually composed his next opera, Aida. As he cultivated the image of gentleman farmer on his estate at Sant’Agata after the premiere of Don Carlos, he consistently turned down various ideas proffered by any number of individuals—yet considered them all very carefully. Thus, when du Locle in
November of 1869 asked him to provide a hymn for the opening of the new Cairo Opera House, he refused, with the comment that he did not compose “pièces de circonstance.” Though the actual documents are no longer available, it seems that it was not until du Locle visited Sant’Agata at the beginning of 1870 that the Aida project was presented to Verdi. The viceroy of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, wanted a new opera from the famous Italian composer’s pen, and the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, who was in the viceroy’s service, had come up with a scenario that all hoped would lure Verdi back into the theater. But still the composer balked and found any number of reasons for not undertaking a new work. It was not until the beginning of June of the same year that he finally accepted the idea of Aida and laid out his conditions for its composition. Needless to say, they were accepted.

Though there were complications and deferrals of the premiere, the work was finally presented at the Cairo Opera House on December 24, 1871. Its Italian premiere, supervised by the composer (who had not traveled to Cairo), took place on February 8, 1872, at La Scala. Contrary to popular accounts, Aida was not commissioned for or performed at the opening of the Suez Canal (which happened in the early months of 1870). Neither did it open the new Cairo Opera House: that event occurred on November 1, 1869, with a performance of Rigoletto.

A curious feature of the Verdi canon is the appearance of what could be called a simple, more old-fashioned opera following one or two works with “theatrical” plots and somewhat experimental or “modern” music (to use the terms of Verdi’s critical contemporaries). Il Trovatore, a work that seems to sum up the best of his early operas, came after the forward-looking Rigoletto; Un Ballo in Maschera after Simon Boccanegra; and Aida after La Forza del Destino and Don Carlos. It is as if Verdi wanted to retrench, to make sure that the inspiration and enthusiasm he spoke of in the letter to du Locle were securely allied to and tempered by the art that he was insistent on. Aida has seemed to some commentators to be too perfect: with the exception of Amneris and possibly Amonasro, the characters seem to have a two-dimensional quality, as opposed to the figures drawn in the round in, say, La Forza del Destino or Don Carlos. The reason for this could easily be that the music of Aida is certainly the most “classical” that Verdi had written up to that point. His uncanny feel for color also allowed him to invent an “Egyptian sound.” While it has nothing to do with actual ancient Egyptian music, it is nonetheless convincing. The orchestration is a miracle of both sonority and delicacy: it is not for nothing that Richard Strauss loved conducting Lohengrin, Carmen, and Aida primarily for the pleasure of observing their orchestration at the closest proximity. The libretto, prepared by Antonio Ghislanzoni under Verdi’s direct supervision, is also clear and straightforward in its presentation of the plot. Verdi’s parola scenica—the
“scenic word” that leaps out in a sentence, captures the listener’s attention, and allows him to take in the situation instantly—is in abundance. A very obvious example is “Ritorna vincitor!” at the end of the first scene in Act I. Amneris calls it out without any accompaniment, all on stage repeat it in unison, and then Aida, left alone after the general exit, sings it a third time, now bitterly. Could any situation be simpler or clearer? Could any situation be more musically and dramatically exciting?

Indeed, situations are so clear that it has often been a cause for wonder that Verdi agreed to use Mariette’s scenario as the basis for a new opera at this point in his career. Did he not say in an 1853 letter, while he was completing Il Trovatore, that he wanted “subjects that are new, great, beautiful, varied, bold”? A clue to the answer may be found in another letter he wrote to du Locle in May of 1870, when, after reading the Aida outline, he said, “There are two or three situations which, if not very new, are certainly very beautiful.” It is easy to imagine the composer reading through Mariette’s scenario (which fairly closely resembled the finished product), sensing the musical possibilities inherent in it.

But it is, of course, the music itself that has assured Aida not only its immense popularity but also the enormous esteem in which it is held by musicians. It has already been pointed out that it is Verdi’s most classic score—of the operas preceding it, only Un Ballo in Maschera could perhaps have a claim to equal it in this capacity. The melodies of Aida fall easily on the ear, yet on examination prove to be far from the more formulaic kind of melody that is met with in the “galley slave” operas. A composer of genius will always bend the verse and the bar line to his own particular needs. To paraphrase novelist John Cheever: “The essence of music is always the singularity of the composer.” Verdi would have been certain to agree when he complained that the French did not take “into account the character and individuality of the composer.” —David Stivender
The Cast

Marco Armiliato
CONDUCTOR (GENOA, ITALY)

THIS SEASON  Aida and La Traviata at the Met, La Fanciulla del West and La Traviata in Zurich, Faust at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, and Tosca, Andrea Chénier, L’Elisir d’Amore, and Don Carlo at the Vienna State Opera.

MET APPEARANCES  More than 325 performances of 23 operas including La Bohème (debut, 1998), Tosca, Francesca da Rimini, Rigoletto, Il Trovatore, Lucia di Lammermoor, La Rondine, La Traviata, La Fille du Régiment, Turandot, Cavalleria Rusticana, and Pagliacci.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  He recently conducted Madama Butterfly at Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Rigoletto and La Bohème at Munich’s Bavarian State Opera. He has also led La Traviata and Andrea Chénier at the Vienna State Opera, Le Nozze di Figaro and Rigoletto in Munich, Tosca in Zurich, La Fille du Régiment at the Paris Opera, and La Rondine at Covent Garden. In 1995 he made his Italian debut at Venice’s Teatro La Fenice with Il Barbiere di Siviglia and his international debut at the Vienna State Opera with Andrea Chénier.

Violeta Urmana
MEZZO-SOPRANO (KAZLU RUDOS, LITHUANIA)


CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  She started her operatic career as a mezzo-soprano, and after singing the role of Sieglinde in Die Walküre at the Bayreuth Festival, made her soprano debut in 2002 at La Scala in the title role of Iphigénie en Aulide. Since that time she has sung Maddalena in Andrea Chénier at the Vienna State Opera, Santuzza in Cavalleria Rusticana at the Paris Opera, Isolde in Rome, Leonora in La Forza del Destino in Vienna and at the Paris Opera, Gioconda and Leonora at Covent Garden, and Tosca in Florence and Los Angeles. She has also sung the title role of Norma in Dresden, Elisabeth in Don Carlo in Turin, Tosca in Florence and Los Angeles, Aida at La Scala, and the title role of Catalani’s La Wally at the Vienna Konzerthaus.
THIS SEASON  The title role of Aida for her debut at the Met, the title role of Norma for her debut at Barcelona’s Liceu, the Empress in Die Frau ohne Schatten and concert performances as Helena in Die Ägyptische Helena in Frankfurt, Donna Anna in concert performances of Don Giovanni with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and concerts with the Cleveland Orchestra, National Symphony, and Baltimore Symphony.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  She has sung Aida in Seville, Elisabeth de Valois in Don Carlos with Houston Grand Opera, Amelia in Un Ballo in Maschera with Washington National Opera and Houston Grand Opera, and Alice Ford in Falstaff for her debut with Washington National Opera. She has also sung Rosalinde in Die Fledermaus, Amelia in Simon Boccanegra, and Elettra in Idomeneo with the Canadian Opera Company, Konstanze in Die Entführung aus dem Serail and Leonora in Il Trovatore with Houston Grand Opera, and Miss Jessel in Britten’s The Turn of the Screw in Los Angeles.

Dmitry Belosselskiy
BASS (Pavlograd, Ukraine)

THIS SEASON  Ramfis in Aida, the Old Convict in Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, and de Silva in Ernani at the Met, the title role of Boris Godunov and King Philip in Don Carlo with the Bolshoi Opera, the Verdi Requiem with the Lucerne Symphony, and a European tour with Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchestra.

MET APPEARANCES  Zaccaria in Nabucco (debut, 2011).

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS  He is a member of Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre and has sung Zaccaria at the Orange and Salzburg festivals, Fiesco in Simon Boccanegra at Berlin’s Deutsche Staatsoper, Sparafucile in Rigoletto at the Houston Grand Opera, the title role of Attila at the Theater an der Wien, Oroveso in Norma with Washington National Opera, and Vladimir in Prince Igor in Zurich.
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George Gagnidze
BARITONE (TBILISI, REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA)

**THIS SEASON**  Amonasro in *Aida* and Tonio in *Pagliacci* at the Met, Scarpia in *Tosca* at the Paris Opera, Amonasro at La Scala, and the title role of *Simon Boccanegra* in Hamburg.

**MET APPEARANCES**  Scarpia, Shaklovity in *Khovanshchina*, and the title roles of *Macbeth* and *Rigoletto* (debut, 2009).

**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS**  Recent performances include Rigoletto at La Scala and the Aix-en-Provence Festival, Scarpia at La Scala and the Vienna State Opera, and the title role of *Nabucco* in Palermo. He has also sung Macbeth at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Rigoletto at the Los Angeles Opera and Parma’s Verdi Festival, Miller in *Luisa Miller* in Valencia, and Germont in *La Traviata* at La Scala, and has appeared at Madrid’s Teatro Real, Paris’s Bastille Opera, and Genoa’s Teatro Felice. He made his operatic debut in 1996 at the Tbilisi Opera House as Renato in *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

Marcello Giordani
TENOR (AUGUSTA, ITALY)

**THIS SEASON**  Radamès in *Aida* at the Met and in Hamburg, Cavaradossi in *Tosca* at the Vienna State Opera and Munich’s Bavarian State Opera, Calàf in *Turandot* with Opera Carolina, and Gustavo in *Un Ballo in Maschera* in Hamburg.


**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS**  The Sicilian tenor has sung in all the world’s leading theaters. Recent performances include Cavaradossi at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Don José in *Carmen* in Dresden, Radamès at the Vienna State Opera, and Calàf in Rome.
This season, The King in Aida for his debut at the Met, Dr. Grenvil in La Traviata for his debut with the Los Angeles Opera, Banquo in Macbeth and Sarastro in Die Zauberflöte at the Glimmerglass Opera, and the title role of D.J. Sparr’s Approaching Ali with North Carolina Opera (a role he also sang for the 2013 world premiere of the work at the Kennedy Center’s Terrace Theater).

Career highlights include Joe in Show Boat, the Commendatore in Don Giovanni, the High Priest of Baal in Nabucco, and Sarastro with the Washington National Opera, Moser in I Masnadieri with Washington Concert Opera, Colline in La Bohème with North Carolina Opera, and Joe with Central City Opera. He has also sung Porgy in a concert version of Porgy and Bess with the Czech National Symphony Orchestra.