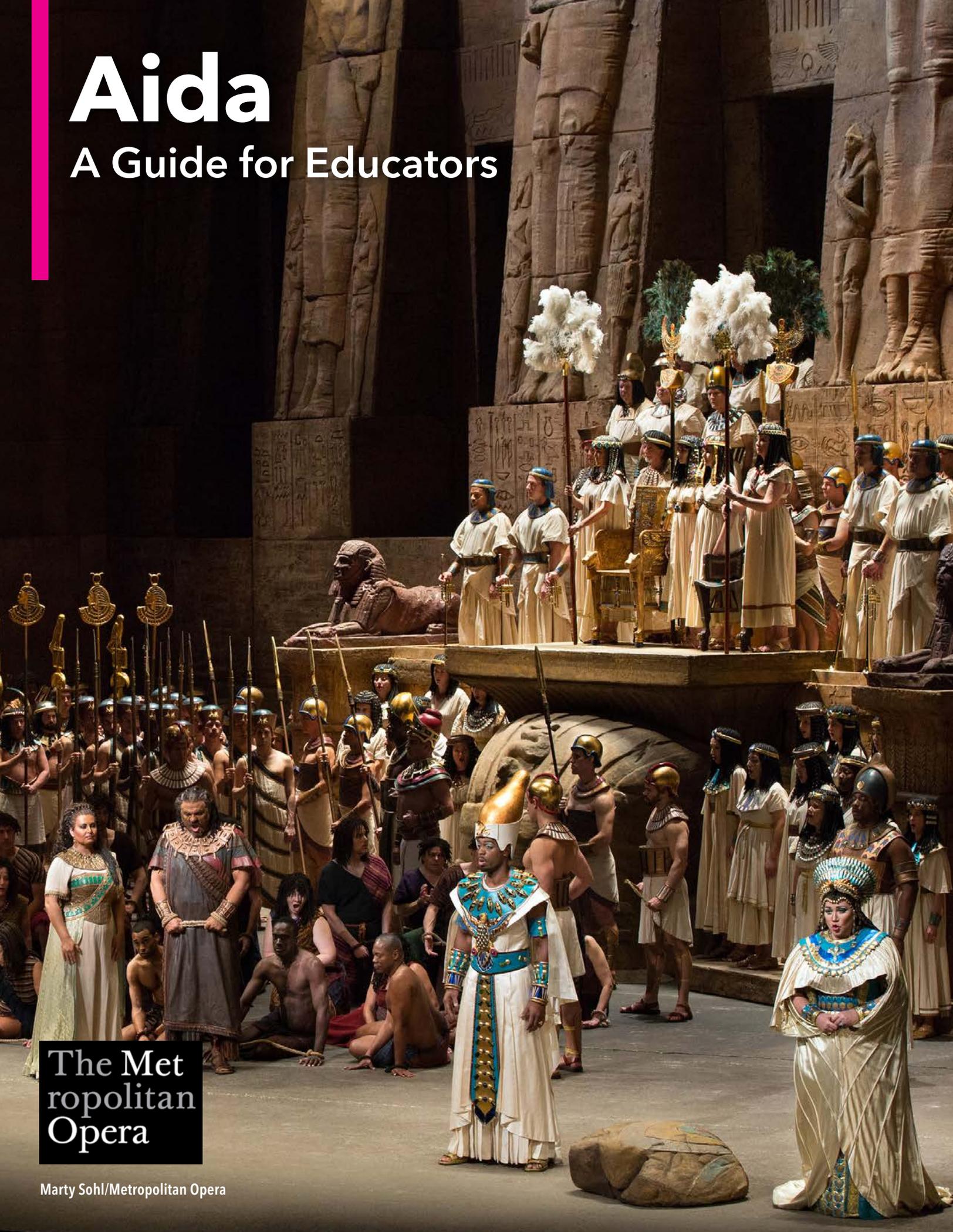


Aida

A Guide for Educators



The Met
ropolitan
Opera

ENCOMPASSING BOTH MONUMENTAL CROWD SCENES AND INTIMATE PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS, *Aida* can be described as a “chamber opera” that nevertheless contains some of the most immense set pieces in all of opera. One of the few of Verdi’s works that was not based on a play or novel, *Aida* represents a return to more traditional forms after the sprawling experimentation of Verdi’s recent works, as in *La Forza del Destino* and *Don Carlos*. The themes of love, duty, and country—sources of continual invention in Verdi’s operas—are distilled perhaps most purely in this work. The Egyptian princess, her Ethiopian rival, and the Egyptian warrior they both love emerge as timeless figures embodied by Verdi’s passionate but surprisingly delicate music.

The Met’s production by Sonja Frisell masterfully portrays the Egyptian setting, using sets, costumes, and household objects drawn from a variety of ancient Egyptian dynasties. The Met’s massive stage allows for the full grandeur of the opera’s processional scenes and ballets, while also creating space to focus on the intimate, personal scenes.

This guide is intended to lead your students through this classic work and demonstrate how it functions as a thrilling large-scale theatrical work as well as a deeply personal drama. By exploring the historical background of the opera and the way it is constructed, students will gain an understanding of Verdi’s opera and be better prepared to experience it live in the opera house. The information on the following pages is designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of attending a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera.

THE WORK:

AIDA

An opera in 4 acts, sung in Italian
Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni, after a scenario by Auguste Mariette
First performed December 24, 1871 at the Cairo Opera House, Egypt

PRODUCTION

Marco Armiliato, Conductor
Sonja Frisell, Production
Gianni Quaranta, Set Designer
Dada Saligeri, Costume Designer
Gil Wechsler, Lighting Designer
Alexei Ratmansky, Choreographer

STARRING

Liudmyla Monastyrska
AIDA (soprano)

Ekaterina Gubanova
AMNERIS (mezzo-soprano)

Marco Berti
RADAMÈS (tenor)

Mark Delavan
AMONASRO (baritone)

Dmitry Belosselskiy
RAMFIS (bass)

Production a gift of Mrs. Donald D. Harrington

Revival a gift of The Estate of Francine Berry

ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



Photo: Johnathan Tichler/
Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world.

The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, with its first opera house built on Broadway and 39th Street by a group of wealthy businessmen who wanted their own theater. In the company's early years, the management changed course several times, first performing everything in Italian (even *Carmen* and *Lohengrin*), then everything in German (even *Aida* and *Faust*), before finally settling into a policy of performing most works in their original language.

Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the opera house on 39th Street did not have adequate stage facilities. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September of 1966, was equipped with the finest technical facilities of the day.

Each season the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York. More than 800,000 people attend the performances in the opera house during the season, and millions more experience the Met through new media distribution initiatives and state-of-the-art technology.

This guide includes several sections with a variety of background material on *Aida*.

- **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Aida*.**
- **A Timeline:** The historical context of the opera's story and composition
- **A Closer Look:** A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Verdi's *Aida*
- **Guided Listening:** A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses
- **Student Critique:** A performance activity, highlighting specific aspects of this production; and topics for wrap-up discussion following students' attendance
- **Further Resources:** Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print
- **Glossary:** Common musical terms found in this guide and in the concert hall

The materials in this guide will focus on several aspects of *Aida*:

- The opera's setting in ancient Egypt
- Verdi's use of music to create striking and memorable characters
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Aida*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera. It includes materials for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds, and seeks to encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.



**Photo: Ken Howard/
Metropolitan Opera**

SUMMARY

The Egyptian warrior Radamès is in love with the Ethiopian princess Aida, who is enslaved to Amneris, an Egyptian princess. Aida loves Radamès, but Amneris does as well. Radamès hopes to earn the right to free and marry Aida by victory in battle. Aida is torn between love for him and longing for her oppressed country. Radamès leads the Egyptian army to battle and returns in triumph, unknowingly bringing Aida's father Amonasro, the king of Ethiopia, back in chains. Radamès is to be married to Amneris as his reward. Aida agonizes over whether to be loyal to him or to help her father. He confronts her angrily and threatens to disown her. Aida draws Radamès into revealing the Egyptians' military plans to Amonasro. Realizing his treason, Radamès surrenders to the priests and is sentenced to death for his betrayal. Amneris unsuccessfully begs them for mercy. As he is sealed in the tomb to suffocate, Radamès discovers Aida there awaiting him, and the two perish together.

THE SOURCE: A SCENARIO BY AUGUSTE MARIETTE

Aida is unusual in Verdi's output for not being derived from a pre-existing play, novel, or epic poem. Instead, its scenario was provided by the French Egyptologist and founder of the Egyptian Museum of Cairo, August Mariette, although its fundamental love-triangle structure is common to many operatic plots. Compared to Verdi's immensely complicated works *La Forza del Destino* and *Don Carlos*, the structure of *Aida* is simple and direct, and almost classical. After reading and approving Mariette's scenario, Verdi hired the poet Antonio Ghislanzoni to write the verse libretto, with whom he worked closely to direct revisions and oversee textual details. The story is set "at the time of the Pharaohs," but approaches the historical setting freely and imprecisely. Likewise, Verdi did not try to incorporate any genuinely Egyptian music.



Photo: Ken Howard/
Metropolitan Opera

SYNOPSIS

Act I: Egypt, during the reign of the pharaohs. At the royal palace in Memphis, the high priest Ramfis tells the warrior Radamès that Ethiopia is preparing to attack Egypt. Radamès hopes to command the army. He is in love with Aida, the Ethiopian slave of Princess Amneris, the king's daughter, and 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 Ptah, the priests dedicate Radamès to the service of the god. Ramfis orders him to protect the homeland.

Act II: Ethiopia has been defeated, and Amneris waits for Radamès to return in triumph. 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 died in battle, and 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' hand in marriage.

VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO

the highest-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO

the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian "mezzo"=middle, medium)

CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

COUNTERTENOR

a male singing voice whose vocal range is equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano, or (less frequently) a soprano, usually through the use of falsetto

TENOR

the highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males

BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS

the lowest male voice

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. Appealing to 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, and 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 steps out 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 emerge from 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 is alive, 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.



Photo: Marty Sohl/
Metropolitan Opera

WHO'S WHO IN AIDA

Character		Pronunciation Guide	Voice Type	The Lowdown
Aida	Ethiopian princess, now a slave	ah-EE-dah	soprano	A slave in Egypt, she is Princess of Ethiopia, but her identity is unknown to her captors. She is in love with Radamès.
Radamès	An Egyptian general	rah-dah-MAYS	tenor	Hero of the Egyptian armies, he is torn between loyalty to his country and love for the foreign Aida.
Amneris	An Egyptian princess	am-NAIR-ees	mezzo-soprano	Daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, she is Aida's mistress as well as her rival for Radamès' love.
Amonasro	Aida's father	ah-moh-NAHZ-roh	baritone	The King of Ethiopia, in disguise among the defeated Ethiopians.
Ramfis	An Egyptian priest	RAHM-fees	bass	Ramfis is an Egyptian priest and the leader of religious ceremonies.

- ca. 3150 BC** Egypt's first pharaoh, Narmer, unifies upper and lower Egypt, establishing the first Egyptian Dynasty.

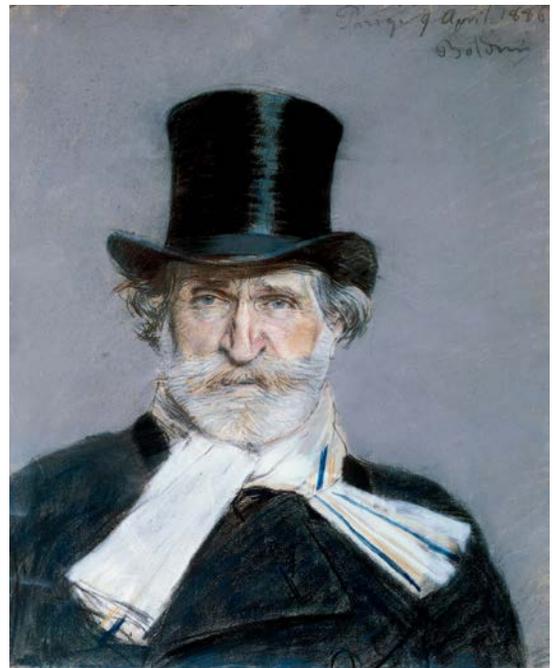
- 1798** The French military general Napoleon Bonaparte lands in Egypt on July 1. In addition to troops, he brings 150 civilian scientists, engineers, and scholars, thus launching Egyptian archeology in the modern era.

- 1813** Verdi is born on October 10 in the small town of Roncole, in what was then the Duchy of Parma, during the Napoleonic Wars.

- 1840** During the composition of Verdi's second opera *Un Giorno di Regno*, the composer's wife dies suddenly. The opera is a failure, and according to some accounts, Verdi swears to never compose again.

- 1842** Verdi's opera *Nabucco* premieres on March 9 at La Scala in Milan and is a great success, establishing his international reputation.

- 1858** The French archaeologist and Egyptologist August Mariette accepts a position as conservator of monuments for the Egyptian Government. His experiences as a researcher and excavator in Egypt later aid him in developing the original story that Verdi will adapt as *Aida*.



A portrait of Giuseppe Verdi by the painter Giovanni Boldini (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome)

- **1859** While struggling with the limitations placed on him by the censorship authorities on what would become his opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*, Verdi marries the singer Giuseppina Strepponi.

- **1869** The Khedive of Egypt inaugurates the opening of the Suez Canal, and attempts—without success—to enlist Verdi to compose music for the occasion.

- **1870** In April, the French impresario Camille du Locle sends Verdi a scenario for an opera by Auguste Mariette, set in ancient Egypt but based on an invented story. Verdi is taken with the idea and agrees with the scheme to have this new opera open the new Cairo Opera House. He enlists Antonio Ghislanzoni to work with him as librettist, and he takes an active role in the shaping of the libretto.

Production of *Aida* in Cairo is delayed because of the intrusion of the Franco-Prussian War, with the opera's sets and costumes trapped in Paris by siege.

- **1871** *Aida* premieres at the Cairo Opera House on December 24, and Verdi is named a Commendatore of the Ottoman Order.

- **1872** *Aida* receives its Italian premiere at La Scala in Milan on February 8, to great public acclaim.

- **1901** Verdi dies in Milan at the age of 87 on January 27.

- **1999** An enormous production of *Aida* is mounted in Egypt in front of the Pyramids of Giza. The performance includes 1,600 artists, a stage measuring 4,300 square meters, and a total of 27,000 spectators over eight consecutive nights.



The Cairo Opera House in 1869

THE EGYPT OF *AIDA*: NOT AS HISTORICAL AS IT MIGHT SEEM

With its temple on the banks of the Nile, its prayers to Ptah, and its famous sealed tomb, the tale of *Aida* seems to come straight from the papyri of ancient Egypt. It doesn't. Verdi and his librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni used a story created by the prominent French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette (who also oversaw the design of the sets and costumes for the opera's original production). There is no evidence that Mariette's ideas came from anywhere but his own imagination—his general sense of an "ancient Egyptian" aesthetic based on archeological finds from several centuries and dozens of dynasties. There are also deliberate historical inaccuracies: for instance, Egyptologists in Mariette's day knew that only male priests, and never priestesses, presided in Egyptian temples. But Verdi knew that priestesses made for a better musical story.

It is sometimes reported that *Aida* was composed to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal, which in fact took place in November 1869, two years before the opera's premiere. *Aida* had its first performance at the newly built Khedivial Opera House in Cairo in December 1871. As for Verdi himself, he never traveled to Egypt and treated *Aida*'s opening at Milan's La Scala six weeks later as its true world premiere.



The Great Pyramids of Giza

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, teachers will need access to a recording of *Aida* and the libretto.

"CELESTE AIDA" (CD 1, TRACK 3)

"Celeste Aida" is the opera's first aria. The high priest Ramfis has told Radamès that the Ethiopian army is on the move, and that a commander has been chosen for the Egyptian army. Radamès desires that position both for military glory and for the access to Aida that the role would grant him. Left alone, he sings about Aida's beauty and his desire to elevate her, in an aria that is both delicate and passionate.

What to listen for:

- Strophic form with long smooth vocal lines (in strophic form, subsequent verses of text are set to the same music)
- Orchestration shifting from martial trumpets to delicate strings
- Vocal dynamics and soft high notes

- (0:00) The scene begins with recitative for Radamès, prominently accompanied by the trumpets, an appropriately military orchestration for his warlike thoughts. As he moves to thoughts of Aida, the violins enter with a smoother, softer melody, quickly illustrating Radamès's opposing desires that will run throughout the entire opera.
- (01:00) The *romanza* begins: it is a strophic form (verses with repeated music) with a lyrical, simple melody. It is set in a gentle, rocking triple meter, with the orchestra supporting the voice, and the violins punctuating the text in a very high register.
- (02:23) The text and music repeat. To differentiate the second verse, the orchestra is more active underneath in this repetition, and there is a short passage of *parlando* (singing in a speech-like manner) singing at (3:30).
- (03:37) The ending of the aria is famously difficult; Radamès must reach a high B-flat *pianissimo* (very quietly) and sustain it without increasing in volume. This delicate singing requires great control of the voice

TRIUMPHAL MARCH (CD 2, TRACK 5)

Led by Radamès, the Egyptian army has conquered the Ethiopians, and now parades to celebrate its victory. Aida is forced by Amneris to accompany her and watch the procession, as the army brings the spoils of victory to lay before the throne. The march includes an on-stage *banda* (a group of instrumental performers who play from the stage).

What to listen for:

- The brisk March tempo and duple meter
- The scoring for brass instruments

(0:00) The melody is played by trumpets in the on-stage *banda*. The march is in the traditional meter of 4/4, but the first section is slightly irregular in that it is made up of two phrases of only three measures instead of the usual four, a deviation which makes a strong unconscious impact.

(00:49) The melody repeats, but now in a new key area. Modulations like this allow the music to repeat but with an audible difference, and the raised pitch creates heightened intensity. The full orchestra is now included in the scoring, although the on-stage trumpets are still clearly audible.

"O PATRIA MIA" (CD 3, TRACK 2)

Aida awaits Radamès outside the Temple of Isis, where Amneris has gone to pray. She wonders what he will have to say to her, and expresses her anguish at having to choose between the man she loves and loyalty to her country. The word 'patria' (country) is always a powerful one in the context of nineteenth century Italian nationalism. Verdi uses the same *romanza* form here as for Radamès's entrance aria to reflect the direct emotional expression of a character.

What to listen for:

- The solo oboe accompaniment
- Legato melody in the voice
- Word-painting in the orchestra

(00:00) An extended orchestral introduction sets the tone for the uncertainty and confusion in Aida's heart.

(00:55) Aida enters with a quiet passage of recitative, but grows more agitated at (01:21) when she contemplates drowning herself. Note the swirling orchestral accompaniment, reflecting the "dark waters of the Nile."

(02:01) The aria begins with the voice alone, which is then joined by the oboe and the bassoon.

(02:48) Trills in the winds accompany Aida as she muses on 'gentle breezes,' creating an evocative musical counterpoint to the text.

(03:59) The first verse builds to a high point but still maintains a delicate and mournful cast throughout.

(04:49) A second verse begins, now with an active accompaniment in the strings, adding variety and urgency to the repetition.

(05:51) The second verse reaches a climax with an unexpected blazing major chord, and then moves into a delicate coda. The aria ends on a pianissimo high A, a vocal challenge similar to the one at the end of "Celeste Aida."

"O TERRA ADDIO" (CD 3, TRACK 13)

Radamès has been condemned to death and Amneris's attempts to save him have failed. As he sits alone in the tomb below the temple, he wonders if Aida has safely returned to her homeland, and is stunned when she emerges from the shadows. She had heard of his fate and came to the tomb to wait for him so that they may die together. The lovers' final duet is very simple in form, supported by a striking orchestration. Against this backdrop, Verdi adds the voices of the temple chorus and a quiet invocation by Amneris.

What to listen for:

- The scene's construction from a repeating melody
- Amneris's contrasting lines against the lovers' duet
- The addition of the temple chorus

- (00:00) and The harps and strings playing high harmonics set the atmosphere for Aida's acknowledgement of her fate. She bids farewell to earth her dreams of joy, and prepares to enter eternity.
- (00:58) Aida's verse is repeated by Radamès while she sings underneath it. In this legato melody which sets unusually long lines of poetry, the beat is fluid so that the singers can linger slightly on important notes. The atmosphere is slow, quiet, and delicate.
- (01:51) The chorus in the temple is heard above the duet (offstage), repeating the same invocation of Ptah from the first act of the opera, creating an eerie counterpoint. The solo flute returns, playing very low in its register.
- (02:23) Radamès and Aida sing the melody in unison for the last time, as Amneris, in her lowest register, is heard pleading for eternal peace (at 3:43). Both the grand and the intimate elements of the opera here come together for the finale. The opera ends quietly, with Amneris' final words intoned over the solo violin.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the *My Highs & Lows* reproducible handout found in the back of this guide.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND AIDA

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE IN ATTENDING THE FINAL DRESS REHEARSAL

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. Performance activities help students analyze different aspects of the experience and engage critically with the performance. They will consider the creative choices that have been made for the particular production they are watching and examine different aspects of the performance.

The Student Critique activity incorporates a reproducible sheet. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. The activity directs attention to details of the production that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The activity sheet is called *My Highs & Lows*. It serves to guide students toward a consistent set of objective observations, as well as to help them articulate their own opinions. It is designed to enrich the students' understanding of the art form as a whole. The ratings system encourages students to express their critique: use these ratings to spark discussions that require careful, critical thinking.

The *My Highs & Lows* handout can be found at the back of this guide.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did they like? What didn't they? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently? The discussion offers an opportunity to apply the notes on students' *My Highs & Lows* sheet, as well as their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *Aida* experts.

The central plot of *Aida* is a love triangle, and Verdi likewise portrays each character with intensely conflicting emotions: Aida and Radamès are torn between their love for each other and their loyalty to their country; Radamès simultaneously seeks military glory and honor; and Amneris struggles with the knowledge that the man she loves is in love with a woman whom she considers inferior, as well as his seeming treachery to their country. But the opera is not just personal; it explicitly portrays imperial power and slavery, and deals with the fate of two nations.

You may want to prompt your students with the following questions:

- Amneris is a complex character: do you feel that she is genuinely regretful at the end of the opera? How does she treat Aida?
- Does Radamès make the right choice, to stay and face his punishment instead of leaving with *Aida* and potentially being happy in her homeland?
- Amonasro threatens to disown Aida for refusing to get information out of Radamès; is he an abusive father, or is he just doing what has to be done to save his people?
- The Egyptians call the Ethiopians “barbarians” and invaders who destroy fields and burn crops. Amonasro levels similar accusations back at the Egyptians. Who is justified in this opera, the Egyptians or the Ethiopians—or both, or neither? What does the opera have to say about conflict?
- Would you choose to leave your homeland forever for romantic love?

IN PRINT

Berger, William. *Verdi With a Vengeance: An Energetic Guide to the Life and Complete Works of the King of Opera*. New York: Vintage, 2000.

An engagingly written overview of Verdi's life and works from a regular Metropolitan Opera radio commentator, this is the most immediately accessible book on this list.

Budden, Julian. *The Operas of Verdi, Volume Three: From Don Carlos to Falstaff*, 3rd revised ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Budden's three volumes cover all of Verdi's operas, describing the genesis of each work, the sources, and a full synopsis with musical examples. Budden's work remains the standard reference for Verdi scholarship.

Budden, Julian. *Verdi: Master Musicians*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

A single volume biography and overview of Verdi's entire career, covering context and musical details. Accessible for non-specialists.

Philips-Matz, Mary Jane. *Verdi: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

An exhaustively researched biography of Verdi with full documentation of his life and travels, but less discussion of the works.

ONLINE

<http://www.verdi.san.beniculturali.it/verdi/?lang=en>

An Italian website for the Verdi Centennial in 2013, with extensive photos and articles.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/egyptian-art>

Website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian galleries, with extensive photos and recorded lectures.

act/scene

Acts and scenes are ways of categorizing sections of operas. An act is a large-scale division of an opera, and each opera will typically include from two to five acts. Acts can be subdivided into scenes, which are often differentiated by a change in setting or characters.

adagio

Literally “at ease,” adagio is a tempo marking that indicates a slow speed. An adagio tempo marking indicates that the performer should play in a slow and leisurely style.

allegro

Italian for “cheerful” or “joyful,” Allegro is the most common tempo marking in Western music, indicating a moderately fast to quick speed.

aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. For example, the earliest arias in opera consist of music sung with different stanzas of text (strophic arias). Another type of aria, da capo arias, became common by the eighteenth century and feature the return of the opening music and text after a contrasting middle section. Nineteenth-century Italian arias often feature a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from the first section (the cantabile) to the second section (the cabaletta).

articulation

The smoothness or hardness with which a note is begun and ended. Articulation is a way of indicating the degree to which each note connects to the next, and can be seen while watching the bow of a stringed instrument player. A note can be attacked sharply and made short, or it can flow smoothly into the next note.

baritone

Literally “deep sounding,” a baritone is what a typical male voice sounds like—the term refers to a male singer with a low but not extremely low vocal range. A baritone will sing notes that are higher than those sung by a bass and lower than those sung by a tenor. Uncommon until the nineteenth century, baritone roles have grown in popularity in opera since the works of Verdi, who often reserved the voice type for villains.

baroque

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1600 to 1750. The beginning of the Baroque period coincides with the invention of opera as a genre, and its end coincides with the death of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. The Baroque period saw the rise of modern tonality, an expansion of performing forces, and increased ornamentation. The term “baroque” means bizarre or exaggerated, and was used by critics in the Eighteenth century critics who preferred a simpler and less-ornamented style.

bass

The lowest sounding line in music. Bass also refers to the lowest singing range for the male voice. Opera composers often choose a bass voice to sing one of two opposite types of roles: comic characters or dramatic and serious characters. For example, Mozart and Rossini wrote comic parts for bass voice, using musical repetition and low register for comic effect. Wagner and Mozart wrote serious parts for bass voice, focusing on the gravity that a low register can contribute to the overall musical texture.

bel canto

Referring to the Italian vocal style of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bel canto singing emphasizes lyricism and ornamentation in order to showcase the beauty of the singer's voice. Its focus on lyrical embellishment directly contrasts with a contemporary Germanic focus on a weighty, dramatic style. Bel canto singing is most closely associated with the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti.

cadenza

An ornamented musical elaboration played in a free style by a soloist to display his or her virtuosity. Cadenzas are typically improvised—that is, created by a performer on the spot—though they can also be written out in advance. They most frequently occur near the end of a piece, at a point of harmonic tension when the piece is about to conclude.

chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral or commentary on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

Classical

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1750 to 1830, bordered by the earlier Baroque period and the later Romantic period. Contrasting with the ornamentation common to the preceding Baroque period, Classical music is characterized by simple and elegant melodies, regular harmonic accompaniment, and contrasts between melodic themes. The composers most closely associated with the Classical period include Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

coloratura

A rapid and elaborate ornamentation by a solo singer, particularly common in operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Requiring vocal agility and a wide and high range, coloratura showcases the virtuosity of a singer by featuring repeating melodic figures, rapid scales, trills, and other embellishments.

conductor

The person who directs the orchestra, setting the tempo, giving interpretive directions to the musicians, and generally holding all the musical elements of a performance together. In orchestra performance, the conductor typically stands on a podium in front of the players and uses a baton to communicate the meter and tempo, and his or her non-baton hand to indicate dynamics, phrasing, and articulation to the musicians. The gestures of a conductor can be likened to a non-verbal language that the musicians understand.

contralto

A deep female voice, with a vocal range that extends lower than that of a mezzo-soprano. Contraltos are known for having a very wide range and for the power and depth of sound with which they can sing. As is the case for roles for basses, many of the earliest roles in opera for contraltos are comic roles, though nineteenth-century composers also wrote dramatic roles for female singers with a lower range.

crescendo

A gradual raising of volume in music achieved by increasing the dynamic level. When music crescendos, the performers begin at a softer dynamic level and become incrementally louder. One of the most famous types of crescendos in opera, the Rossini crescendo, includes an increase in volume together with repeating melodic and rhythmic phrases, higher instrumental registers, and the gradual addition of instruments in order to create a particularly dramatic effect.

diminuendo

A gradual lowering of volume in music achieved by decreasing the dynamic level. During a diminuendo, the performers begin at a louder dynamic level and become incrementally softer.

dynamics

A musical trait pertaining to loudness and softness. During the eighteenth century, composers began indicating their desired intensity of volume in music by writing words such as piano (soft) and forte (loud) into the musical score. Dynamics encompass a spectrum from pianissimo (very soft) to piano (soft) to mezzo piano (moderately soft), all the way up to fortissimo (very loud). Music can shift to another dynamic level either suddenly or gradually, through a crescendo or diminuendo.

ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

finale

The last portion of an act, a finale consists of several musical sections that accompany an escalating dramatic tension. Finales frequently consist of multiple ensembles with different numbers of characters. When it occurs at the end of an early act in the opera, a finale may create a messy situation—and the resolution of this situation will only happen in subsequent acts. One type of finale common in comic operas, a chain finale, features characters entering or exiting from the stage to create unexpected combinations of characters, in turn increasing the opera's dramatic tension.

forte

Meaning "loud" or "strong" in Italian, forte is a dynamic level in music that indicates a loud volume. Adding the suffix "-issimo" to a word serves as an intensifier—since forte means "loud," fortissimo means "very loud."

harmony

The simultaneous sounding of pitches to produce chords, and the relationship between different chords as they succeed one another. Throughout much of Western music, systems of rules govern these progressions to help create our sense of musical tension, expectation, and conclusion. Tonal harmony is based on progressions of chords in relationship to a tonic (or home) key. In the 19th century, as composers sought novel sounds to reflect the originality of their invention, they began to employ chords and progressions of greater dissonance and greater distance from the home key. As such dissonances moved beyond mere sound effects into the musical structure itself, the traditional theory of tonal harmony began to become insufficient as a way to understand and describe musical structure.

intermission

A break between acts of an opera. At the beginning of an intermission, the curtain will fall (that is, close) on stage, and the lights in the auditorium, called the house lights, will become brighter. Intermissions provide audiences with a chance to walk around, talk with one another, and reflect on what they have seen and what could happen next. The break in the performance may also correspond with a change of time or scene in the story of the opera—the next act may take place hours or months later, or be set in a different location. Usually lights will dim and a bell may sound to indicate that the intermission is drawing to a close and the opera is about to resume.

legato

A type of articulation in which a melody is played with smooth connection between the notes. A legato passage does not include any pauses between notes or any accents at the beginnings of notes, as the notes blend into one another without a break. In contrast, a passage that is played staccato features notes played in a separated manner.

Leitmotif

From the German for “leading motive,” a leitmotif is a recurring musical idea, or motive, that represents a particular person, object, idea, emotion, or place. This musical idea is usually a few seconds in length and can occur in the music’s melody, harmony, rhythm, or a combination of the three. Leitmotifs are most closely associated with the operas of Richard Wagner, where they are used repeatedly throughout the opera to provide unity; they also less frequently appear in operas of other composers, including Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Strauss.

libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early eighteenth century, a composer would frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

maestro

A title of respect used to address a conductor. The term is often applied to conductors with several decades of experience. However, performers often use this honorific when addressing the conductor.

melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

mezzo-soprano

A female voice with a range between that of a contralto and soprano. A mezzo-soprano's voice is slightly deeper than that of a soprano, so mezzo-sopranos are often cast in supporting roles as older women, including nurses, confidantes, or maids.

opera buffa

A term applied to Italian comic operas from the mid-eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. The plot of an opera buffa often features scenes and characters from everyday life and addresses a light or sentimental subject, concluding with a happy ending.

opera seria

An eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Italian opera employing a noble and serious style. The plot of an opera seria often upholds morality by presenting conflicting emotions such as love versus duty, or by modeling enlightened rulers.

operetta

Featuring spoken dialogue, songs, and dances, an operetta is a short theatrical piece. Shorter in duration than operas, operettas typically feature a light subject matter, incorporate melodies composed in a popular style, and feature spoken dialogue. Most popular from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the genre is the precursor of the American musical.

ornamentation

An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make a melody more expressive or ornate. Ornamentation can be either indicated through symbols written into the music or improvised by the performer.

overture

An instrumental piece that occurs before the first act as an introduction to an opera. After the conductor enters the orchestra pit and takes a bow, the music for the overture begins. Most overtures are a few minutes in duration, and set the mood for the opera—even featuring musical themes that will occur later in the opera.

piano

Abbreviated *p* in a musical score, piano indicates a soft dynamic level. Musicians may achieve a piano sound by using less bow, less air, or less force. In opera, soft music will often correspond with emotions of sadness or moments in the plot when a character is reflecting on a course of action or emotional state. Pianissimo is “very soft,” and can be so quiet that an audience may need to listen carefully in order to discern its melody and harmony.

pitch

The quality of a musical sound corresponding to its perceived highness or lowness. Scientifically, pitch can be measured as the number of vibrations (or repetitions) of a sound wave per second, which is called its frequency. A sound with a low frequency, like a bass drum, will sound low and have a low pitch, while a sound with a high frequency, like a siren, will sound high.

prima donna

Meaning “first lady” in Italian, the prima donna is the leading female role in an opera. The term may apply to the role or to the singer herself, who usually sings in the soprano register and is the star of the show. Since the nineteenth century, the term has also been applied to a singer of any gender with a self-centered and demanding personality.

recitative

A type of vocal writing between speech and song that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied either by keyboard or by the whole orchestra.

rhythm

Rhythm refers to the way music unfolds over time; it is a series of durations in a range from long to short. Along with pitch, it is a basic and indispensable parameter of music. Rhythm is perceived in relation to an underlying beat and within the context of a meter. Western musical notation indicates to the performer the exact duration of each note or rest.

Romantic

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1830 to 1900. Beginning in literature and later adopted by composers, romanticism reflected a newfound focus on individuality, nature, and emotional extremes. Music from the Romantic period often explores music’s redemptive power, focusing on the sublimity of nature, love, and the mysterious. Composers began to experiment with shortening and lengthening the standard forms and durations of musical works, and also added more expressive harmonies to convey the originality of their musical vision.

score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that unite to constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

Singspiel

Literally “sung play,” a Singspiel is an opera with spoken dialogue. Singspiels are typically in German and are from the Classical or early Romantic eras. The plot of a Singspiel is usually comic in nature, and its music may include songs, choruses, and instrumental numbers that are separated by spoken dialogue.

solo

A piece, musical passage, or line for a lone singer or other performer, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The most common type of solo in opera is the aria, which is composed for a single voice with orchestral accompaniment.

soprano

The highest singing range for the female voice. Roles composed for soprano singers are typically among the leading roles in the opera and require soprano singers to show off their virtuosic flexibility and range.

tempo

Literally “time” in Italian, tempo refers to the speed of a piece of music. Tempo is indicated in a score by a variety of conventional (often Italian) words—such as *allegro*, *adagio*, *vivace*, *moderato*, *grave*, and many more—that not only provide direction on the composer’s desired rate of speed, but also carry associations of gesture and character. For instance, *vivace* indicates not only a brisk speed but also a lively spirit. Additional tempo markings may indicate when a composer asks for a section of music to be sped up (such as “*accelerando*”) or slowed down (such as “*rallentando*”).

tenor

The highest natural male vocal range. By the nineteenth century, the tenor had become the most common vocal range for male leading roles in operas. Tenor roles often feature high-pitched notes for male voice in order to showcase the singer’s range and power. A related voice type is the countertenor, with a range above that of a tenor and similar to that of a contralto.

theme/motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

timbre

Pronounced TAM-bruh, a French word that means “sound color.” It refers to the complex combination of characteristics that give each instrument or voice its unique sound. Just as we can recognize each other by the differences in our speaking voices, operatic singing voices are distinguishable by their unique timbres. Listeners can also identify orchestral instruments by their timbre without being able to see them. The creative combination of different instrumental timbres is one of the artistic aspects of orchestration.

trill

A rapid alternation between two pitches that are adjacent to one another. Trills are a type of ornamentation, serving to embellish the melodic line, and appear regularly within coloratura passages. Trills also may appear near the end of a piece in order to prolong the musical tension before the music concludes.

verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower-class, and the criminal. Its characters are driven by passion to defy reason, morality, and the law. In order to reflect these emotional extremes, composers of verismo opera developed a musical style that communicates raw and unfiltered passions. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the *bel canto* style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within the realm of literature.

November 1, 2016

Conducted by Marco Armiliato

Reviewed by _____

THE STARS:	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Liudmyla Monastyrskya as Aida	*****	
Marco Berti as Radamès	*****	
Ekaterina Gubanova as Amneris	*****	
Mark Delavan as Amonasro	*****	
Dmitry Belosselskiy as Ramfis	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Radamès sings Aida's praises			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Amneris encounters Aida and Radamès (trio)			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Radamès is named the general (chorus)			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Aida despairs having to choose between love and her country			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Radamès is consecrated in the temple of Ptah			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Act 2:			
Amneris relaxes in her chamber			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Amneris summons Aida and discovers her secret love			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The Egyptians parade in triumph			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Dancers celebrate and tribute is brought in			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Aida recognizes her father and pleads for mercy			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Radamès is rewarded with marriage to Amneris			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Act 3:			
Amneris prays at the temple of Isis			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Aida sings of her love for her country			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Amonasro confronts Aida and gives her orders			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Radamès arrives; Aida suggests they escape			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Radamès reveals the army's route			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Amneris rejects Radamès as a traitor; Aida flees			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Act 4:			
Amneris reflects on her complicated feelings for Radamès			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Radamès rejects Amneris's help			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The priests accuse and condemn Radamès			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Amneris pleads for Radamès's life			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Radamès discovers Aida sealed in the tomb with him			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Aida and Radamès bid the world farewell			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5