

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 another attack against Egypt. Radamès hopes to command the Egyptian 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 and marry her. But Amneris also loves Radamès and is jealous of Aida, whom she suspects of being her rival for Radamès's affection. A messenger brings news that the Ethiopians are advancing. The king names Radamès to lead the army, and all prepare for war. Left alone, Aida is torn between her love for Radamès and loyalty to her native country, where her father, Amonasro, is king.

In the temple of Vulcan, the priests consecrate Radamès to the service of the god Ptah. Ramfis orders Radamès to protect the homeland.

Act II

Ethiopia has been defeated, and in her chambers, Amneris waits for the triumphant return of Radamès. Alone with Aida, she pretends that Radamès has fallen in battle, then says that he is still alive. Aida's reactions leave no doubt that she loves Radamès. Amneris is certain that she will defeat her rival.

At the city gates, the king and Amneris observe the victory celebrations and praise Radamès's triumph. Soldiers lead in the captured Ethiopians, among them Amonasro, who signals his daughter not to reveal his identity as king. Amonasro's eloquent plea for mercy impresses Radamès, and the warrior asks that the order for the prisoners to be executed be overruled and that they be freed instead. The king grants his request but keeps Amonasro in custody. He 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 pray in a temple on the banks of the Nile. Nearby, Aida is waiting for Radamès, lost in thoughts of her homeland. Suddenly, Amonasro appears. Appealing to Aida's sense of duty, he makes her promise to discover from Radamès which route the Egyptian army will take to invade Ethiopia. Amonasro hides as Radamès arrives. He and Aida dream about their future life together, and Aida convinces him 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. Realizing what he has done, Radamès is horrified. Aida and Amonasro try to calm him when Ramfis and Amneris emerge from the temple. Father and daughter are able to escape, but Radamès surrenders himself to the high priest's guards.

Act IV

Radamès awaits trial as a traitor, believing Aida to be dead. Amneris summons him, but even after he learns that Aida has survived, he rejects Amneris's offer to save him if he gives up his lover. Brought before the priests, Radamès refuses to answer their accusations, and they condemn him to be buried alive. Amneris begs for mercy, but the judges will not change their verdict.

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 peace.

In Focus

Giuseppe Verdi

Aida

Premiere: Khedivial Opera House, Cairo, 1871

This grandest of grand operas, *Aida* 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, the opera never loses sight of its three protagonists: Amneris, the proud daughter of the pharaoh; her slave Aida, who is secretly the princess of the rival kingdom of Ethiopia; and Radamès, the Egyptian warrior that 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

In a remarkable career spanning six decades in the theater, Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed 28 operas, at least half of which are at the core of today's repertoire. His role in Italy's cultural and political development also made him an icon in his native country. The story of *Aida* is thought to be the creation of Auguste Mariette (1821–1881), an extraordinary French archaeologist who was the founder of the Egyptian Museum of Cairo (though opinions differ—Verdi biographer Mary Jane Phillips-Matz has argued that the source was actually composer and librettist Temistocle Solera). 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 libretti, 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, 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 (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.

Met History

Aida first came to the Met during the “German Seasons” of the 1880s and was performed in German until 1890. (The Met’s inaugural 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. Arturo Toscanini made his Met debut conducting a spectacular new production (even though the previous production was only a year old) for opening night of the 1908–09 season. That performance also featured the Met debut of Czech soprano Emmy Destinn (who would sing the title role 52 times at the Met through 1920), as well as American mezzo-soprano Louise Homer (who sang Amneris 97 times between 1900 and 1927), tenor Enrico Caruso (91 performances as Radamès at the Met between 1903 and 1919), and the great baritone Pasquale Amato (70 appearances between 1908 and 1921). Other unforgettable Aidas at the Met have included Zinka Milanov (1938–58), Elisabeth Rethberg (1922–42), Birgit Nilsson (1961–1967), Leontyne Price (from 1961 until her farewell appearance at the Met in 1985), Martina Arroyo (1965–1986), and Gilda Cruz-Romo (1973–1979). A number of exceptional tenors have appeared as Radamès over the years, including Giovanni Martinelli (a company record 123 times between 1913 and 1943), Giacomo Lauri-Volpi (1925–1933), Mario Del Monaco (1951–1954), Carlo Bergonzi (1956–1978), Richard Tucker (1965–1973), and Luciano Pavarotti (1986–2001). The current staging by Sonja Frisell, with sets by the acclaimed film production designer Gianni Quaranta (*A Room with a View*), premiered in 1988 with a cast headed by Leona Mitchell, Fiorenza Cossotto, Plácido Domingo, Sherrill Milnes, and Paul Plishka. The production was telecast a year later, with Aprile Millo and Dolora Zajick squaring off as Aida and Amneris.

Program Note

After the 1867 premiere in Paris of Verdi's *Don Carlos*, Camille du Locle, the composer's Parisian friend and co-librettist for that opera, persisted in attempts to further collaborate with the most famous opera composer in the world at the time. The two struck up a correspondence after du Locle's return from a trip to Egypt: "a land," wrote Verdi, "which once possessed a grandeur and a civilization which I could never bring myself to admire." How ironic that he would, not long after, embark on one of the most notable artistic monuments of 19th-century "Egyptomania," the fad for all things Egyptian that followed Napoleon's expeditions in 1797–1801 and the subsequent magnificent archeological discoveries.

The process that led to *Aida* began with the Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, known as Ismail the Magnificent, who stated in 1879 (the same year in which he was toppled from power by the British), "My country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe." As part of the festivities marking the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Khedive invited Verdi to compose a celebratory ode, but the composer declined: He had no desire to write pièces d'occasion. Determined to secure a new work by Verdi, the Khedive then offered a much more attractive commission—a new opera to open Cairo's extravagant new opera house, for which the composer was offered unlimited rehearsal time whenever he wished. When Verdi learned that Wagner might be offered the project should the great Italian composer continue to be obdurate, he capitulated almost immediately. A shrewd businessman who recognized the value of having a ruler so desirous of his services, Verdi requested—and received—a fee four times what he was paid for *Don Carlos*.

It was du Locle who brought to Verdi's attention the scenario that eventually became *Aida*, but if he had hoped for a French-language, Parisian version of the opera, his hopes were dashed by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, which threw the French capital into chaos. Verdi also encountered the usual complications attendant on completing a libretto with sufficient specimens of "parola scenica" (a term he invented in a letter to his Italian librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni in 1870 to describe words and phrases that leap off the page in moments of heightened drama, such as "Ritorna vincitor!"), and casting the La Scala and Cairo premieres proved troublesome, as well. Ultimately, the delays prevented the work from being ready for the 1869 opening of the Khedivial Opera House, and Ismail Pasha had to be content with a performance of *Rigoletto* instead. Finally, with all the complexities resolved, *Aida* received its world premiere in Cairo on December 24, 1871, and its European premiere in Milan on February 8, 1872. The La Scala performance—Verdi cared more about this one—was a huge success with the public, but the critics were less happy with the musical mixture of "the modern school" (influences from Wagner, Meyerbeer, and Gounod) and traditional Italian traits than they had been with *Don Carlos*. Verdi, worried about critical reaction, wrote to his friend Clarina Maffei with regard to the fourth production of the opera in Padua:

The success of *Aida*, as you know, was outspoken and decisive, untainted by *ifs* and *buts* and such unkind phrases as *Wagnerism*, the *Future*, the *Art of Melody*, etc., etc. The audience surrendered to its feelings and applauded. That's all!

Verdi himself conducted the first Parisian performance on March 22, 1880, and this time, it was an unqualified success with public and press alike. Sometimes it takes a few years, or more than a few, to bring a work into proper focus.

That Verdi accepted the Khedive's commission is both somewhat surprising—in light of his characteristic demands for original, even experimental theatrical works—and typical: It was not unknown for him to be drawn to simpler, more old-fashioned plots in the wake of radical endeavors. The love-triangle of Idamante, Ilia, and Electra in Mozart's *Idomeneo* some 90 years earlier is a predecessor for Radamès, Aida, and Amneris in *Aida*; Verdi described the plot as “not entirely new,” its outline simple and straightforward. What attracted him was the sheer theatricality of the story, among other things, including the possibilities of new and exotic orchestral colors. The more limited orchestras of earlier 19th-century Italian opera had long since been replaced by immense ensembles—in this case, including six “Egyptian” trumpets (actually Roman-made), a military banda (every town had its brass band for public occasions, and they are an enduring part of Verdi's orchestras), and an underground ensemble of four trumpets, four trombones, and bass drum for the tomb scene. The distinctive coloration of this opera begins with the first ultra-soft, muted violin sounds at the start of the prelude; this sort of atmospheric approach, beginning and ending softly, with richer, fuller sonorities in the middle, was fashionable at the time, but Verdi's canonic workings and radical harmonies are his own. We hear an initial theme—a rising fragment ending with a “sighing figure”—that is associated throughout the opera with the heroine Aida and love first repressed, then admitted, followed by a more menacing descending theme treated in counterpoint and associated with the priests of Fthà, or Ptah, the creator god and demiurge who existed before all other things in Egyptian mythology. (We hear Aida's theme memorably in Act III played by the flutes, a high sustained tone in the violins, and cellos *sotto voce*, as she is waiting for Radamès outside the temple.) Other equally memorable orchestral sounds are to be found in abundance—for example, the translucent tapestry of strings at the start of Act III, with the note G played in various ways (*pizzicato*, muted, *tremolando*, distributed across four octaves in the first violins in swaying fashion). The result is a texture of incomparable delicacy, mystery, and beauty—of nocturnal stillness that is nonetheless vibrant with quivering life.

But this, of course, is an Italian opera, in which voices reign supreme. Verdi's publisher Ricordi describes *Aida* as being around 20 years old, of “a loving nature,” with “meekness and gentleness” her chief characteristics. This loving nature has musical heights and depths; we hear despair, longing, and ardor with a huge vocal wingspan in “*Ritorna vincitor!*” and plaintive homesickness in “*O patria mia,*” her

Act III romanza. "Oh, my country, never more will I see you," she sings before and after each verse, the line often splitting into expressive fragments. Her father, Amonasro, capable of lyricism when he is persuading Aida to do his bidding, shows his true colors when he bursts forth in anger against the Egyptians. "Just as a man in a towering rage oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation, and propriety and forgets himself completely, so should the music likewise forget itself," Mozart said of Osmin's music in his *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, and the same is true of Amonasro. Radamès is given sufficient tenor heroics to satisfy any operagoer, until he realizes in Act III that he has betrayed his country. The lyrical sweetness of his part in the death-duet at the opera's conclusion is a new vein of pathos for him. The mezzo-soprano Amneris is by far the most complex of the major characters. She genuinely loves Radamès, but she is a master of dissimulation, accustomed to power, and determined to humiliate Aida; the melody associated with her tends to appear in the orchestra, with the vocal line ("parlante melodico," or "melodious speech") grafted onto it. But when she pleads with Radamès in Act IV ("Ah! Tu dei vivere"), Verdi gives her some of the most anguished, majestic, and beautiful melody ever written for a mezzo, culminating in a plea to the gods for mercy ("Numi, pietà"—words Aida had sung earlier) couched as gasping, sobbing fragments. Ramfis is among the most powerful of all the priests, hermits, and prophets sprinkled throughout Verdi's operas, and he is an especially unyielding and bloodthirsty specimen of the type. In the judgment scene of Act IV, he and his priests sing a version of plainchant-like melody—not to be found in any liturgy—of Verdi's invention, and he is often accompanied by the orchestra's version of sounds from the crypt.

This opera was Verdi's hail-and-farewell to the French-derived Italianate version of grand opera, based on history (or imagined history) and filled with huge ceremonial scenes, large crowds, massed forces of many kinds. The second scene in Act I, with its invocations of Ptah to melodies made to sound non-Western (a kind of exotic wailing); the dances for Moorish slaves and for the temple priestesses; the massing of male chorus, female chorus, banda, the soloists, and the entire orchestra for the triumphal scene of Act II: These are guaranteed to wow the spectator. But Verdi has a heartbreaking habit in his late tragedies of pulling the camera away from the gigantic and the public to focus instead on the most intimate matters of love and death, and he does so here. The work's final moments, with the chorus above the tomb chanting "Immenso Fthà" and Amneris pleading in anguished monotone for Radamès's soul, are like none other in operatic history.

—Susan Youens

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