

Interesting bits about *Aida* compiled by Jill Leahy

During 1886 rehearsals of *Aida* at the Teatro Lyrico Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro, there was an ongoing quarrel between artists of the Italian touring company and the local inept conductor, with the result that substitute conductors were rejected by the audience. Arturo Toscanini, a 19-year-old cellist who was assistant chorus master, was persuaded to take up the baton for the performance. Toscanini conducted the entire opera from memory, with great success: the start of a promising career.

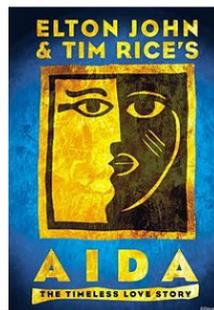
The great conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was presiding over a performance of *Aida* beset by many stylistic problems, not the least of which was a camel that relieved itself on the stage. As Sir Thomas watched the camel, he was heard to mutter to himself, "Terribly vulgar, but, Lord, what a critic!"

In 1987, *Aida* was performed by the Cairo Opera Company at the pyramids as a mega production with over 1600 artists on stage. The performances attracted over 27,000 spectators from around the world. The October 2001 performances of the opera *Aida* at the Pyramids were expected to attract over 26,000 spectators over six evenings but the September 11 attacks in the U.S. impacted those plans. With the recent unrest in Egypt, for the first time in the history of the Cairo Opera House, the performances of *Aida* were cancelled on May 29-30, 2013.

Aida is the result of Verdi's desire to create "grand opera . . . done in my own manner". However, as 'grand' as *Aida* is, it requires an orchestra smaller than that for his previous 'grand' opera, *Don Carlos*. *Aida* has one of the largest casts of any opera. During the 'Triumphal March' or 'Grand Chorus' in Act II there are over 160 people on stage, displaying an extremely dramatic sound and spectacle. 'The Triumphal March' appears frequently in popular culture, most notably in films such as *The Rules of Attraction*, *Prizzi's Honor*, and *The Cat's Meow*.

The opera has been adapted for motion pictures, most notably in a 1953 production, starring Lois Maxwell and Sophia Loren, and a 1987 Swedish production. In both cases, the lead actors lip-synched to recordings by actual opera singers. Other music inspired by ancient Egypt ranges from Debussy's ballet score *Khamma* to "Walk like an Egyptian" by The Bangles. Other operas with an Egyptian theme: Handel wrote three operas set in Egypt, including *Julius Caesar*. Massenet wrote *Thaïs*, set in Alexandria.

The opera's story, but not its music, was used as the basis for a 1998 musical backed by the Disney Company and written by Elton John and Tim Rice. Originally called *Elaborate Lives: The Legend of Aida*, the show had its world premiere at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre in 1998. Eventually it went on to be titled *Elton John and Tim Rice's Aida*, which ran on Broadway at the Palace Theatre from 2000 to 2004.



Sources: *World of Opera* by Bruce Scott, Atlanta Opera, and Al-Ahram Publishing House online.

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Aida

PITTSBURGH OPERA
 EDUCATION

Study Guide to the Opera

Music by Giuseppe Verdi • Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni



Putting the "GRAND" in Grand Opera

by Jill Leahy

Giuseppe Verdi, born in 1813, was one of the most famous composers of the 19th century. While composing for the Paris Opera, Verdi developed a friendship with librettist and impresario Camille du Locle, who provided a steady stream of possible opera subjects. There are several versions of how the idea for *Aida* came about: **(False)** Verdi was asked by Khedive Ismail of Egypt to create an opera celebrating the opening of the Suez Canal. **(May be False)** Du Locle sent Verdi an invented scenario by the archaeologist and Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, secretary to the Khedive. **(May be True)** One scholar claims that the scenario was written by Temistocle Solera, a librettist who had worked with Verdi.

But really, who cares? The important thing is Verdi liked the idea of a basic love triangle—Aida, Radamès, Amneris—set in an exotic locale and involving the struggle between loyalty, patriotism, and love both forbidden and unrequited. Eventually the original scenario became an Italian libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni. Verdi researched Egyptian religion, music, history, and geography. He was intrigued with musically depicting the exotic world of ancient Egypt for Western audiences. He worked in both major and minor modes, used unusual instrumentation with flutes, trumpets, and harps, and wrote very demanding and highly emotional roles for the principal singers. In the end, Verdi created an opera inhabited by lots of people on stage—singers, dancers, slaves, messengers, even animals—and requiring majestic scenery changes. The result—a grand spectacle!

Aida was to be premiered at the Khedival Opera House in January 1871; however, the costumes and scenery coming from Paris were delayed because the Franco-Prussian war was raging. Finally, the Cairo premiere took place on December 24, 1871, but Verdi chose not to attend. Instead, he conducted the Italian premiere himself at *La Scala* on February 8, 1872.

Although the critics didn't particularly like it, *Aida* was enthusiastically embraced by audiences, and within three years from its premiere it was seen all over the world. *Aida* continues to be part of standard operatic repertoire.

Aida Synopsis

The scene is in Memphis and Thebes, at the time of the Pharaohs' power.

ACT I, Scene 1 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. Radamès dreams that victory in the war would enable him to free her and marry her (**Celeste Aida**). 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 (**Ritorna vincitor**). She prays to the gods for mercy.

ACT I, Scene 2 In the temple of Vulcan, the priests consecrate Radamès. Ramfis orders him to protect the homeland.

ACT II, Scene 1 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 (**Duet: Fu la sorte dell'armi**). 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, determined to be victorious over her rival, leaves for the triumphal procession.

ACT II, Scene 2 At the city gates the king and Amneris observe the celebrations and crown Radamès with a victor's wreath (**Triumphal scene: Gloria all'Egitto**). 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.

Intermission

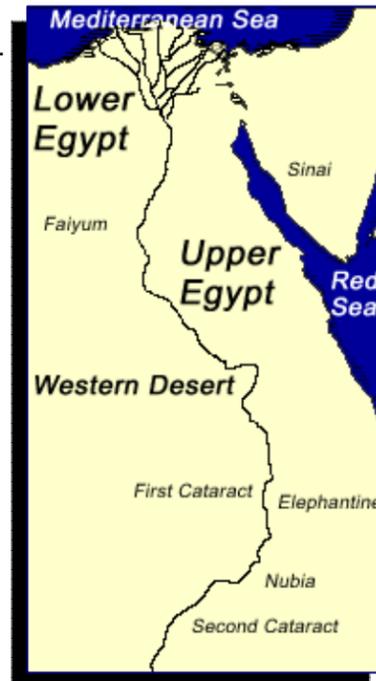
ACT III On the eve of Amneris's wedding, Ramfis and Amneris enter a temple on the banks of the Nile to pray. Aida, who is waiting to meet Radamès in secret, is lost in thoughts of her homeland (**O patria mia**). Suddenly Amonasro appears. Invoking Aida's sense of duty, he makes her promise to find out from Radamès which route the Egyptian army will take to invade Ethiopia (**Duet: Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate**). Amonasro hides as Radamès enters and assures Aida of his love (**Duet: Pur ti riveggo, mia dolce Aida**). 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 desperate about 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.

Intermission

ACT IV, Scene 1 Radamès awaits trial as a traitor. He believes Aida to be dead but then learns from Amneris that she has survived. Amneris offers to save him if he renounces her rival but Radamès refuses. Brought before the priests, he remains silent to their accusations and is condemned to be buried alive. Amneris begs for mercy, but the judges will not change their verdict. She curses them.

ACT IV, Scene 2 Aida has hidden in the vault to share Radamès's fate. They express their love for the last time (**Duet: O terra, addio**) while Amneris, in the temple above, prays for Radamès's soul.

Adapted from *Opera News*



Characters of the Opera

EGYPTIANS

King of Egypt *bass*

Radamès
[rah-dah-MESS] *tenor*
Egyptian general who hopes to lead the army against the enemy so he can dedicate his victory to his love Aida.

Amneris
[ahm-NEH-ris] *mezzo-soprano*
Proud Egyptian princess in love with Radamès and jealous of her slave Aida.

Ramfis [RAHM-fees] *bass*
Powerful High Priest of the god Ptah. His name is sometimes spelled Ramphis.

High priestess *soprano*
Though not seen on stage, the high priestess plays a vital role in the consecration scene, when the priests, priestesses, and Radamès invoke the blessing of Ptah.

ETHIOPIANS

Amonasro
[ah-mohn-AHZ-roh] *baritone*
King of Ethiopia who leads his army to attack Thebes. He forces Aida, his daughter, to betray the man she loves.

Aida [ah-EE-dah] *soprano*
Ethiopian slave to the Egyptian princess Amneris. Her name is also spelled Aïda. She must choose between her love for the Egyptian, Radamès, and loyalty to her homeland.

Messenger
Priests, priestesses
Official
Guard
Nubians
Populace, slaves, prisoners

Getting to Know Verdi

compiled by Jill Leahy

Giuseppe Verdi was so famous that letters addressed simply "Maestro Verdi, Italy" reached him. If Verdi's fame and success were translated into today's terms, he would be a rock star. Apart from being a leading musical figure, he was a political figure iconized by thousands of Italians.

Verdi turned down the Khedive's invitation to write an "ode" for the new opera house because "I am not accustomed to compose *morceaux de circonstance*", translated to mean "occasional pieces." Some scholars claim that Verdi refused to create an opera for the Khedive many times, but finally agreed when he was told that they were going to offer the opportunity to Richard Wagner.

2013 marks the 200th anniversary of Giuseppe Verdi's birth. During October, special events are scheduled in the city of Parma, Modena, Roncole Verdi (where he was born), and Busseto (where he grew up and was the town's music master as a young adult). Opera performances are held in the *Teatro Regio di Parma*, one of Italy's historic opera houses, and in Busseto at *Teatro Giuseppe Verdi*.

Verdi did not attend the premiere in Cairo, and was displeased when he found out that the audience consisted of invited dignitaries, politicians, and critics, but not the general public. He considered the premiere at *La Scala* as the real one.

"In spite of *Aida's* widespread appeal—it is prevented from being among the top ten only because of the large scale resources required to stage the piece—there was one person who didn't care for the new opera and demanded a refund. Shortly after the Parma premiere, Prospero Bertani was bold enough to write the composer directly, demanding not only the cost of his ticket, but reimbursement of train fare and dinner. Slightly amused, the composer asked his publisher Ricordi to write a check for everything but the meal, which he would have had anyway. Verdi requested a signed remittance from Bertani for the sum promising that the latter would never again subject himself to the 'horrible specters' of his music, unless the composer personally authorized it and covered the expenses. Bertani happily produced the necessary documentation. Verdi then instructed his publisher to print the letter in the Italian newspapers ('as many as you like'), which caused the poor man to become *persona non grata* everywhere he went. Signor Bertani implored the composer to revive his reputation, but in a flash of his acute mean streak (and affront to his ego), Verdi wouldn't budge."



Giuseppe Verdi conducting the Paris Opera premiere of *Aida* (sung in French) at the Palais Garnier on 22 March 1880.

Sources: Atlanta Opera, Carolina Opera, and

Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents by Hans Busch