



THE ATLANTA OPERA

AIDA



FEBRUARY 27, MARCH 2, 5, 7(M), 2010

Opera Guide

Synopsis: *Aida*



Aida by J.D. Scott

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 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.

In the temple of Vulcan, the priests consecrate Radamès. 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 (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.

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.

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.

ACT IV

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 the priests.

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.

Courtesy of Opera News

Character Map

Amonasro
King of Ethiopia; Aida's father;
taken prisoner by Radames

King of Egypt
Father of Amneris

Aida

Radames

Amneris

Ethiopian princess; enslaved to Amneris; secretly in love with Radames; daughter of Amonasro

Captain of the Egyptian guard; secretly in love with Aida

Daughter of the King of Egypt; in love with Radames; master to Aida

Meet the Composer: *Giuseppe Verdi*



Giuseppe Verdi

Giuseppe Verdi was the greatest composer of Italian opera in the nineteenth century. He was also a man who helped shape his time, and his time helped shape him. When he was born, 'Italy' was only a figure of speech; it was composed of small states, each with its own dialect that could not be easily understood by the citizens of other parts of the peninsula. Only the speech of Tuscany, with its capital, Florence, and of other nearby states would be understood as Italian today. The states shared little history; most were under the domination of some foreign power, and each state used different currencies. Music formed the only common bond, and Verdi provided that. He united Italians with his music before they were united politically.

Verdi was so famous that letters addressed simply "Maestro Verdi, Italy" reached him. Almost all of Verdi's earlier operas had an underlying theme of revolt against oppression, at least to the extent allowed by the censors. The audience understood that the oppressed people in Verdi's works were lightly disguised Italians. Since each Italian city had an opera house as its principal center of recreation, opera was the perfect medium for stirring up patriotic feeling among the oppressed citizens. Applause for Verdi meant applause for independence.

Giuseppe Verdi was born in October 1813 in Le Roncole, a village in the

province of Parma. Since Parma was under the control of the French at the time, the child's name was registered as Joseph Fortunin François, although he was known as Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco. In 1814, Napoleon's troops were driven from their positions in Italy by the Russians and Austrians. Cossak troops pursued the French through Le Roncole. Verdi's mother hid with her baby for twenty four hours in a nearby church tower, afraid that he would cry and reveal their presence. While he did escape discovery, their house was set on fire.

In later years, Verdi liked to claim he had illiterate peasant roots, but he really came from a family of small landowners and traders which knew the value of, and were able to provide him with, a classical education. Young Verdi was quiet and precocious. At a time when many country children were not even taught to read, he started studying Latin at age four. Verdi was fascinated by music, especially the sound of the church organ and, when he was seven, his father, who ran an inn and store, bought him a broken down piano which a neighbor repaired.

There is a story that, while serving at mass in the church, he became so engrossed in the music that he did not hear the priest ask him for the wine. To get his attention, the priest kicked him. This knocked him out, and he had to be sprinkled with holy water to be revived. Verdi developed musically to the point where, at the age of ten, he was sent to nearby Busseto to live and study, under the patronage of Antonio Barezzi. When he was 12, he was appointed organist at Le Roncole and each Sunday walked the six miles round trip from Busseto to play (he made the trip barefooted to save shoe leather). By the age of 14, he was teaching and giving concerts and soon began to compose pieces for the local Philharmonic Society. On his own, he read classical literature and history and started to develop his interest in nationalism and liberty. He moved in with the Barezzi family and fell in love with one of the daughters, Margherita, one of his piano and voice students.

Later Verdi went to Milan to study, his cost underwritten by Barezzi. Milan is now part of Italy but, at the time, it was part of a different country, the Austrian province of Lombardo Venetia. Passports were necessary to travel between Busseto and Milan. Although Austrian soldiers were everywhere, ordinary citizens were not interfered with. There were restrictions: beards were forbidden to public employees and students who wore beards or moustaches were refused admission to exams and even expelled; smoking was not permitted in public places. Still, artistic life flourished especially in music, and the opera house of La Scala became the social center of Milan. At the age of 23, upon completion of his studies, Verdi returned to Busseto, married Margherita Barezzi, and started working on his first known opera, *Oberto*. (There might have been an earlier one, *Rochester*, but it was either lost or incorporated into *Oberto*. Produced when he was 26, *Oberto* was a moderately successful work. Tragically, his wife and two children all died within two years of its premiere, and his second opera, the comedy *Un giorno regno*, was a failure.

The despondent Verdi resolved to give up composing but was later persuaded to return to music by the impresario Bartolomeo Merelli and the soprano Giuseppina Strepponi. The latter, who had been scheduled to sing in *Oberto*, was to become his second wife. The story goes that Merelli put a copy of the libretto for *Nabucco*, the Biblical story of the Israelites' captivity in Babylon, in Verdi's coat pocket. When he got home, he threw the libretto onto the table and his eyes caught the words "Va, pensiero sull'ali dorate", (Fly, thought, on wings of gold), which the Israelites sing as they long for their homeland and freedom. The words kept running through Verdi's head, and he started to compose. The opera was an immediate success; the Italians identified the captivity of the Israelites with their own dominance by foreigners. "Va, pensiero", including the words, "Oh, my country so beautiful and lost! Oh, memory so dear and fatal!", became almost a national anthem and Verdi became, involuntarily, a leading

Meet the Composer: *Giuseppe Verdi (cont.)*

figure in the movement toward a free, united Italy. Although the authorities forbade encores of arias and choruses, the audience at La Scala demanded repeats of 'Va, pensiero' so insistently the conductors decided a disappointed audience would be more dangerous than the Austrians and gave them the encores. After all, it was a Biblical story.

Verdi became a national figure. His name was used to name hats alla Verdi, shawls alla Verdi, and sauces alla Verdi. In its first season, more seats were sold to *Nabucco* than the city had inhabitants. He continued to test the limits of censorship; in his next opera *I Lombardi*, the tenor sings, "The Holy Land will be ours" and the crowd replies, "Yes!... War! War!". The audience knew that the Holy Land should be identified as a United Italy. It is difficult for non-Italians to realize just how great his influence was. Audiences saw allusions everywhere and Verdi gave them plenty to identify. The choruses "O Signore" from *I Lombardi* and "Va pensiero" are still taught as patriotic anthems in elementary schools in Italy.

Operas followed one after the other, including one based on Joan of Arc and another on Attila the Hun. After the premiere of *Nabucco*, Verdi wrote 16 operas in 11 years. By the time he was 40 he was the most famous and most frequently performed Italian opera composer in Europe. He commanded huge fees and began to accumulate land and buildings. He was independent and could decide when and for whom he wanted to compose. For a time after the composition of *Macbeth*, based on Shakespeare's play, Verdi and Giuseppina lived in Paris, but when a rebellion started in Milan, Verdi hurried back to Italy.

By 1861, the unification of Italy was well on its way, and Verdi was elected to the first Italian parliament where Vittorio Emanuele II, King of Piedmont, was proclaimed King of Italy. Verdi was not an active member of parliament, and his formal political career was short. It was during this time that Verdi achieved some of his greatest successes as a composer. The most important of his operas during this time are:

Rigoletto, 1850
Il trovatore, 1853
La traviata, 1853
Simon Boccanegra, 1857
Un ballo in maschera, 1859

Verdi started to experiment with his compositions during this time, his Middle Period. He wanted to make the music more continuous and concentrated on the words, not just as poetry, but with their meaning enhanced by the music. In the Miserere scene (Act II, Scene 3) of *Il trovatore*, the music helped to paint the scene and enhanced the action.

In 1859, Verdi announced to his friends that he was retiring from composing. He had written 21 operas in two decades, and he was tired. At the age of 46, he preferred to live the life of a gentleman farmer on his estate. During his "retirement", he lived simply in the country at Sant'Agata, farming and hunting. He rose at 5:00 a.m. every day and inspected the crops and horses before breakfast. He went for long walks and took drives in the countryside, accompanied only by a pet rooster. He planted a tree for each of his operas and became interested in exotic plants. This hiatus lasted only three years.

Verdi resumed composing with *La forza del destino* for St. Petersburg, Russia. He traveled extensively to Russia, Paris, Madrid, and London, supervising productions of his operas. He also played the role of farmer and closely supervised all aspects of the management of his farm at Sant'Agata. He became a national monument. When Verdi and his librettist, Boito, walked onstage after the premiere of *Otello*, they received over 20 curtain calls; the audience wept from sheer emotion. At the end of the evening, Verdi's carriage was pulled back to his hotel by the cheering crowd and he was serenaded for hours. A similar reception met *Falstaff*, composed when he was eighty years old.

Verdi was also a philanthropist. In 1857 his long-time librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, suffered a paralyzing stroke. During the eight years that he lived on, unable to move or speak, Verdi gave generous support to his wife and daughter. The composer built a

hospital near his estate for the benefit of the neighboring people and took an active interest in it until his death, modestly refusing to have his name on it. During particularly hard times he ordered free polenta (a grain made from corn) be given away every day at noon. After his operas and the famous *Requiem*, his most lasting monument is the Casa di Riposo in Milan, built as a home for 100 impoverished musicians. Verdi established an endowment for it, and it is still in operation today.

In all, Verdi wrote 26 operas, several in two different versions. During his last illness, the streets near his rooms were covered with layers of straw so that he would not be disturbed by the noise of carriages. Crowds waited silently for news of his condition. He died in Milan on January 17, 1901, at the age of 87. The composer asked for a funeral with no music and no singing but, as his coffin was placed in the ground, someone in the crowd started to sing "Va, pensiero" and soon everyone joined in the famous melody. A special session of the Roman Senate was called to listen to eulogies, and schools were closed for the day. One month later, the coffins of Verdi and his wife were moved to the Casa di Riposo, where they rest today. Two hundred thousand people lined the black-draped streets of Milan and Maestro Arturo Toscanini conducted a choir of eight hundred in "Va, pensiero" in tribute to Verdi, the artistic symbol of Italy's drive for freedom.

Used by permission of the San Diego Opera



Aida by J.D. Scott

Aida



Aida was commissioned by the Khedive of Egypt for the Italian Theatre in Cairo in January 1871. However, the siege of Paris at the height of the Franco-Prussian War caused the costumes and scenery to be trapped in Paris, delaying the performance. The piece was finally premiered on December 24, 1871 at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo. The opera was not commissioned to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, as is sometimes reported, nor for the opening of the Khedivial Opera House which opened that same year with Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

Aida met with great acclaim when it finally opened in Cairo. The costumes, accessories and stages for the premiere were designed by Auguste Mariette. Verdi did not attend the premiere in Cairo, but was not pleased when found out that the audience consisted of invited dignitaries, politicians and critics, but no members of the general public. He therefore considered the Italian (and European) premiere, held at La Scala on 8 February 1872 to be its real premiere.

The opera went on to performances in Naples and Parma the following year and was extremely successful and met with high acclaim. The opening night in Naples was so successful that a parade escorted Verdi back to his hotel, after which a band played under his window late into the night.

There was at least one individual, however, who was not impressed with the work. Upon attending several performances in Parma in 1872, Signor Prospero Bertani wrote to Verdi to express his displeasure with the experience. He wrote that "the opera contains absolutely nothing thrilling or electrifying, and if it were not for the magnificent scenery, the audience would not sit through it to the end. It will fill the theatre a few more times and then gather dust in the archives." Signor Bertani then went on to request reimbursement for the costs he incurred attending the performance, including 2.00 lire for a "disgustingly bad dinner at the station".

Thankfully, Bertani's prediction would not come to fruition. *Aida* is a staple of the standard operatic repertoire and appears as number 16 on Opera America's list of the 20 most-performed operas in North America.

Interesting Facts About: *Aida*

- Giuseppe Verdi's name translates as "Joseph Green" in English. Actually, in Italian, the term *verdi* is the plural form of "green". So if one were to translate his last name into English, the composer would be known as Joseph Greens. Musical comedian Victor Borge often referred to the famous composer as "Joe Green" in his act, saying that "Giuseppe Verdi" was merely his "stage name".
- Verdi exhibited a strong curiosity for music as a young child and had a particularly interesting experience when he heard an organ in church for the first time at the age of seven. He was helping as a choir boy at Mass and was completely mesmerized with the harmony of the music he heard. The child didn't hear the priest ask him repeatedly for the holy water, and the priest pushed the young Verdi to get his attention. Verdi fell down the steps of the altar, fainted, and had to be carried into the sacristy. His first words upon waking up were to beg his father to let him learn music.
- The role of *Aida* was written for Teresa Stolz who sang it for the first time at the Milan premiere. Although the truth has never been established, Stolz is believed to have been Verdi's mistress for many years, in spite of his apparent devotion to his wife, Giuseppina Strepponi.
- 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 during the Triumphal Scene. As Sir Thomas watched the camel, he was heard to mutter to himself, "Terribly vulgar, but, Lord, what a critic!"
- Verdi's first operas were composed during an era of great political turbulence in the then-disunited Italian peninsula. Admirers of Verdi who were also political activists realized that the name Verdi was an anagram for "Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia". The future king was supported by many reform-minded people,

Interesting Facts About: *Aida* (cont.)



Aida by J.D. Scott

including Verdi. Political censorship was strict and free speech did not exist. Therefore, many of those who dreamed of a united Italy saluted their cause, as well as their country's greatest composer, by shouting "Viva Verdi" wherever his operas were presented, and writing the slogan upon every wall they could find.

- Superstar Renata Tebaldi made her American debut in the title role of *Aida* in the autumn of 1950 at the San Francisco Opera.
- Soprano Leontyne Price was the first African-American to become a leading prima donna at the Metropolitan Opera and was well-known for her performances of Verdi's roles. Following her performance of the title role in *Aida* at La Scala, a critic

wrote, "Our great Verdi would have found her the ideal *Aida*." Ms. Price gave her operatic farewell on January 3, 1985, in *Aida*, in a live broadcast from the Met. After taking "an act or two to warm up", wrote Times' critic Donal Henahan, she produced "pearls beyond price." After her Act III aria, "O patria mia", she received a three-minute ovation. In 2007, PBS viewers voted this the #1 "Great Moment" in 30 years of Met telecasts.

- The Khedivial Opera House burned to the ground on October 28, 1971. After the original opera house was destroyed, Cairo was without an opera house for nearly two decades until the opening of the new Cairo Opera House in 1988. The site where the Khedivial Opera House used to stand

has been rebuilt into a multistory concrete car garage, but the square overlooking the building is still called Opera Square (Meidan El Opera).

- The opera has been adapted for motion pictures on several occasions, most notably in a 1953 production which starred Lois Maxwell and Sophia Loren, and a 1987 Swedish production. In both cases, the lead actors lip-synched to recordings by actual opera singers. The opera's story, but not its music, was used as the basis for a 1998 musical of the same name written by Elton John and Tim Rice. *Elaborate Lives: The Legend of Aida* had its world premiere at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre, running from September 16 to November 8, 1998.

Suggestions for Further Study



Aida by J.D. Scott

Books

Busch, Hans. *Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978.

Phillips-Matz, Mary Jane. *VERDI: A Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Recordings

Muti. *Verdi: Aida*. EMI Classics, 2001.
Solti. *Verdi: Aida*. Decca, 1990.
Karajan. *Verdi: Aida*. Decca, 1999.