



Photograph of G. Verdi, signed and inscribed to
Gustav Schirmer, founder of the house

AÏDA

Opera in Four Acts

By

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Libretto by

A . G H I S L A N Z O N I

The English Version by

MRS. G. G. LAURENCE

With an Essay on the
History of the Opera by

W. J. HENDERSON

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AÏDA.

FIRST PERFORMED AT CAIRO, EGYPT, DEC. 24, 1871; AND AT MILAN, FEB. 8, 1872.

Characters of the Drama,

With the Original Cast as Presented at the first Performances.

		(At Cairo)	(At Milan)
AÏDA	Soprano	Signora POZZONI	Signora STOLZ
AMNERIS	Mezzo-soprano .	Signora GROSSI	Signora WALDMANN
RADAMÈS	Tenor	Signor MONGINI	Signor FANCELLI
AMONASRO . . .	Baritone	Signor STELLER	Signor PANDOLFINI
RAMPHIS	Bass	Signor MEDINI	Signor MAINI
THE KING	Bass	Signor COSTA	Signor PAVOLERI
A MESSENGER . .	Tenor	Signor BOTTARDI	Signor VISTARINI
Priests, Priestesses, Ministers, Captains, Soldiers, Officials, Ethiopian Slaves and Prisoners, Egyptian Populace, etc.			

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

ACT I.—1. THE KING'S PALACE, AT MEMPHIS; 2. TEMPLE OF VULCAN, AT MEMPHIS.

ACT II.—1. A HALL IN THE APARTMENTS OF AMNERIS; 2. BEFORE A GATE
OF THE CITY OF THEBES. ACT III.—ON THE BANK OF THE
NILE, WITH TEMPLE OF ISIS. ACT IV.—1. HALL IN THE
KING'S PALACE; 2. TEMPLE OF VULCAN.

Aïda.

The importance of Verdi's "Aïda" as a work of musical art can hardly be overestimated. It is as certain as anything in art-history can be, that this production revolutionized modern Italian opera, and that to its influence is due the composition of such works as "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci." In itself, the opera marks the beginning of what has been called Verdi's third period. Commentators on his work are fond of pointing out that his style changed when he wrote "Ernani," something more than half a century ago, and that it wholly altered once again, when he produced "Aïda." The change from his first style to his second is one that can be discerned only by very careful students of his scores, but that from his second to his third was at once patent to the entire world. "Aïda" was acclaimed as a revelation of new and unsuspected powers in the composer of

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"*Il Trovatore*" and "*La Traviata*," though careful judges ought to have said that it was the result of old powers wielded with a new purpose. There was no dissent, however, from the general verdict that the "grand old man" of Italian music had given the world a masterpiece, an opera far and away beyond the best works of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini, brilliant in its opulence of color, gorgeous in its instrumentation, filled in every measure with a splendor of melodic beauty, and throbbing with dramatic passion. From that verdict there has not yet been any dissent, and the only Italian who has rivaled "*Aida*" is Verdi himself in his noble "*Otello*" and his marvelous "*Falstaff*."

It is frequently asserted that "*Aida*" was written for the opening of the new opera house at Cairo, Egypt, built by Ismail Pacha. The error of this statement, however, is established by the fact that the house was opened in 1869. Ismail Pacha had certain lordly ambitions which did him credit. He desired to appear before the civilized world as a munificent patron of the arts, and his earnest desire was to add to the lustre of his new opera house by producing a work based on an Egyptian story. He naturally turned to Verdi, then the reigning operatic master. Verdi was not at first inclined to accept the offer, and he named as his price a figure so high that he thought it would frighten the Khedive. However, his terms were promptly accepted, and gradually Verdi came to view with interest, and at length with enthusiasm, the opportunities for high coloring and brilliant effects offered by the location of the action in Egypt. The Khedive confided to Mariette Bey, the eminent French Egyptologist, the task of finding a story suitable for operatic treatment and likely to appeal to Verdi. The Bey had found in his studies of ancient Egyptian history an incident from which he developed the original plan of the libretto of "*Aida*." This plan was transferred to M. Camille du Locle, who wrote the recitative and lyrics in French prose. His work was done at Verdi's home, at Busseto, Italy, and profited much by the composer's practical advice. Indeed, Verdi did much toward the preparation of his own libretto, and the double stage in the last act, showing Radamès and *Aida* dying in the tomb under the temple in which Amneris is bowed in grief, is entirely his. Signor Ghislanzoni translated the French prose into Italian verse, and when the music had been completed, the Italian was translated into French verse for use on the operatic stage of France.

Verdi set to work at once. Meanwhile the Khedive had decided that he would like to have the composer go to Egypt to conduct the first performance. Verdi's price for writing the opera was \$20,000, and \$30,000 if he went to Egypt. But at the end, his horror of the ocean—he had once gone to London and suffered from sea-sickness—overcame him, and he refused to go at any price. The original plan was to produce the opera toward the close of 1870, and for that purpose the scenery was painted in Paris. But the Franco-Prussian war broke out, and the scenery was a prisoner. Verdi, during the year's postponement, was not idle. He made some important improvements in the score. He cut out a chorus in Palestrina style, and substituted a chorus and a romanza for "*Aida*." He had come to the wise conclusion, that the Palestrina style would be incongruous in an Egyptian

opera. The opera was produced on December 24, 1871. The conductor was Signor Bottesini, the famous double-bass player, and the cast was as given above. The audience was a strange mixture of Europeans and Orientals. Filippi, the Italian critic, wrote :

"The Arabians, even the rich, do not love our shows; they prefer the mewings of their tunes, the monotonous beatings of their drums, to all the melodies of the past, present, and future. It is a true miracle to see a turban in a theatre of Cairo. Sunday evening the opera house was crowded before the curtain rose. Many of the boxes were filled with women, who neither chattered nor rustled their robes. There was beauty, and there was intelligence, especially among the Greeks and the strangers of rank, who abound in Cairo. For truth's sake, I must add that, by the side of the most beautiful and the most richly dressed, were Coptic and Jewish faces, with strange head-dresses, impossible costumes, a howling of colors,—no one could deliberately have invented worse. The women of the harem could not be seen. They were in the first three boxes on the right, in the second gallery. Thick white muslin hid their faces from prying glances."

The success of the opera was most emphatic. A chorus of praise rang through Europe, and the genius of Verdi was acclaimed in glowing terms. "Aida" was next given at La Scala, Milan, February 8, 1872. It was given in Paris on April 22, 1876, with Mme. Stolz, Mlle. Waldmann, Signor Masini, Signor Pandolfini, Signor Medini, and M. Edouard de Reszké in the cast. The first performance in America was given at the Academy of Music, New York, on November 26, 1873, with the following great cast: Aida, Octavia Torriani; Amneris, Annie Louise Cary; Radamès, Signor Italo Campanini; Amonasro, M. Victor Maurel; Ramphis, Signor Nannetti; King, Signor Scolara.

The story of "Aida" is supposed to belong to the time of the Pharaohs, and its action is located at Memphis and Thebes. The first act begins in the King's palace in the former city. The High Priest, Ramphis, tells Radamès that the Ethiopians are marching against Egypt and that the goddess Isis has named the leader of the defending army. Radamès, left alone, declares how happy he would be could he lead the army to victory and return to lay his laurels at the feet of Amneris's slave, Aida, whom he loves. Amneris and Aida join him. Amneris loves him, and from his demeanor and that of Aida she suspects the truth. She swears to avenge herself if her suspicion proves correct. The King and his court enter, and presently a messenger comes to announce that it is Amonasro who is leading the invaders. Amonasro is Aida's father, but she alone knows this. The King declares that Isis has chosen Radamès to lead the Egyptian army, and directs him to go to the temple of Ftha (Ptah) to receive the consecrated arms. The scene concludes with a martial ensemble. The second scene takes place in the temple, where the priests invoke Ftha and the priestesses dance the sacred dance. Radamès receives the arms, and departs upon his mission.

The second act opens in the apartments of Amneris at Thebes. Amneris bewails the absence of Radamès, and her slaves vainly try to console her. Aida enters, and Amneris, to test her, says that news has come of the death of Radamès.

Aïda's grief betrays her love, and Amneris threatens her with destruction. The second scene shows a great square, into which the triumphal army marches with Radamès glorified as a conqueror. He brings with him a number of Ethiopian prisoners, among them Amonasro, who is not known to be the king. Aïda rushes to her father's arms, and joins him in begging for the lives of the prisoners. Radamès, seeing Aïda's grief, joins in the prayer, which Amneris and the priests oppose. The King releases all the prisoners save Amonasro, who is to remain as a slave with Aïda. Then, to the joy of Amneris, and the horror of Radamès and Aïda, the King bestows his daughter's hand on Radamès.

The third act takes place on the Nile's bank before the temple of Isis, whither Amneris, on the eve of marriage, has gone to pray. Aïda has made an appointment to meet Radamès near the temple, and while she waits for him she bewails her separation from her native land. She is surprised by her father, who has discovered her love for Radamès, and orders her to induce the young man to reveal the plans of the Egyptians. Aïda at first refuses, but after an outburst of savage wrath on the part of her father, she consents. Radamès arrives. Amonasro conceals himself. Aïda tries to lure Radamès to flight with her. He yields, and discloses the Egyptian plans. Amonasro appears, announces that he has overheard, and that he is the king of Ethiopia. Amneris comes out of the temple in time to overhear some of the dialogue. Amonasro rushes upon her with his knife. Radamès interferes and forces Amonasro and Aïda to fly, while he remains and surrenders himself to Ramphis.

The fourth act opens in a chamber adjoining the court in which Radamès is to be tried. Radamès is brought in for trial, and is met by Amneris. She beseeches him to abandon Aïda, and promises that she will intercede for him if he will do so. He refuses. She tells him that Amonasro has been killed and that Aïda has fled. Still he refuses, and Amneris bitterly repents the outcome of her own jealousy. The priests lead Radamès to trial. Amneris, in an agony of grief, hears them accuse him, while he submits in silence to condemnation. They return with their prisoner, and as they pass out Amneris curses them. The second scene shows the temple and the vault beneath it. Radamès, shut in the vault, breathes a prayer that Aïda may never know his fate. But Aïda, who has already found her way to the vault and awaited him there, comes forward. They embrace one another, while above the priestesses sing their chant. Aïda dies in the arms of Radamès, while Amneris, garbed in mourning robe, enters the temple and sinks prostrate in despair upon the huge stone that closes the vault.

This is an admirable story for operatic treatment. It presents an effective sequence of the grand emotions—love, joy, hatred, jealousy, despair and rage, all of which are susceptible of adequate musical expression. It offers a fine variety of action and scenery, and excellent opportunity for spectacular display. The glitter and pomp of the triumphal procession at the close of the second act make a strong and impressive contrast with the subdued glory of the moonlight night on the banks of the Nile in the third act. Indeed, there are few operas in which the scenic surroundings, the action and the emotions are so completely in accord, and it is partly owing to this that Verdi was able to make his music a puissant element in a

powerful organization. As for the music, it is difficult to speak of it without appearing to indulge in extravagant praise. It is so rich in melody and harmony, so closely wedded in expressive power to the meaning of the text and so broadly dramatic in all its aspects, that it claims a place among the most striking art-products of our time. The glitter of theatrical tinsel offends finer taste here and there, but, as a whole, "Aida" is without doubt a masterpiece.

It is an opera from which one can easily select "gems," but closer study will convince the music-lover that it is a necklace of equally fine jewels. The opening recitation of Ramphis and Radamès, by its melodious character and the strong coloring of its accompaniment, invites one to enter at once the enchanted domain of the ancient East. The first aria of Radamès, "Celeste Aida," is full of character and tenderness, and in the ensuing trio the note of tragic portent is firmly sounded. The martial finale makes the first scene a sort of prologue to the opera, summing up, as it does with its pomp of war, the opening chapter of love, jealousy, ambition and defiance. All the passions of the drama make their appearance in elementary form in the first scene, and give us a foretaste of what is to come. The dance and song of the priestesses in the temple of Ftha are weirdly Oriental in character, and the invocation is broad and dignified. The opening of the scene in the chamber of Amneris is luxurious in color and feeling, while the duet between the princess and her slave is full of passion. The finale of the act, the triumphal procession and the plea for the prisoners, is dazzling in its splendor.

But Verdi reaches his climax in the Nile scene. In all Italian opera there is no finer example of the true aria than Aida's "O patria mia." It is eloquent in its expressive power, beautiful in its pure melody, perfect in form, and subtly forceful in its harmonization. The subsequent duet for Aida and Amonasro is a superb piece of writing, while the duet for Aida and Amneris, though it falls somewhat more into the habit of theatrical diction, especially in its *ad caplandum* close, has nevertheless the power of a warm mood-picture. The remainder of the opera is less effective with the general audience, but it is all good music and beautiful.

Those who are familiar with Verdi's earlier works, such as "La Traviata" and "Il Trovatore," while they may detect in "Aida" occasional reminiscences of them, cannot fail to perceive the great change in the master's style. In "Aida" he has abandoned the elementary dance-rhythms, the antique melodic formulæ, the bald and empty passages of recitative between the set numbers, and the cheap and noisy instrumentation. The rhythms are broader and more scholarly; the melody is fresh, original and diversified in character; the harmony is immensely rich and expressive, and the instrumentation glows with Oriental warmth of color. The critics who went to Cairo in 1871 declared that Verdi, the Italian Verdi of the honey-tuned Neapolitan school of composers, had been inoculated with the virus of Wagnerism. It would have been strange, indeed, if Verdi had not discerned the general trend of operatic art under the stimulus of Wagner's proclamations; but although he arose and girded himself to step to the place rightly his in the van of progress, he made no sacrifices of his own individuality.

Verdi remained in "Aida" as truly an Italian composer as he was in "Rigo-

letto." His melody was purely Italian in its technical character and its adherence to the fundamental forms of its school. He continued to employ the set forms, the aria, duet, trio, etc., but he molded them on broader lines and infused into them a truer dramatic utterance. He remodeled his instrumentation so as to add to his operatic canvas all the colors of the modern orchestral palette. In a word, he showed how a man of genius could vitalize the shopworn apparatus of Italian grand opera, just as Mozart had done nearly a century earlier in his "Don Giovanni." In his earlier works Verdi demonstrated that he possessed immense vigor, abundant melodic invention, and inexhaustible resourcefulness. But he was working on the lines of tradition, and the traditions of the Neapolitan school, founded by Alessandro Scarlatti, father of the operatic aria, and maintained by Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini, demanded tunefulness for its own sake without regard to the spirit of the text. It was when Verdi threw overboard the traditions of this school and adapted its methods, after modernizing them, to the legitimate business of dramatic expression, that he produced "Aida," a work which ought to live among the masterpieces of our era.

Some critics have affected to discover "leading motives" of the Wagnerian kind in "Aida," but such critics do not understand the nature of the Wagner system. Verdi does use a melodic phrase to indicate the personality of Aida, but it is employed chiefly to herald her entrance. Other commentators have pointed to his instrumentation as an evidence that he had succumbed to the influence of Wagner. But in "Aida" Verdi for the first time in his career made a deliberate attempt at local color. Some writers have pointed out what they believed to be Oriental themes in his music. Whether he adapted extant themes to his purpose or not is a matter of small import. The main point is that he employed a scheme of harmony and instrumental color which keeps the Oriental locale of the opera constantly in the hearer's mind. The music of "Aida" is fitted not only to the emotions of the drama, but to the scene of action, and that, too, without any clap-trap obtrusiveness.

The career of Verdi is an epitome of the history of Italian opera in his time, for he has been the leader of his school. His followers number all the members of what has been called the young Italian school. Its one product has been the condensed opera, such as "Pagliacci." The one-act operas of Mascagni and Leoncavallo employ every item of Verdi's apparatus as found in "Aida." The single new element is the condensation. Verdi has been the model and the despair of these younger men. Whosoever desires to know the Italian opera of our time at its best, should study the scores of Verdi's last three operas, "Aida," "Otello" and "Falstaff." But of these three, the first is the only one that preserves the forms of the older school, and hence it is to-day and must remain for all time the noblest example of Italian opera as established by its most admirable exponents.

W. J. HENDERSON.

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