

AIDA

An Opera in Four Acts

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni

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Study Guide
prepared by

VAOPERA

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Preface

Purpose

This study guide is intended to aid you, the teacher, in increasing your students' understanding and appreciation of AIDA. This will not only add to knowledge about opera, but should develop awareness of other related subjects, making the performance they attend much more enjoyable.

Most Important

If you only have a limited amount of time, concentrate on the cast of characters, the plot and some of the musical and dramatic highlights of the opera. Recognition produces familiarity, which in turn produces a positive experience.

The Language

AIDA was written in Italian. The Virginia Opera will perform AIDA in the original language, Italian, but an English translation will be projected on a screen above the stage. With these Supertitles, audiences can experience the beauty of opera in the original language, yet still understand the meaning of all that is being sung.

Objectives

1. To understand how opera, as an art form, reflects and comments on society and the world in which we live.
2. To develop an awareness of how the study of certain art forms such as opera can communicate ideas of the past and present.
3. To develop a basic understanding of what opera is. Students should be able to identify the many elements (musical, visual, and dramatic) of an opera and understand how they work together to produce a unified, exciting, and emotional work.
4. To understand the process of adapting a story for the stage; what changes need to be made and why. Incorporated in this objective is a basic understanding of what makes a good opera.
5. To know the basic plot/story line of AIDA.
6. To understand how music serves as a mode of communication in opera and the effect music has on characteristics and mood.
7. To develop some sense of appreciation for opera as a timeless art form that brings real characters, emotions, and situations to life.
8. To understand the working relationship between words and music in an opera. Students should understand how a composer and librettist work together to create significant, dramatic, and unified meaning.

What is Opera?

Opera is a unique type of entertainment—a play that is sung throughout. Because it combines music and theater, opera can be the most moving of all the arts, and can tell a story in a way quite unlike any other. It does so by means of words, actions, and music.

The words of an opera are called a libretto (the Italian word for “little book”), much like the words of a play are called a script. There are important differences between a libretto and a script, however. For one thing, a libretto usually contains far fewer words than a script. The reason for this is the music. It can take more time to sing a line of text than to say it; also, words are often repeated in operatic music for reasons of musical form. Therefore, there are fewer words in an opera than in a play of the same length.

While the spoken word can clearly show what people are thinking, singing is much better at showing emotions. For this reason, the plot of an opera is likely to be filled with dramatic situations in which highly emotional characters perform bold actions.

The way librettists (the people who write the words) use words is also different. Opera librettos are commonly made up of poetry, while this is not often true of the scripts for plays. Many of the musical passages can be considered a type of sung poetry, complete with meter, accents, and rhyme. If you were to say the words that the characters sing, this would become very clear.

A librettist can also do something that a playwright cannot—he or she can write an ensemble. An ensemble is a passage in the libretto in which more than one person sings; often, several characters sing different vocal lines simultaneously. In a play, if all the actors spoke at once, the audience could not understand the words. In an opera, the music helps the audience to sort out the thoughts and feelings of each singer. Frequently, each individual character has a distinct musical or vocal style which distinguishes him/her from the other characters.

If the libretto of an opera is a special language, the score (or musical portion of an opera) is a special use of music. It is music that is meant to be sung, of course, but it has characteristics that many songs do not. Operatic music is dramatic music, written for the theater. For this reason, it must also be capable of describing strong feelings that invite the audience’s involvement with the story and their identification with people on stage. In addition, a good operatic composer can use music as a tool to define character and personality traits of his characters.

One way in which a composer (the person who writes the music) can use music is through the voices of the singers themselves. A human voice, especially when singing, can express all sorts of feelings. Composers know this and use this knowledge to the fullest. First, they consider the personality of a character and then choose a voice type (either high or low) that best suits this type of person. For example, younger characters are often sung by the higher voice types. There are five different voice categories (perhaps some students are familiar with these from singing in a choir):

SOPRANO: the highest female voice

MEZZO-SOPRANO: (also called ALTO) the lower female voice

TENOR: the highest male voice (like Pavarotti or Caruso)

BARITONE: the middle male voice

BASS: the lowest male voice

Each of these voice categories can be subdivided into more specialized types, such as “dramatic soprano”, “lyric soprano”, “coloratura soprano”, “basso-buffo”, depending on the specific type of music being sung. These distinctions are known as vocal fachs, from a German word meaning “mode”.

After a composer has chosen the characters’ voice types, he then tries to interpret the libretto in musical terms. A character may sing very high notes when agitated or excited, or low notes when depressed or calm. He or she may sing many rapid notes or a few long held notes, depending upon the mood at the time.

In an opera production, the ideas of the composer and librettist are expressed by the singers as directed by a conductor and stage director. The conductor is responsible for the musical aspects of the performance, leading the orchestra and the singers and determining the musical pace. The stage director is responsible for the dramatic movement and characterizations of the singers. He works with a design team—a set designer, costume designer, and a lighting designer – to determine the visual interpretation of the work. Just as the composer and librettist must work in close communion in the writing of an opera, the conductor and stage director must have a close collaboration to produce a unified interpretation of an opera. Both must collaborate with the singers and the design team (and sometimes a choreographer, if dancing is involved). For this reason opera is perhaps the form demanding the greatest degree of collaboration.

An opera then, is a partnership of words and music with the purpose of telling a dramatic story. While the story itself may be about everyday situations or historical figures, it usually has a moral or idea that the entire audience understands. This is one of the great features of opera—it unites a variety of people with different backgrounds by giving them a common experience to relate to.

The Operatic Voice

To present a true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “squillo” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass) there is a further delineation into categories (Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, and Dramatic) which help to define each particular instrument. The Coloratura is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The Lyric is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The Spinto is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a Dramatic, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The Dramatic instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving a unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	Coloratura	Lyric	Spinto	Dramatic
Soprano	Norina (<i>Don Pasquale</i>) Gilda (<i>Rigoletto</i>) Lucia (<i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>)	Liu (<i>Turandot</i>) Mimi (<i>La Bohème</i>) Pamina (<i>The Magic Flute</i>)	Tosca (<i>Tosca</i>) Amelia (<i>A Masked Ball</i>) Leonora (<i>Il Trovatore</i>)	Turandot (<i>Turandot</i>) Norma (<i>Norma</i>) Elektra (<i>Elektra</i>)
Mezzo-Soprano	Rosina (<i>Barber of Seville</i>) Angelina (<i>La Cenerentola</i>) Dorabella (<i>Così fan tutte</i>)	Carmen (<i>Carmen</i>) Charlotte (<i>Werther</i>) Giulietta (<i>Tales of Hoffmann</i>)	Santuzza (<i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>) Adalgisa (<i>Norma</i>) The Composer (<i>Ariadne auf Naxos</i>)	Azucena (<i>Il Trovatore</i>) Ulrica (<i>A Masked Ball</i>) Herodias (<i>Salome</i>)
Tenor	Count Almaviva (<i>Barber of Seville</i>) Don Ottavio (<i>Don Giovanni</i>) Ferrando (<i>Così fan tutte</i>)	Alfredo (<i>La Traviata</i>) Rodolfo (<i>La Bohème</i>) Tamino (<i>The Magic Flute</i>)	Calaf (<i>Turandot</i>) Pollione (<i>Norma</i>) Cavaradossi (<i>Tosca</i>)	Dick Johnson (<i>La Fanciulla del West</i>) Don Jose (<i>Carmen</i>) Otello (<i>Otello</i>)
Baritone	Figaro (<i>Barber of Seville</i>) Count Almavira (<i>The Marriage of Figaro</i>) Dr. Malatesta (<i>Don Pasquale</i>)	Marcello (<i>La Bohème</i>) Don Giovanni (<i>Don Giovanni</i>) Sharpless (<i>Madama Butterfly</i>)	Verdi Baritone Germont (<i>La Traviata</i>) Di Luna (<i>Il Trovatore</i>) Rigoletto (<i>Rigoletto</i>)	Scarpia (<i>Tosca</i>) Jochanaan (<i>Salome</i>) Jack Rance (<i>La Fanciulla del West</i>)
Bass	Bartolo (<i>Barber of Seville</i>) Don Magnifico (<i>La Cenerentola</i>) Dr. Dulcamara (<i>The Elixir of Love</i>)	Leporello (<i>Don Giovanni</i>) Colline (<i>La Bohème</i>) Figaro (<i>The Marriage of Figaro</i>)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (<i>Don Pasquale</i>) Don Alfonso (<i>Così fan tutte</i>)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (<i>Norma</i>) Timur (<i>Turandot</i>) Sarastro (<i>The Magic Flute</i>)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of a myriad of art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state-of-the-art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



AIDA

Premiere

First performance on December 24, 1871,
at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo, Egypt.

Cast of Characters

AIDA, an Ethiopian slave	Soprano
RADAMES, Captain of the Guard.....	Tenor
AMNERIS, daughter of King of Egypt.....	Mezzo Soprano
AMONASRO, King of Ethiopia, Aida's father	Baritone
KING OF EGYPT	Bass
RAMFIS, Chief Priest.....	Bass
THE HIGH PRIESTESS.....	Soprano
MESSENGER.....	Tenor
Priests, priestesses, soldiers, prisoners.....	...Chorus

Brief Summary

Egypt and Ethiopia are at war. Aida was captured and made a personal slave to Amneris, the daughter of Egypt's king. No one knows Aida's father is Ethiopia's king. Aida loves Radames, a high-ranking Egyptian officer. Aida's father, Amonasro, invades Egypt with his army and Radames is sent with Egyptian forces to oppose him. Aida is torn between her love for Radames and love for her people. Radames returns triumphant with many prisoners, one of whom is Aida's father. The King of Egypt gives Amneris' hand in marriage to Radames as a reward for his success.

Amonasro, keeping his identity secret, seeks out Aida for help. Learning about her love for Radames he convinces her to trick Radames into revealing the Egyptian war plans. As Aida and Radames discuss their plan to run away together, they are overheard by Amneris who denounces Radames as a traitor. Aida and Amonasro escape, but Radames surrenders himself to the High Priest. Radames refuses to defend himself and is sentenced to death. After he is sealed in his tomb he realizes he is not alone. Aida has returned to die with him. They embrace and say their final farewells.

AIDA

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Prelude

The opening music is a combination of two motifs. The first theme, appearing in the high strings, is chromatic and is associated with the character of Aida. The second, driving and forceful, is contrapuntal in style. This theme represents the priests. These two motifs denote the essential conflict of the opera.

Act I

To the strains of the prelude motifs, The Chief Priest Ramfis confides in Radames that the Ethiopians are again attacking Egypt and the Goddess Isis has named the commander of the Egyptian Army. After Ramfis departs, Radames expresses the hope that he will be the one named as the commander. He then sings of the woman he loves in the aria, "*Celeste Aida*" (Heavenly Aida). Aida is an Ethiopian captive who is a slave to Amneris, the daughter of Egypt's king. Radames is joined by Amneris who secretly loves him but is suspicious that he loves another. Her suspicions are represented by the sinuous nature of her melodic line. Their duet, "*Quale insolita gioia nel suo sguardo*" (What joy in your visage), turns into a trio full of tension when Aida appears and it becomes clear to Amneris that Aida and Radames have feelings for one another.

Musical fanfares proclaim the arrival of the King of Egypt, Chief Priest Ramfis and courtiers. A messenger announces the news of Egypt's invasion by the Ethiopian king Amonasro and his army. The King states that the goddess Isis has chosen Radames to command the army. All join in the hymn, "*Su, del Nilo*" (Guard the Nile). Amneris leads the crowd in crying out, "*Ritorna vincitore!*" (Return as victor!), before the assemblage exits. Aida, left alone, reflects on the crowd's words in a multi-section aria that echoes those fateful words. Plumbing the depths of her anguish, Aida contemplates her impossible situation. Amonasro is her father and Radames is her love. Who should be victorious? Her soliloquy culminates with a prayer, "*Numi, pietà*" (Gods have pity).

The final scene of Act I is the formal investiture of Radames as Commander of the Army. The opening chorus, "*Possente Ptha!*" (O mighty Ptha), is led by the solo voice of the High Priestess. The harmonies and melodic line have vestiges of "local color" which is the composer's attempt to provide a musical expression of the aura of ancient Egypt. A solemn tableau of chanting and dancing ensues as Radames is entrusted with the sacred sword. Ramfis entrusts Radames with the protection of the country and begins the "*concertato*," (concerted finale) of the act, "*Nume, custode e vindice*" (Great god and avenging power).

Act II

The first scene of Act II takes place in the apartments of Amneris as she prepares for the triumphal return of the victorious Egyptian Army. Her attendants sing of Radames' victory, "*Chi*

mai fra gli inni e i plausi (Our songs praise him), and Amneris sings a yearning response “*Ah, vieni, vieni mio amor*” (Ah, come, my beloved). The sequence is repeated three times. Aida enters and Amneris sympathizes with her feelings of loss due to the defeat of her countrymen. She also cunningly lays a trap for Aida to reveal her true feelings for Radames. Amneris implies that Radames has been killed. Aida’s reaction confirms Amneris’ suspicions. Aida cries out for mercy, “*Pieta ti prenda del mio dolor*” (Pity my sorrow). Amneris responds without pity, “*Trema, vil schiava*” (Tremble, vile slave). Fanfares are heard in the distance as the two women face off, their music sharply contrasting. With the chorus, the two women sing “*Su! del Nilo al sacro lido*” (At the sacred shores of the Nile), then Amneris storms out leaving Aida with a reprise of her earlier plea to the Gods to have pity for her suffering.

The chorus “*Gloria al Egitto, ad Iside*” (Glory to Egypt, to Isis) greets the victorious army upon their return. This great concerted scene features interludes for female singers and the contrapuntal melodic motif of the priests as the crowd gathers to greet the victors. A great interplay of trumpets is featured as the famous Triumphal March begins. The march sequence is followed by a ballet in which local color harmonies and instrumentation are given a prominent role. Amneris places a laurel wreath on Radames’ head and the King tells him he may have anything he desires. Radames asks that the captured Ethiopian prisoners be brought in. Among them is Aida’s father, Amonasro. Aida sees him and calls out, “*Che veggo! Egli? Mio padre!*” (What do I see! He? My father!). He quickly cautions her to keep his identity secret. Amonasro leads the central section of the scene with a lengthy narrative describing the battle and then launching into a plea for clemency, “*Ma, tu Re, tu signore possente*” (But, you great King, most powerful). His voice is joined by the other Ethiopians and slaves. Over the priests’ objections Radames asks that the prisoners be freed. The King agrees with the exception of Aida and Amonasro, who will be kept as hostages. Then the King bestows on Radames the hand of Amneris in marriage. The act is brought to a jubilant close with the reprise of “*Gloria al Egitto,*” now in an extended form. The principal voices soar above the chorus, expressing their emotions at this new turn of events.

Act III

A beautiful and complex blend of orchestral sounds tone-paints the moonlit banks of the Nile. The sound of the musical note G is prolonged and supported by the resonances in the strings and woodwinds. An off-stage chorus intones “*O tu che sei d’Osiride*” (You who are Osiris). Amneris and Radames arrive to pray at the temple on the eve of their marriage. As they enter the temple Aida’s theme is heard. Aida has arrived for a secret meeting with Radames. As she waits for him she reflects on her homeland and sings a *romanza*, “*O patria mia*” (O my homeland). Her anxiety and agitation is heard in the orchestral accompaniment. Amonasro surprises his daughter and in the ensuing due, “*A te grave cagion*” (To thee I come) he remonstrates with her about her duty to her homeland. Even though he knows she loves Radames she must help him discover the Egyptian war plans. Broken down by her father’s words she agrees to betray Radames. Amonasro hides as Radames appears. Aida and Radames embark on a lengthy duet. The first section, “*Pur ti riveggo*” (Again I see thee) is quick-paced as Radames assures Aida of his love, although he must command his troops once again. The second section, “*Fuggiam gli ardori inospiti*” (Let us fly from these burning skies) is more moderately paced as they grapple with their dilemma. The third movement, “*La tra foreste vergini*” (There, where the virgin forests rise) precedes the final section, called a *caballetta* because of its speed and heightened emotion. In “*Si, fuggiam da queste mura*” (Yes, let us flee these walls) Radames and Aida confirm their fateful decision to flee together to a

better place. Aida quickly asks Radames what route they should take to avoid the Egyptian army. He replies that his army will be positioned at the Napata Gorges. A brisk trio ensues as Amonasro triumphantly announces his presence saying that the Gorges of Napata is where he will ambush the Egyptian Army. Radames, reacting in horror, cries out that his honor is lost. Radames refuses to be comforted by the words of Aida or her father. At this moment Amneris and Ramfis leave the temple and take in the unsettled scene, realizing immediately that treachery is afoot. Amneris calls Radames a traitor and is set upon by Amonasro who tries to kill her. Radames protects Amneris as Aida and her father escape. Radames surrenders himself to the priests as the act is brought to a close.

Act IV

An orchestral prelude precedes the first scene of Act IV. Amneris is alone, bitterly regretting her denunciation of Radames. She sings an extended arioso, an aria-like soliloquy, as she resolutely determines to save Radames. Radames is brought to her and in an extended duet she pleads with him to defend himself, “*Già i sacerdoti adunansi*” (Already the priests are assembling). He refuses. Amneris continues, declaring her love in a moving lyrical section of the duet, “*Ah! ti dei vivere*” (Ah! Consent to live!) Radames only wishes for all to end. In the next section of the duet Amneris reveals that Aida is still alive and did not die with her father. Radames reaction is exultant. Now he can rejoice and die knowing she is safe. Amneris’ jealousy returns with a fierce intensity made even greater by Radames’ rejection. He returns to his prison accompanied by the sound of the priests’ theme and the cries of Amneris. The Judgement Scene commences with the priests chanting a prayer. Radames’ trial follows a sequence that is repeated three times. There is a triple invocation, Radames name is announced three times, three charges are stated, three silences from Radames, three reactions to his silences, and three responses by Amneris. First Ramfis intones a statement of Radames’ treasonous acts, followed by silence from Radames, followed by the judgement of the priests, “*Traditor!*” (Traitor!), followed by a plea from Amneris for pity. Radames has been given three chances to defend himself and he has refused to answer three times. The priests pronounce the sentence: he is to be entombed alive below the altar of Vulcan. In an *arioso* Amneris begs them for mercy, to no avail. The priests leave, muttering “traitor.” The scene ends with Amneris crying out and cursing them in her frustration and anguish.

The final scene of the opera takes place in the tomb where Radames has been sealed. He sings, “*La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse*” (The fatal stone now closes over me). He hears a sound and realizes he is not alone. Aida has found her way into the tomb to die with him. Radames is both saddened and heartened by her presence. They express themselves in a lengthy duet that has three main sections, all of which are lyrical. The first part, “*Morir! si pura e bella!*” (To die so pure and lovely) expresses Radames lamentation at his beloved’s approaching death. In the second part, “*Vedi? di morte l’angelo*” (See? the angel of death), Aida seems to welcome death. The third section and the most momentous is “*O terra addio*” (Farewell O earth) as the lovers sweetly surrender to oblivion in each other’s arms. The melodic phrase follows a simply arching line and is repeated numerous times. At the end they are singing in unison. The priests chant in the background and Amneris kneels at the altar above the tomb. She prays for peace, “*Pace*” as the music slowly and quietly fades away.

AIDA

Historical Background

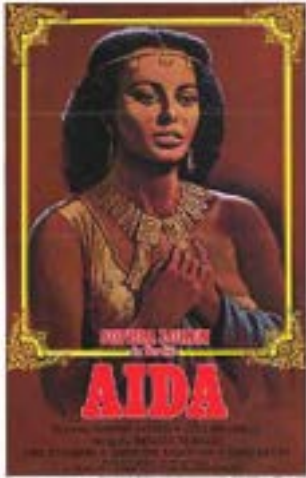
There is a widespread, but incorrect, belief that Giuseppe Verdi wrote the opera AIDA to commemorate the opening of the Suez Canal. He was asked to write an inaugural hymn as part of the canal's opening festivities but declined the request. He did accept a commission from the Khedive of Egypt for an opera to be presented at the Opera House in Cairo built for the Suez Canal celebration. The inaugural opera presented at the new Khedivial Opera House was another Verdi masterpiece, RIGOLETTO.

Finding suitable librettos was an ever-present concern for Verdi as he matured as a composer. Archival letters document his dissatisfaction with many of the librettos presented to him during the 1860s. At the end of the decade, he received a manuscript that had come from a well-known Egyptologist and archaeologist, Auguste Mariette, a Frenchman with an extensive background in ancient Egyptian history and culture. Mariette had written a scenario set in the time of the ancient pharaohs that was created with the approval of the Khedive. This treatment interested Verdi who engaged Antonio Ghislanzoni, a librettist with whom he had collaborated on an earlier work. Verdi himself was very involved in the formulation of the libretto using his long experience in the theater to help shape the dialogue and the arrangement of the scenes. Auguste Mariette designed the set and costumes for the premiere in Cairo and used his knowledge of ancient Egypt to make the staging as authentic as possible. It is generally considered an "Old Kingdom" setting. The sets and costumes were built in Paris but delayed in shipment by the Franco-Prussian War and the Siege of Paris. Verdi donated much of his earnings for this opera to help victims of the Siege.



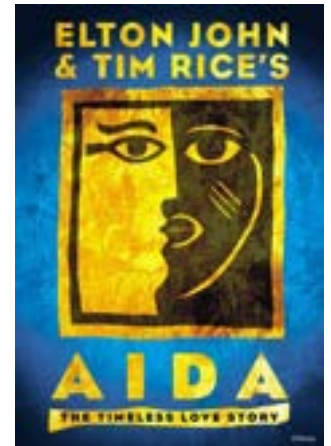
Verdi purposefully combined two operatic styles in composing AIDA. The Italian approach, which stressed the warmth and flexibility of the human voice combined with melodic beauty and exuberant outpourings of emotion, was combined with the pageantry, choruses and dance of French grand opera. The desire to fuse these two styles was a goal Verdi had pursued for some time. Additionally, Verdi continued to build on the movement in nineteenth century opera to more closely interweave the music and the drama. He made greater use of recurring themes throughout the opera and heightened his use of musical color and exoticism to achieve a musical environment that would approximate the ancient Egyptian setting. He achieved more continuity with AIDA than any of his previous works.

Verdi did not attend the premiere in Cairo on December 24, 1871, and was dismayed that the general public was not invited. A few weeks later, on February 8, 1872, the opera had its premiere at La Scala Opera House in Milan, Italy. Verdi was involved in every aspect of this performance and considered this occasion to be its true premiere. Public and critical acclaim was immediate and AIDA was performed at all the major opera houses of the world in the months and years that followed. This performance history has continued throughout the



twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Currently, AIDA is one of the twenty most-performed operas in North America. The Metropolitan Opera in New York City has presented this opera more than 1100 times since it premiered in New York on November 26, 1873. Its popularity shows no signs of abating.

AIDA has also been adapted for the big screen with movies produced in 1953 and 1987. The 1953 film starred Italian actress Sophia Loren in the title role. In 1998 the story of AIDA was used as the basis for a successful musical written by Elton John and Tim Rice.



AIDA

About the Composer

The Life of Verdi

Giuseppe Verdi was born in the small village of Le Roncole, Italy, in 1813. His parents belonged to a middle-class family of innkeepers and his father was enthusiastic about his son's education and chosen field. From an early age Giuseppe studied with local teachers. He received an old spinet as a gift from his father, and was eventually made the town's official organist. He also entered the *ginnasio* (high school) to study humanities and began formal music lessons with the director of the local Philharmonic Society. Antonio Barezzi, a wealthy merchant and musician, recognized Verdi's musical talent and became his patron, providing financial support and encouragement for many years. With his aid, Verdi applied to the Milan Conservatory, but was refused, partly because he was past the entering age, but mostly because of his unorthodox piano technique. Instead, Verdi became the pupil of Vincenzo Lavigna, a former principal conductor at La Scala Opera House in Milan. Beyond this more formalized training, Verdi considered himself largely self-taught.



After completing his studies in 1835, Verdi was appointed *maestro di musica* in Busseto, near his hometown of Le Roncole. He held the post for three years, during which time he also composed, gave private lessons and married his benefactor Barezzi's daughter. Verdi soon wrote his first opera, *Oberto*, in 1839, and began a professional career marked by continual rounds of negotiations with theaters and librettists, and intense periods of composition and preparation for the production of his work. Soon thereafter, terrible tragedy struck with the deaths of his wife and two very small children, causing him to nearly renounce composition altogether. However, *Nabucco*, his next premiere, was an unprecedented success. In what is referred to as his "galley slave" years (1842-1853), Verdi arduously wrote sixteen operas - an average of one every nine months. *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata*, written near the end of this period, soon became cornerstones of the Italian operatic repertory and are still immensely popular today.

Verdi's accumulated wealth granted him greater artistic freedom. In the second half of his life he would only compose eight more operas. He spent most of his time away from the theater, now married to his companion of many years, the former soprano Giuseppina Strepponi. In 1859 the public honored Verdi's patriotism by using his name as an acronym to spell out *Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia*, king of the newly united independent Italy.

He was nearing the age of sixty when he produced *AIDA* in 1871. With *AIDA*, Verdi achieved that fusion of French and Italian opera traditions that he had long desired. The death of his friend, the great writer Alessandro Manzoni, would inspire him to write the magnificent *Messa da Requiem* in 1874. After a period of general disillusionment and unhappiness, Verdi regained the will to compose during his later years. He subsequently composed two of his greatest masterpieces, *Otello* in 1887 and *Falstaff* in 1893.

Although many of Verdi's operas had disappeared from the repertory by the time of his death in 1901, he had nevertheless become a profound artistic symbol of Italy's achievement of statehood. It is said that during Verdi's funeral thousands of mourners paid homage by spontaneously singing "Va pensiero," a chorus from *Nabucco* written some sixty years earlier. "Va pensiero" expressed the public's deep feelings and the extent to which Verdi's music had been assimilated into the Italian consciousness.

AIDA

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the contrast between the two female leading roles – AIDA and AMNERIS. How are they different as characters? How does the music they sing differ?
2. AIDA's signature music is lyrical and introspective. How does this musical treatment help define her character?
3. Discuss the contrast between two male leading roles – RADAMES and AMONASRO. How do their voice parts contribute to their musical characterization?
4. Does AMONASRO care for AIDA as a daughter? How does he treat her?
5. How does AIDA deal with her sense of loyalty or duty to her country? How does her love for RADAMES complicate her feelings?
6. Verdi gives AIDA an important aria to express the conflict she feels. What is this aria? (Ritorna Vincitor) What emotions does AIDA express in this aria?
7. AIDA is an opera of many duets. What is the significance of the duet being the central musical expression? How does that support the underlying themes of the opera?
8. Discuss Verdi's use of musical imagery – for example, how did Verdi create the sound of water flowing? What river was he describing?
9. Aida is the heroine but Amneris has been described as the more interesting character. Do you agree? Why?
10. If Amneris is the more interesting character, how does her music support this premise?
11. How does Radames demonstrate his personal character and sense of honor?
12. At the end of the Judgement Scene Amneris blames her jealousy for the outcome. What is the outcome and how did her jealous nature contribute to the tragedy?
13. The themes of loyalty and duty are prominent in the opera. Which characters are most affected by these themes and how?
14. The opera's Prelude juxtaposes two musical themes important in AIDA. Can you identify which characters are represented in the Prelude music? How would you describe these musical themes?
(AIDA and the PRIESTS)

15. Discuss Verdi's extensive use of local color. How would you describe "local color" in musical terms? Does Verdi achieve a sound that would represent Ancient Egypt? In what scenes do we find the most examples of "local color"?

16. What are some of the underlying themes of the opera? Are they character-driven or event-driven?

- (Loyalty to country, loyalty to family)
- (Duty to one's country/duty to one's parent)
- (Honor - living by a set of principles)
- (Sacrifice - putting another's interests before your own)
- (Jealousy)
- (Vulnerability)