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Opera in four acts by Giuseppe Verdi to a libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni after a scenario by Auguste Mariette; Cairo, Opera House, 24 December 1871.

The King of Egypt	bass
Amneris <i>his daughter</i>	mezzo-soprano
Aida <i>an Ethiopian slave</i>	soprano
Radames <i>Captain of the Guards</i>	tenor
Ramfis <i>Chief Priest</i>	bass
Amonasro <i>King of Ethiopia, Aida's father</i>	baritone
The High Priestess	soprano
A Messenger	tenor
Priests, priestesses, ministers, captains, soldiers, functionaries, Ethiopian slaves and prisoners, Egyptian populace, etc.	
<i>Setting</i> Memphis and Thebes, during the reign of the Pharaohs	

During the late 1860s the search for suitable librettos began to cause Verdi increasing problems. One of his most active helpers was the French librettist and impresario Camille Du Locle, with whom Verdi had collaborated in the making of *Don Carlos*. Du Locle sent Verdi a stream of possible subjects covering a wide variety of genres: from comic plots that might have continued the manner of *Un ballo in maschera* to large-scale topics suitable for conversion into grand opera. But Verdi became more and more difficult to please, finding the comic subjects structurally or temperamentally unsuitable, while often complaining of the 'patchwork' quality of grand opera, its inherent lack of coherence. The breakthrough came in the early months of 1870, when Du Locle sent Verdi a scenario by the archaeologist and Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, based on an invented story set in Egyptian antiquity. Verdi had the previous year refused to supply an inaugural hymn as part of the celebrations to open the Suez Canal; but he accepted this new Egyptian idea - which was to open the new Cairo Opera House - almost immediately, appointing as librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni, his collaborator in the revised *La forza del destino*. Work on the opera, whose scenario was adapted and enlarged by both Du Locle and Verdi, proceeded through 1870, Verdi as usual taking a considerable hand in the libretto's formation, even in minor details of line length and wording.

As the composer decided not to attend the Cairo première, he proceeded to complete the orchestration of his score in Italy; but by that stage it was clear that production of the opera would be delayed by the Franco-Prussian war, the siege of Paris having trapped the sets and costumes in the French capital. There were in addition a series of intense struggles over the première cast, in which as usual Verdi took a close interest. Eventually *Aida* was first performed in Cairo – with predictable success – in late 1871, directed by the famous double bass player Giovanni Bottesini, with a cast including Eleonora Grossi (Amneris), Antonietta Anastasi-Pozzoni (Aida), Pietro Mongini (Radames) and Francesco Steller (Amonasro). Verdi also devoted great attention to the Italian première at La Scala, making various slight changes to the score and minutely rehearsing a carefully chosen group of principals. This second performance, conducted by Franco Faccio, took place on 8 February 1872, and included Maria Waldmann (Amneris), Teresa Stolz (Aida), Giuseppe Fancelli (Radames) and Francesco Pandolfini (Amonasro). It was again hugely successful with the public, although some critics voiced reservations about passages they found conventional or old-fashioned. Verdi was reluctant to allow further performances in Italy without assurances of a sensitive staging, but by the mid-1870s the opera had entered the general repertory, where it has remained to the present day. Some time before the Milanese première, Verdi wrote a full-scale overture; but after hearing it rehearsed he decided to withdraw it and reinstate the prelude.

The prelude juxtaposes and combines two themes: the first, chromatic and presented on high strings, will be associated with *Aida* throughout the opera; the second, scalar idea, contrapuntally developed, will be associated with the priests.

Synopsis

Act 1.i A hall in the King's palace in Memphis

To the accompaniment of a restrained development of motifs from the prelude, Ramfis and Radames are in conversation: Ramfis advises that the Ethiopian enemy is again on the attack, and that Isis has named the commander of the Egyptian troops. As Ramfis departs, Radames eagerly anticipates becoming that leader, and then muses on his beloved *Aida* in the *romanza* 'Celeste *Aida*', a ternary-form piece shot through with atmospheric instrumental effects. Radames is then joined by Amneris, who loves the young warrior, but whose sinuous string melody underlines her suspicions about the direction of his affections. Their agitated duet, 'Quale inchiesta!', is interrupted by the appearance of *Aida* (and her characteristic theme), and Radames's longing glances confirm Amneris's jealousy. The duet turns into a trio as Amneris relentlessly questions the confused lovers.

A series of fanfares heralds the King of Egypt, Ramfis and a large group of followers. A messenger announces that Amonasro, King of the Ethiopians, is leading an army against them; the King of Egypt reveals that Isis has named Radames as their commander. All join in the martial hymn, 'Su! del Nilo', *Aida*'s syncopated line underlining her distress at the forthcoming battle. After a final unison cry of 'Ritorna vincitor!' ('Return victor!'), the crowd disperses, leaving *Aida* alone. Her long, multi-sectioned arioso, which begins with an anguished verbal echo of the chorus's 'Ritorna vincitor!', explores in depth her predicament: Amonasro is her father, but the victory of her family would see the defeat of her beloved Radames. The soliloquy ends with a delicate but intense prayer, 'Numi, pietà', in which she begs the gods to have pity on her suffering.

1.ii *Inside the temple of Vulcan in Memphis*

The scene is an old-fashioned tableau, so beloved of French grand opera. An opening chorus, 'Possente Fthà', has many gestures to local colour, notably in its use of the melodic diminished 3rd. There follows a priestesses' dance during which Radames is conducted to the altar. In solemn tones, Ramfis bids Radames protect the homeland, and then leads off the concertato 'Nume, custode e vindice', which gradually gains in power, mingles with the opening strains of the scene, and culminates in a triumphant cry of 'Immenso Fthà!' (For Verdi's annotated libretto)

Act 2.i *A room in Amneris's apartments*

A chorus of female slaves, singing of Radames's recent victories, is followed by a dance of Moorish slaves, Amneris punctuating the choral song with a languorous appeal for her warrior to return. Aida is seen approaching and Amneris dismisses her slaves, to begin one of the great confrontational duets of Verdi's later operas, a number that has echoes of the traditional four-movement form though with equally significant divergences. First comes a succession of contrasting episodes, 'Fu la sorte dell'armi', in which Amneris, with her characteristic sinuous chromaticism, attempts to trap Aida into admitting her love for Radames. Aida's confusion crystallizes into an anguished statement of her identifying theme, but Amneris continues the interrogation by announcing Radames's death, and then by contradicting the news. The intensity of Aida's reactions leaves no doubt of her feelings and, in an *adagio* second movement, 'Pietà ti prenda del mio dolore', she begs in vain for Amneris to show mercy. They are interrupted by fanfares, and an offstage chorus singing the Act 1 'Su! del Nilo' (Verdi revised this final section after the first performance in Cairo). Over the choral musical background, Amneris and Aida sing a cabaletta substitute, 'Alla pompa che s'appresta', Amneris's line matching the martial atmosphere of the chorus, Aida's minor-mode answer – with syncopated accompaniment – in sharp contrast. Amneris storms out, to leave Aida alone for a last, desperate reprise of 'Numi, pietà'.

2.ii *One of the city gates of Thebes*

The grand concertato finale – one of Verdi's most spacious – begins with a chorus, 'Gloria all' Egitto', which features interludes for a female group and for the priests, who have a version of their characteristic contrapuntal theme. The stage gradually fills to strains of the famous march for 'Egyptian' trumpets; then comes a ballet sequence, full of harmonic and instrumental local colour; then a reprise of 'Gloria all'Egitto' during which the victorious Radames finally appears. Amneris places a laurel wreath on Radames's head, and the King grants him any wish he may desire. Radames asks that the prisoners be brought forth and Aida sees among them Amonasro. She inadvertently reveals to all that he is her father, but Amonasro quickly stops her from disclosing his identity. The Ethiopian king now takes centre stage to lead off the central Andante, which begins with his account of the battle and then shades into the main lyrical passage, a prayer for clemency, 'Ma tu, Re, tu signore possente'. The prayer is taken up by Aida and the prisoners, is sharply rejected by the priests (who demand death for the defeated), and develops into a broad and lengthy tutti. The set piece over, Radames asks the Egyptian king for clemency to be shown to the prisoners; Ramfis objects, but Radames carries the day. In a final gesture the king gives him a last reward: Amneris's hand in marriage. The scene concludes with a reprise of 'Gloria all'Egitto', varied and expanded to allow the principals to express their reactions to the new situation.

ACT 3 *The banks of the Nile*

A single note, G, is sustained by a complex blend of orchestral sonorities to invoke moonlight on the banks of the Nile. An offstage chorus adds to the effect by chanting a hymn to Isis, 'O tu che sei d'Osiride'. Amneris and Ramfis disembark from a boat and enter the temple to pray on the eve of Amneris's marriage. Aida's theme emerges as she cautiously enters for a clandestine meeting with Radames. In a *romanza* that Verdi added to the opera only at the last minute, 'Oh, patria mia', she invokes her long-lost homeland, the restless accompaniment and harmonies combining with a formal layout of remarkable freedom, even for the later Verdi.

The ensuing duet with Amonasro is best seen as the first half of a conventional four-movement structure. After a brief *scena* in which Amonasro shows that he knows of her love for Radames, the first movement, 'Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate', is the usual juxtaposition of contrasting lyrical sections: Amonasro invokes their beautiful homeland and reminds Aida of the cruelty of their enemies, but when she refuses to ask Radames about the route his troops will take, and so help the Ethiopians ambush the Egyptians, he angrily reproaches her in 'Su, dunque, sorgete'. Aida is by now broken down, and in the *andante* second movement, 'Padre! ... a costoro', painfully accepts her duty to the homeland: her fragmented line is 'healed' by Amonasro, and finally flowers into a lyrical acceptance of her fate. As Amonasro hides, Radames appears and a second, more conventional four-movement duet ensues. In a hectic first movement, Radames assures Aida of his love but warns that he must again lead his troops in battle. The *andantino* second movement, 'Fuggiam gli ardori inospiti', sees Aida recall the musical idiom of 'Oh, patria mia' in an effort to persuade Radames to run away with her. A brief transition movement, in which Aida accuses the still-reluctant Radames of not loving her, leads to the duet cabaletta, 'Si: fuggiam da queste mura', in which Radames emphatically agrees to join her in flight. The cabaletta ceases abruptly before its final cadences as Aida asks Radames of the route his army will take. As soon as Radames discloses the information, Amonasro emerges from the shadows, triumphantly announcing that his troops will be there to meet the Egyptians. In a closing *terzetto*, 'Tu! ... Amonasro!', Radames rails at his lost honour. Aida and Amonasro try to comfort him, but they delay too long: Amneris and Ramfis discover them; Amonasro tries to kill Amneris but is prevented by Radames; and, as father and daughter rush off, Radames gives himself up to justice at the hands of the priests.

Act 4.i *A hall in the King's palace*

After an orchestral prelude based on the main theme of the *terzetto* in Act 1 scene i, Amneris sings an extended *arioso* in which she determines to save Radames. He is led on by the guards, and yet another multi-section duet ensues. In the first movement, 'Già i sacerdoti adunansi', there is a patterned alternation of declamatory periods as Amneris begs Radames to defend himself and Radames refuses, having lost all interest in life. The central lyrical movement, 'Ah! tu dei vivere', allows Amneris to declare her love, but Radames still wishes only for death. The main melody of the opening movement returns in the third as Amneris reveals that Aida, whom Radames believed dead along with Amonasro, is still alive. This revelation eventually precipitates a brief cabaletta, 'Chi ti salva', in which Amneris explodes with renewed jealousy and Radames rejoices that he can now die to protect his beloved.

Radames is led back to the dungeon, and a restrained version of the priests' theme, punctuated by anguished cries from Amneris, sounds as the priests and Ramfis follow him in. They chant a solemn prayer, 'Spirto del Nume', before beginning Radames's trial. Radames is accused by Ramfis three

times: each time he refuses to answer, the priests brand him traitor ('Traditor!') and Amneris begs the gods for mercy. The priests then pronounce the horrible sentence: he will be entombed alive below the altar of the god he has outraged. In an unrestrained arioso, Amneris begs for mercy; but the priests are inflexible. As they depart, she is left to hurl after them a bitter curse, 'Empia razza! Anatema su voi!'

4.ii The scene is on two levels: the upper represents the interior of the temple of Vulcan, gleaming with gold and light; the lower is a vault

Priests close the stone over Radames's head as he sings his opening recitative, full of thoughts of Aida. But he hears a groan and quickly finds his beloved: she has stolen into the vault to die in his arms. Their duet has none of the usual contrasting movements, but is rather a sustained piece of delicate lyricism with three main ideas. First comes Radames's 'Morir! sì pura e bella!', in which he laments her death; Aida counters with 'Vedi? ... di morte l'angelo', whose scoring and vocal style suggest that the heroine is already speeding to a celestial haven. And finally, with the background addition of chanting from above, comes the most substantial lyrical idea, 'O terra addio', whose extreme simplicity of formal outline is matched, perhaps permitted, by the unusually angular melodic arch. In the final moments, with the lovers singing 'O terra addio' in unison, Amneris kneels above the vault and implores peace for the soul that lies beneath.

Although *Aida* is still one of Verdi's most popular operas, its reputation has perhaps declined slightly of late, overtaken for the first time by works such as *Don Carlos* and *Simon Boccanegra*. The reasons for this reverse are doubtless complex, but the comparative conservatism of *Aida* must surely have played a part. If any rough division of Verdi's mature output were made according to 'experimental' versus 'conservative' works (with, say, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata* and *La forza del destino* in the first category, and *Il trovatore* and *Un ballo in maschera* in the second), then *Aida* would undoubtedly figure with the latter group. In formal terms it concentrates on the conventional set pieces of grand opera: the grand ceremonial scene and – most of all – the large-scale multi-sectional duet, of which there are several. True, there is a considerable array of variants within the recurring duet scheme, but both contemporary critics and more recent commentators have nevertheless seen certain elements of these formal structures as uncomfortable throwbacks to an earlier aesthetic. The level of musical characterization is also indicative of this conservative stance. In common with the characters of *Trovatore* and *Ballo*, the principal roles in *Aida* – with the partial exception of Amneris – hardly develop during the opera, tending to remain within their conventional vocal personalities as the plot moves their emotions hither and thither.

But to regard the restricted focus of *Aida* purely in these terms is to take a one-sided view of Verdi's capacities as a musical dramatist, and to lend an unfair aesthetic privilege to the radical aspect of his personality. Indeed, *Aida*'s greatest artistic successes are born of this 'conservatism': in magnificently controlled ceremonial scenes such as Act 2 scene ii – in which a kind of flexible variation technique allows episodes such as the opening chorus to reappear as the culmination of the scene; or in the telling effects gained when various multi-movement duets dovetail into each other, as in the sequence that closes Act 3.

There is, moreover, one important aspect in which *Aida* remains the most radical and 'modern' of Verdi's scores: its use of local colour. *Aida*, constantly alluding to its ambience in harmony and instrumentation, is the one Verdi opera that could not conceivably be transported to another

geographical location. In this respect it was an important indication of the influence local colour would come to have over *fin-de-siècle* opera, and an object lesson on the delicacy and control with which this colour could be applied to the standard forms and expressive conventions of Italian opera.