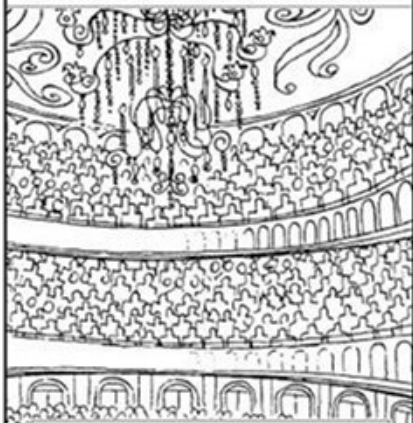


Aida

Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series



Story Synopsis

Principal Characters

Story Narrative/ Music Highlights

Background, Analysis, Commentary

Aida

Italian opera in four acts

**Music
by
Giuseppe Verdi**

Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni

**Premiere in Cairo on Christmas Eve
December 24, 1871**

**Adapted from the
Opera Journeys Lecture Series
by
Burton D. Fisher**

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Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series

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Characters in the Opera

Radames, an Egyptian military hero in love with Aida	Tenor
Aida, a captured Ethiopian slave, maidservant to the Egyptian princess Amneris	Soprano
Amneris, the daughter of the Pharaoh and princess of Egypt	Mezzo-soprano
Amonasro, the Ethiopian king and Aida's father	Baritone
Ramphis, the high priest of Isis	Bass
Pharaoh, the king of Egypt	Bass
A Messenger	Tenor

TIME: Ancient Egypt during the time
of the Pharaohs

PLACE: The cities of Memphis and Thebes

Brief Synopsis

Aida is a story about love that conflicts with patriotic duty. Radames, an Egyptian general, and Aida, a captured Ethiopian princess whose identity has been concealed, are secretly in love. Aida is the maidservant to Amneris, the daughter of the Pharaoh and princess of Egypt, who also loves Radames.

The Ethiopians and their king, Amonasro, Aida's father, are advancing on Thebes. To meet their attack, Radames has been chosen to lead the Egyptian armies. Aida is in conflict. The man she loves commands the Egyptian troops who are at war against her countrymen.

Amneris, suspicious that Aida is her rival for Radames, tricks her into revealing that Radames is indeed her lover. Now fuming with jealousy, Amneris swears revenge against her rival.

Radames returns triumphantly from his battle against the Ethiopians, and asks for clemency for the prisoners. Among them is their king, Amonasro, who is disguised as an officer. At the sight of him, Aida acknowledges her father's presence, causing

astonishment among the multitude. The high priest, Ramphis, warns that if the Ethiopians are freed, they will resurge and seek vengeance. The Pharaoh frees the captives on the condition that Aida and her father remain as hostages. The Pharaoh complicates the rivalry between Aida and Amneris. In appreciation of Radames's victory, he grants Radames the hand of Amneris in marriage; together they shall rule Egypt.

Amonasro induces Aida to heed her patriotic duty and obtain tactical military information from Radames. As Radames and Aida plan to flee Egypt together, Radames unwittingly reveals the route the Egyptian army is planning to pursue. His revelation is overheard by Amonasro who reveals himself as the Ethiopian king. Amneris and Ramphis witness Radames's indiscretion and accuse him of treachery; he surrenders to justice.

Amneris pleads with Radames to abandon his love for Aida, and in return, she will secure a pardon for him from the Pharaoh, but Radames refuses her offer. At Radames's trial, he is found guilty and condemned to die in a tomb. In a crypt, Aida joins Radames, and both await their imminent death as Amneris, above them in the temple, mourns the death of her beloved.

As the *Aida* story progresses, towering passions and emotional eruptions are unleashed by the principal characters as they face conflicts of love, jealousy, rivalry, and patriotism. The ultimate tragedy of the story is that as Aida and Radames are forced to yield to the power of state and religion, both become doomed.

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

Prelude

The prelude to *Aida* immediately establishes the dramatic conflict within the story: human helplessness against the oppressive power of the state and religion. Two musical themes collide, representing the struggle and tension between love and duty.

The first theme heard is the soft, poignant, pleading melodic motive identifying the heroine, Aida.



The second theme identifies the priests of Egypt: it is dark, imposing music that suggests their authority and oppressiveness. They are the unrelenting guardians of the glory of their nation.



Act I - Scene 1: The Grand Hall in the palace of Pharaoh in the ancient Egyptian city of Memphis

Despite their recent defeat, Egypt's Ethiopian enemies are again advancing and threatening the city of Memphis.

Radames, an officer in the Egyptian army, converses with the high priest, Ramphis, and expresses his eager anticipation and hope to become the supreme commander of their troops. Ramphis advises him that the goddess Isis, the divine benefactress of Egypt, has already named the commander, and the decision will soon be announced by Pharaoh himself.

After Ramphis departs, Radames reveals that he loves the captured Ethiopian slave Aida, now a maidservant to the Egyptian princess, Amneris. Aida has concealed her royal Ethiopian identity to prevent the Egyptians from using her as a political hostage. Radames speculates on the honor and glory he will achieve if he should be selected to command the Egyptian armies and then return victorious. He concludes that with his triumph, Pharaoh would generously grant him his coveted victory prize, his beloved Aida.

Radames sings the *romanza*, “Celeste Aida, forma divina” (“Radiant Aida, divinely beautiful”), a meditation about his passionate love for Aida, which he concludes with his dream of their future happiness together: “Un trono vicino al suol” (“I will build you a throne”).

Radames: “Celeste Aida”



Princess Amneris enters, and her subtle, superficial conversation with Radames fails to hide her raging passion for him.

Amneris's theme

Allegro assai moderato



When Aida suddenly appears, Radames inadvertently casts loving glances at her. Amneris observes them, and becomes inflamed with jealousy. This is the beginning of a bitter rivalry between the two princesses.

Each character reveals his or her inner thoughts. Radames reflects his agitation that Amneris may have discovered his secret love for Aida; Amneris reveals her suspicion and burning jealousy if Aida is indeed Radames's love; and Aida vents her desperation and frustration, believing that not only is her love for Radames doomed and futile, but that she will never again see her beloved country.

Trio: Aida, Radames, and Amneris

Allegro agitato e presto



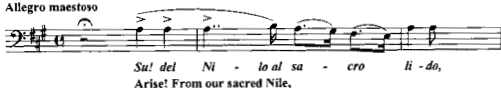
Pharaoh's procession arrives. A messenger delivers grave news telling of an invasion into Egypt by the Ethiopians led by their indomitable king, Amonasro. They have devastated and burned crops and, emboldened by their easy victory, are now marching on Thebes.

Pharaoh proclaims war, and his people approve with emotional outbursts of "Guerra, guerra" ("War, war"). Pharaoh turns to Radames and announces that their venerated goddess, Isis, has chosen him to command their legions against the Ethiopians. Radames thanks the gods for answering his prayers. Amneris responds with pride and elation; Aida trembles in fear.

The Pharaoh commands his people to the temple of Vulcan to anoint Radames with the sacred arms of Egyptian heroes. The priests, ministers, and captains join to praise their powerful gods who will bring them victory and death to the foreign invaders: "Su! del Nilo" ("Arise! From our sacred Nile").

Pharaoh and chorus: “Su! del Nilo”

Allegro maestoso



Amneris proudly presents Radames with a staff to guide him to victory, and as they exit, she leads the Egyptians in proclaiming their ultimate victory: “Ritorna vincitor” (“Return victorious”).

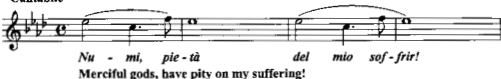
“Ritorna vincitor”

Aida is left alone. She faces inner conflict and is agonized and distressed. She repeats the Egyptian call to victory, “Return victorious,” but for whom does Aida pray? For her lover Radames’s victory or for her country Ethiopia’s triumph in battle? Aida faces the conflict of her love for Radames vs. her loyalty to Ethiopia. Her father, Amonasro, has invaded Ethiopia to rescue her from bondage. If he defeats the Egyptians, her beloved Radames may die. If Radames is victorious, her father may be killed and her country destroyed.

Aida condemns herself for her treacherous thoughts. She has inadvertently wished her lover to return victorious over her father and brothers. Aida bemoans her cruel fate, and concludes the tragic portrait of her inner conflicts with an intense and delicate prayer. She is weary and vulnerable, and despairingly pleads to her gods: “Numi, pietà del mio soffrir!” (“Merciful gods, have pity on my suffering!”)

“Numi, pietà”

Cantabile



Act I - Scene 2: Temple of Vulcan at Memphis

In the temple of Vulcan, the priests and priestesses, in an austere and solemn ceremony, invoke the sacred gods of Egypt with solemn chants and religious hymns.

Invocation of the Priestesses

Andante con moto



Radames solemnly expresses his firm devotion to Egypt. He is led to the altar, blessed, anointed by the priests, and then receives the sacred armor and sword. The consecration of Radames conveys the extraordinary power of the gods to protect and defend their sacred soil. They invoke the all-powerful god Phthà, the father of gods and men, their creator, their guardian and protector, the animating spirit of the universe, and the supreme judge of human conduct and destiny.

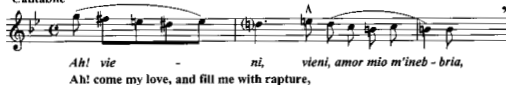
The finale of the consecration of Radames concludes with a full fortissimo of chorus and orchestra, all glorifying the god Phthà: “Immenso Fthà” (“All powerful Phthà”).

Act II - Scene 1: Amneris's apartments

Radames and the Egyptian armies have vanquished the Ethiopians. Amneris is surrounded by female slaves who adorn her for the forthcoming celebration of the Egyptian victory over the Ethiopians. Amneris, with passionate and voluptuous sensuality, rapturously dreams about Radames, and eagerly prepares to welcome him.

Amneris: “Ah! vieni, vieni amor mio”

Cantabile



As Aida approaches, Amneris suspects that this slave of the vanquished Ethiopians may indeed be her rival for Radames's love. A dramatic confrontation ensues between the two princesses.

(Aida's identity as a princess of Ethiopia is not known.)

Amneris is determined to solve the mystery and prove that her suspicions are true. She will unmercifully use cunning and guile to trap Aida into admitting her love for Radames. At first, she feigns affection and friendship for Aida, pretending sympathy for the fatal destiny of her people. In response, Aida expresses her anxiety and deep concern for the fate of her father and countrymen. After Amneris offers her pity and assurance that time—and love—will heal her wounds, the mention of love immediately transforms Aida from sadness to hope.

As she proceeds to try to entrap Aida, Amneris tells her that Radames has been killed in battle. Aida's despairing response persuades Amneris that she has indeed uncovered the truth. But then Amneris tricks Aida and contradicts the news, telling her that "Radames vive" ("Radames lives"). Aida now responds with an outburst of joy. Unwittingly, Aida has revealed her secret.

Amneris explodes and screams at her rival: "Sì, tu l'ami. Ma l'amo anch'io intendi tu? Son tua rivale figlia de'Faraoni." ("Yes, you love him. I love him too, do you hear? I am your rival, the daughter of Pharaoh.")

In an almost instinctive defense, Aida is about to betray her identity as a princess of Ethiopia, but she prudently hesitates, and begs Amneris for forgiveness and pity. Amneris, now seething with jealousy and revenge, erupts in rage, shocked that her rival for Radames is but a lowly slave. She then proceeds to malign and curse Aida. Then, with indignation, she condemns Aida: "Trema, vil schiava!" ("Tremble, vile slave!") Amneris's passions of hatred and revenge have erupted and exploded. Aida begs for pity and mercy, realizing that if she reveals her love for Radames, her life is doomed.

Act II - Scene 2: Entrance to the city of Thebes, before the temple of Ammon

The Triumphal Scene of *Aida* provides a magnificent spectacle that portrays pomp, splendor, glory, and the power of ancient Egypt and its Pharaohs. All Egypt has gathered to celebrate victory over the Ethiopians and honor Radames and his troops.

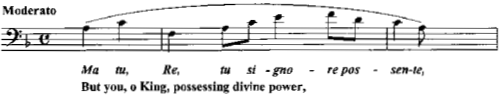
The choral hymn “Gloria all’Egitto” (“Glory to Egypt”) accompanies the entrance of Pharaoh, Amneris, the royal court, and the priests. Troops arrive, accompanied by the exhilarating Grand March. A ballet accompanies the presentation of treasures from the conquered Ethiopians, and then all exuberantly applaud the arrival of Radames, who is duly praised by Pharaoh as the savior of Egypt.

Grand March



Amonasro: “Ma tu, Re”

Moderato



Ramphis and the priests oppose clemency for the Ethiopian prisoners and advise Pharaoh to decree death to them. Radames, after casting loving glances upon Aida, which prompts Amneris to seethe with revenge, reminds Pharaoh of his promise, and asks life and liberty for the Ethiopians.

Ramphis reminds Pharaoh and Radames that the Ethiopians are enemy warriors with revenge in their hearts. A pardon would only embolden them and incite them to arms again. Radames, believing that their warrior king Amonasro was killed in battle, argues that without their leader, no hope remains for the vanquished. Ramphis offers a compromise and suggests that the prisoners be freed, but in exchange, that Aida and her father remain as hostages.

Pharaoh yields to Ramphis's counsel. To celebrate the renewed peace, he bestows on Radames his final reward: the hand of his daughter Amneris in marriage. Both shall now rule Egypt. The power of Pharaoh has doomed Radames's and Aida's love.

Amid this grandiose spectacle, the conflicting dilemmas of each of the characters are placed clearly in focus. Amneris gloats, jubilant that her dreams to possess Radames have been fulfilled, and confident that the slave Aida can no longer be her rival for Radames. Aida is in despair, fully realizing the hopelessness of her love now that Radames has been granted Amneris and the throne of Egypt. Radames is confused and bewildered. Amonasro whispers to Aida to have faith because Ethiopian revenge is imminent. A reprise of the hymn “Gloria all’Egitto,” followed by the Grand March, concludes the Triumphal Scene.

Act III: The banks of the Nile

Act III begins in near silence, its music evoking serene Oriental imagery as moonlight descends on the Nile. The priestesses in the temple of Isis sing hymns of joy to celebrate the forthcoming royal wedding of Amneris and Radames. Amneris and the

high priest Ramphis arrive to pray at the temple on the eve of her marriage.

Aida appears for a secret rendezvous with Radames. While she waits, she nostalgically recalls her homeland: “O patria mia, mai più, mai più” (“My country, never again, never again will I see my homeland”). Then she recalls its natural beauty: “O cieli azurri, o dolci aure native” (“O azure sky, and soft blowing breezes”).

Aida: “O cieli azurri, o dolci aure native”

Andante mosso

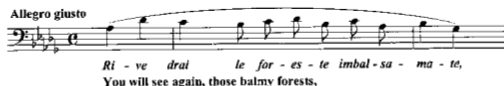


Aida’s father, Amonasro, appears. He warns his daughter that her rival will destroy her. He then tells her that she can have her country, her throne, and Radames as well, if she helps the Ethiopians defeat the Egyptians. Amonasro arouses Aida’s patriotism by invoking their homeland, Ethiopia.

Amonasro and Aida:

“Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate”

Allegro giusto



Amonasro is clever and manipulative. He reminds Aida that the Egyptian enemies have humiliated their people by mercilessly committing atrocities and horrors. They have profaned their homes, temples, and altars, and ravished virgins. He again appeals to Aida’s patriotism, advising her that the Ethiopian armies are ready to attack and will be victorious, but only if they know the route the Egyptian armies plan to follow.

Aida inquires, somewhat disingenuously, “Who will be able to discover that route?” Amonasro replies, “You alone.” He reminds her that Radames, their general, will meet her shortly, and he commands his daughter to secure that strategic information from Radames.

Aida becomes horrified, immediately realizing that in order to perform her patriotic duty, she must betray her lover. Aida refuses Amonasro’s demands.

In her despair and conflict between love for Radames and her duty to her country, she pleads for her father's pity and understanding. But Amonasro is relentless and responds furiously, insisting that without her help, Ethiopia will be vanquished, and the Egyptians will destroy their cities and spread terror, death, and carnage.

He reminds Aida that if she fails to cooperate, she will bear the guilt for Ethiopia's destruction: "For you, your country dies, the ghosts of your countrymen and the ghost of your mother will curse you." He then explodes in a rage, cursing his daughter if she does not help her people: "You are unworthy! You are not my daughter. You are but a slave of the Pharaohs!"

Amonasro has terrorized Aida; her pleas for mercy and understanding have become futile. Although she is appalled at the thought of betraying Radames, she must accede to her duty to father and country. Aida reluctantly consents; she will secure the secret information from Radames.

Radames appears for his rendezvous with Aida.

Radames: "Pur ti riveggo, mia dolce Aida"



Aida initially spurns Radames, condemning him as the spouse of Amneris, but Radames contradicts her and swears that his only love is Aida. When Aida asks him how he expects to free himself from Amneris, Radames claims that if he defeats the Ethiopians, Pharaoh will reward him. He will ask for Aida as his prize. But Aida is more realistic and pessimistic, and advises him that his dreams are in vain. Amneris will not be spurned, and she will be relentless in her revenge.

Aida persuades Radames that they must flee together and escape the vengeance of Amneris and the priests. She seductively describes the blissful life they could share together in Ethiopia.

Aida: "Là tra foreste vergini"



When Radames hesitates, Aida renounces him, and tells him to go to Amneris: if he will not flee with Aida, he no longer loves her. Radames refuses violently, but fearing he will lose Aida, with impassioned resolution he capitulates and decides that he will flee Egypt with her.

Aida asks Radames by which road they can escape. Radames assures her that the gorges of Napata will be safe until tomorrow; it is then that the Egyptian armies plan to ambush the Ethiopians at the gorges.

Upon hearing Radames divulge his secret, Amonasro emerges from hiding and announces that he is not only Aida's father, but the king of the Ethiopians who was presumed dead. Radames is frozen in shock, delirious, and horrified. He fully realizes that he has unwittingly betrayed Egypt. Amonasro, now in possession of strategic military intelligence, triumphantly announces that his troops will be at the gorges of Napata, and they will ambush the Egyptians.

Aida tries to calm Radames, assuring him that her love is more important than his honor, but Radames is inconsolable and deliriously screams that he has been dishonored.

Amneris and Ramphis had overheard Radames's revelation as they exited the temple and accuse him of treachery. Amonasro tries to kill Amneris, but Radames intervenes and deters him. Afterwards, Amonasro and Aida flee.

Guards appear. Radames, gasping in confusion and disbelief, cries out, "I am dishonored," and then surrenders himself to justice and the priests.

Act IV - Scene 1: The judgment hall

Amneris is overwhelmed with anger, grief, remorse, and desperation. She laments that her abhorred rival, Aida, has escaped, but more importantly, she fears that her beloved Radames will be condemned to death by the priests as a traitor. Amneris is inflamed with her love for Radames, and decides that if he renounces Aida, she will use her power to save him and persuade Pharaoh to grant him a pardon. Confidently, Amneris calls for Radames to plead with him.

Amneris tries to reason with Radames, but he has reconciled himself to his guilt. He indeed revealed a vital secret, but his honor remains pure, because his treasonous revelation was unwitting and unintentional.

Radames believes that Aida is dead. Without her, he has no interest in salvation and craves death. But then Amneris reveals the truth, telling him that Aida lives. It is her father Amonasro who is dead. Amneris, a woman obsessed and possessed by her love for Radames, pleads with Radames to give up Aida: "Marry me, Amneris, and I will save your life." She tells him, "You must live, live for me, for my love! For your sake I have suffered mortal anguish. I lay awake nights weeping. My fatherland, my throne, my life – all, all, I am ready to sacrifice for you."

But Amneris cannot tear Radames from his passion for Aida. Just like Amneris's passion for Radames, it is a love that is eternal and unshakable. Radames's obstinate refusals inflame the frustrated and defeated Amneris. Her initial dignity and restraint become transformed into turbulent explosions of renewed jealousy and anger.

Radames, intransigent and oblivious of her passionate entreaties, is led off to his trial.

Offstage, the priests read the charges against Radames with each charge echoed by solemn tympani rolls and trumpet blasts. Radames revealed his country's secrets to the enemy, deserted his camp on the day before battle, and broke his faith in country, king, and honor. Radames remains silent, and refuses to defend himself against the charges. Finally, the priests pronounce Radames a traitor, and condemn him to be entombed alive.

Listening outside, Amneris wails in anguish with outcries to the gods for mercy. When the priests appear, she frantically confronts them and unleashes her bitterness, cursing them as merciless ministers of death.

Finally, Amneris damns the priests with ruthless vengeance: "Empia razza! anatéma su voi! La vendetta del ciel scenderà!" ("Impious race! Anathema! May the vengeance of heaven descend upon you!")

Act IV - Scene 2: A split stage: the upper level the temple of Vulcan, the lower level a subterranean crypt

The fatal stone is placed on Radames's tomb as he mourns his fate. He shall never again see the light of day or his beloved Aida.

Suddenly, Aida appears, explaining that she has come to die with her beloved Radames. Together, they will rise to heaven, immortalize their love, and achieve eternal bliss.

From the temple of Vulcan above, the chants of the priestesses are heard: their fatal hymn of death. Together, Aida and Radames invoke their farewell to life on earth. Their dreams of terrestrial joy have vanished in grief, but happiness overcomes them as they invoke heaven's promise of eternity for their souls.

Radames and Aida: "O terra addio"

Meno mosso



Amneris, in mourning robes, appears before the stone which closes Radames's crypt. She pronounces her final words to her beloved Radames: "Pace t'imploro, pace t'imploro, pace, pace, pace!" ("I pray for peace, everlasting peace!")

Verdi.....and Aida

Giuseppe Verdi was born in the village of Busseto in northwestern Italy in 1813, while the smoke of war was just clearing, and the continental armies' defeat of Napoleon was imminent. His musical career began after he demonstrated early talent at the piano, and within a short time he was substituting as organist at the local church.

By his mid-teens, his compositional talents emerged, and he began writing an eclectic assortment of band marches, piano pieces, and church music. At eighteen, the successful Busseto merchant, Antonio Barezzi, became his patron, and Verdi moved into his home, provided singing and piano lessons to his daughter, Margherita, and very soon thereafter, Verdi and Margherita became affianced.

With Barezzi's patronage and support, Verdi applied to the Milan Conservatory, but he was rejected. He was a nonresident; he was four years above the entry age; his knowledge of theory was insufficient; and his piano playing style was deemed weak and too unorthodox. Nevertheless, he remained in Milan and began private studies in harmony and counterpoint with the renowned Vincenzo Lavigna, who had for many years been concert master at La Scala. At the age of twenty-two, Verdi returned to the provincial world of Busseto, married Margherita Barezzi, and was appointed to the post *maestro di musica*. There he directed and composed for the local philharmonic society and gave private music lessons.

Verdi's first opera, *Oberto* (1839), indicated promise for the young, 26-year-old budding opera composer. Its success generated commissions from La Scala for three more operas. His second opera, the comic opera *Un giorno di regno* (1840), was received with indifference and failed disastrously. It was a comic opera composed during a period when he lost his wife and two children.

But it was his third opera, *Nabucco* (1842), that became an immediate and triumphant sensation and catapulted the young composer to immediate recognition. *Nabucco* expanded the *bel canto* school. It possesses plenty of vocal fireworks, but its focus is emotionalism rather than exhibitionism, with forceful and powerful characterizations. Verdi commented, "With this opera, my artistic career can truly be said to have begun." Indeed, Verdi developed into the musical colossus of Italy during his times.

Verdi's early operas all contained an underlying theme: a patriotic call for the liberation of his beloved Italy from the oppressive foreign rule of both France and Austria. Within the subtext of these operas, Verdi, with his operatic pen, sounded the alarm for Italy's freedom. Each story in those early operas was disguised with allegory and symbolism, and advocated individual liberty, freedom, and independence for Italy. The suffering and struggling heroes and heroines in those early operas were metaphorically his beloved Italian compatriots.

For example, in *Giovanna d'Arco* (Joan of Arc), the French patriot Joan confronts the oppression of the English, her own French monarchy, and even the Church. The heroine is eventually martyred, but her plight was synonymous with Italy's struggle against its own oppression. In *Nabucco*, the suffering Hebrews enslaved by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were allegorically the Italian people themselves, similarly in bondage by foreign oppressors.

Verdi's Italian audiences easily read the underlying messages he had subtly injected between the lines of his text and nobly expressed through his musical language. At *Nabucco*'s premiere, at the end of the Hebrew slave chorus that expressed hope for salvation, "Va, pensiero," the audience wildly stopped the performance with inspired shouts of "Viva Italia!"—an explosion of nationalism that forced the authorities to assign extra police to later performances of the opera in order to prevent riots. The "Va, pensiero" chorus became the emotional and unofficial Italian national anthem, the musical inspiration for Italy's patriotic aspirations. Even the name V E R D I had a dual association: homage to the great maestro acclaimed as "Viva Verdi," and as an acrostic for *Vittorio Emanuele Re D' Italia*, King Victor Emmanuel's return from exile an inspiration for Italian liberation.

During Verdi's first creative period, between the years 1839 and 1850, he composed fifteen operas: *Oberto* (1839); *Un giorno di regno* (1840); *Nabucco* (1842); *I Lombardi* (1843); *Ernani* (1844); *I due Foscari* (1844); *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845); *Alzira* (1845); *Attila* (1846); *Macbeth* (1847); *I masnadieri* (1847); *Il corsaro* (1848); *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849); *Luisa Miller* (1849); and *Stiffelio* (1850).

As the mid-nineteenth century unfolded, Verdi, now in his forties, had become the most popular opera composer in the world. In his early operatic style, he had emphatically preserved the *bel canto* traditions maintained by his immediate predecessors, Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. Verdi became the conservator of a glorious tradition in which voice and melody remained supreme. Those were the vital and dynamic forces that represented the soul of the Italian operatic art form.

As the 1850s evolved, Verdi felt satisfied that his objective for Italian independence was soon to be realized. He sensed the fulfillment of Italian liberation and unification in the forthcoming *Risorgimento*, that historic revolutionary event that established Italian national independence. Thematically, Verdi's opera texts were poised for a transition, and he began to seek and progress toward more truthful characterizations and more fully integrated dramas.

Verdi began a relentless search for new operatic subjects. He sought unusual, gripping characters placed in confrontational scenes that would provide more profound dramatic conflict. As such, he abandoned the heroic pathos and nationalistic themes of his early operas to seek subjects that would be bold to the extreme, subjects with greater dramatic and psychological depth, subjects that accented spiritual values, intimate humanity, and tender emotions. He was unceasing in his crusade to create an expressiveness and acute delineation of the human soul that had never before been realized on the opera stage. New characters would appear: hunchbacked jesters, consumptive courtesans, and viciously vengeful gypsies.

Beginning with *Rigoletto* (1851), Verdi entered his "middle period," in which his operas began to contain heretofore unknown dramatic qualities and intensities, and a profound characterization of humanity that he integrated with his brilliant, exceptional lyricism. His creative art began to flower into a new maturity with operas that would eventually become some of the best-loved works ever written for the lyric theater: *Rigoletto* (1851); *Il trovatore* (1853); *La traviata* (1853); *I vespri siciliani* (1855); *Simon Boccanegra* (1857); *Aroldo* (1857); *Un ballo in maschera* (1859); *La forza del destino* (1862); *Don Carlos* (1867); and *Aida* (1871).

As Verdi entered the twilight of his career, he epitomized the words of Robert Browning's Rabbi

Ben Ezra: “Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be.” Verdi triumphed during the twilight of his career with his two final operas that became testaments to his incessant creative energy and genius: *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893), operas possessing an unprecedented integration between text and music but simultaneously maintaining Italian opera’s vital truth. These operas were driven by a profound emphasis on melody, lyricism, and vocal beauty.

In an illustrious and monumental opera career that virtually dominated the nineteenth century, Verdi composed a total of 28 operas before his death in 1901 at the age of 88.

In the 1870s, as Verdi embarked on the composition of *Aida*, the Italian operatic landscape was grim. The *bel canto* genre that dominated Italian opera during the first half of the nineteenth century was no longer in vogue. Other than Verdi’s, virtually no Italian operas of any lasting consequence were being composed with the possible exception of Boito’s *Mefistofele* (1868) and Ponchielli’s *La Gioconda* (1876).

In France, Meyerbeer’s “spectacle” operas were the rage, and Gounod had introduced the new style of the French *lyrique* with *Faust* (1859). In Germany, Wagner had mesmerized opera and the music world with his music dramas: *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersinger* (1868), and the first *Ring* installments, *Das Rheingold* (1870) and *Die Walküre* (1870).

Wagner’s transformations of opera into music drama revolutionized the lyric theater. Verdi considered Wagner’s new ideas, theories, and esthetics an assault on the very foundations and traditions of Italian opera. In the nineteenth century, an assault on Italian opera was a personal attack on Verdi himself. Nevertheless, the great Italian opera master refused to be inoculated with the Wagner virus. He would not permit Wagner to be his *bête noire*, nor would he become Wagner’s disciple or imitator.

Verdi could not deny Wagner’s existence or influence, yet he totally disagreed with Wagner’s solutions and remedies for opera’s ills. Essentially, Wagner’s revolutionary theories and conceptions about music drama, his new *music of the future*, stressed a dramatic integrity that would derive from a profound synthesis between text and music, and the symphonic weaving of leitmotifs, or leading

motives.

Wagner expounded his theories in the “Gesamtkunstwerk,” the “total art work,” an ideal in which all of the arts became unified into the musico-dramatic structure. He conceived opera as a synthesis of the theatrical arts, therefore, a fusion of poetry, music, acting, scenery, and drama, with its idealistic whole equal to the sum of its parts. In the process, Wagner discarded elements of opera’s internal architecture and eliminated recitative, arias, and set pieces. The theoretic result became a continuous flow of melody, “unendliche Melodie,” or endless melody.

Nevertheless, Verdi opposed the Wagnerian ideal. He believed that Wagner’s use of leitmotifs, those leading motives or fragmented musical tunes associated with characters and ideas, were developed to the extreme. He had used leitmotifs as early as *Ernani* and *Macbeth*, although sparingly and with subtlety. And he considered that Wagner’s symphonic weaving of those leitmotifs had created an orchestra that became too garish and heavy, a narrator and commentator in the overall structure that seemingly dominated rather than integrated the drama. Verdi commented, “Opera is opera, symphony is symphony.”

Verdi envisioned his own conception of an Italian *music of the future*, a more integrated music drama that would be less complex than those of Wagner. Verdi would strive for musico-dramatic integrity but would remain the conservator of the Italian traditions in which voice and melody were its ultimate components.

Verdi considered Wagner’s music dramas dramatically stagnant, their texts too long, overburdened with thought, meditative and introspective, and their declaimed harangues seemingly like blustering speech rather than lyricism. In particular, Verdi always strove for motion, swift action, and counter-reaction. His characters vented impassioned and intense emotions, but in the process, always sang beautiful music. Verdi wrote melodrama. Most of his operas depict great raw emotions, such as love, hate, revenge, and lust for power, but are always set to unforgettable music.

Verdi vehemently opposed the Wagnerian revolution. Nevertheless, their differences became a nineteenth-century clash of operatic titans. Wagner was the radical inventor and innovator; Verdi was the conservator of traditions.

So, in the 1870s, as Verdi approached the composition of *Aida*, Wagner's revolutionary theories loomed as an ominous shadow over Verdi. Nevertheless, he was determined that his *Aida* would maintain its Italian soul. *Aida* would be an Italian opera to the core, expressing its drama with rich melodies and profound vocalism. As such, in *Aida*, Verdi employed many set pieces, such as arias and duets, but he molded them ingeniously and infused them with profound dramatic significance. By the time Verdi reached *Aida*, he had achieved absolute mastery of both the musical and theatrical elements of his art.

Recitative, which generally moves the plot forward and provides narrative, was the primary innovation of the seventeenth-century Camerata. It provided the action between set pieces that provided moments of meditation and introspection. It is indeed ironic that for 400 years, every reform movement and major innovation in opera has attempted to eliminate formal recitative. As early as *Rigoletto* (1851), Verdi began to bridge the gulf between those seemingly empty passages of recitative and set pieces. By the time Verdi had progressed to *Aida*, he had virtually eliminated formal recitative. As a result, *Aida* is virtually seamless, its entire score containing a definite and continuous flow of music and drama.

In *Aida*, Verdi demonstrated a new maturity in his rhythmic techniques. They had become broader and more appropriate, and certainly represented a complete abandonment of those elementary dance rhythm accompaniments that were so prominent in operas such as *Il trovatore* (1853).

Aida provides a breathtaking succession of immortal melodies, all fresh, original, and diversified in character. Verdi had never been to Egypt, but harmonically, he captures an Oriental warmth and color in the score as he paints an exotic canvas of rich and expressive musical imagery. In particular, the musical depiction of the Nile in Act III conveys images of the river's serpentine coiling and its ebbs and swells.

Aida provides a heretofore unknown dramatic expressiveness through a magnificent blend of text, music, harmony, and orchestration, and succeeds in achieving an ideal musico-dramatic cohesiveness. Nevertheless, the score always adheres to the central dynamic of Italian opera: a profound lyricism.

Temperamentally, Verdi was a son of the Enlightenment. He was an idealist who possessed a noble conception of humanity that abominated absolute power and deified civil liberty. His lifelong manifesto became a passionate crusade against every form of tyranny, whether social, political, or ecclesiastical.

In 1867, Verdi's opera immediately preceding *Aida*, *Don Carlos*, premiered in Paris. The opera libretto was based on a work of one of Verdi's favorite dramatists, Friedrich Schiller, also the literary source of his previous operas *Giovanna d'Arco*, *I masnadieri*, and *Luisa Miller*.

In *Don Carlos*, neither Verdi nor Schiller was intending to rewrite history, but rather, to clothe this theme of inhumanity and injustice in a great work of art. The story portrays the inhumanity of Spain's sixteenth-century King Philip II and the stifling power of his monarchy and the Church. Verdi and Schiller's underlying premise was to expound their nineteenth-century humanistic ideals about the dignity of man, freedom, and liberty. Verdi believed that the duty of an artist was equal to that of a priest: to teach morality, and to awaken man to moral consciousness and universal truth. He was a skeptic, and in the nineteenth century's eruption of romantic nationalism, he intuitively foresaw elements of modern fascism and totalitarianism and their consequential abusive authoritarianism. Those same themes were addressed in his previous operas *Simon Boccanegra* and *Un ballo in maschera* (1859)—and, of course, would be addressed later in *Aida*.

In his teens, the young Verdi became immersed in and profoundly admired the literary works of Vittorio Alfieri. Alfieri's tragedy *Filippo* was the story of the sixteenth-century King Philip II of Spain, his son Don Carlos, and the dilemma of Elizabeth de Valois, initially engaged to Don Carlos, but later married to Philip. Alfieri was a freethinking liberal who continuously struggled over the underlying issues affecting Italy's pre-*Risorgimento* nationalist ambitions. He believed that Italian liberation from foreign tyranny had been confounded by the abuses inherent in the political coalition of church and state. His advocacy of freedom earned him heroic status among republicans who wished to overthrow Italy's autocratic foreign rulers, France and Austria.

In *Filippo*, Alfieri passionately assailed tyranny

by condemning the “ancient cult of fear” that haunted every tyrant’s court. In describing the despotism of Philip II of Spain, he wrote: “The palace is his temple; the tyrant is a god there; courtiers are its priests; and the victims are freedom, honesty, right thinking, virtue, true honor, and finally, ourselves; we are immolated here.”

Verdi shared Alfieri’s philosophical and political ideas, eventually developing them into a passionate, lifelong antipathy of authoritarianism. As a result, he became an ardent republican and a radical anti-cleric. Later in life he honored Alfieri by naming his son and daughter, respectively, Icilio Romano and Virginia after the heroic protagonists in Alfieri’s tragedy *Virginia*.

Verdi’s *Don Carlos* has become recognized in recent years as one of his greatest masterpieces. The characters in the opera are embroiled in towering and passionate human dilemmas, but underlying those conflicts and tensions are the noble ideals and sentiments of liberalism. The King and the Grand Inquisitor portray the rigidity and intransigence of sixteenth-century fundamentalism and conservatism, but opposing them are those nineteenth-century-style liberals for human progress represented by Rodrigo, the Marquis of Posa, and eventually the Infante, Don Carlos himself, as they advocate independence for Flanders.

In the *Don Carlos* story, Spain is a theocracy in which secular and religious power are fused, and the authoritarian power of the king is sanctified and justified by the Catholic Church. Political corruption and human abuse become the ultimate consequence of this alliance, leading to excessive power which inherently calls for political responsibility and sacrifice, all arbitrarily justified as necessary for the greater good. In *Don Carlos*, it is that unrelenting authoritarian power of church and state that ultimately intimidates humanity. Its consequences are human repression, helplessness, and impotency.

Man’s helplessness against the power of the theocratic state was Verdi’s mind-set when in the 1870s he approached his next opera, *Aida*. In the *Aida* story, ancient Egypt’s religious and secular power are united in a singular, awesome, sacred institution. In this classical theocracy, church and state are united, and absolute rule is exercised by one man whose power is divinely endowed. The king, or

Pharaoh, is an incarnation of god on earth, the supreme ruler and descendant of the divine and cosmic gods. The priests of Isis, just like the Grand Inquisitor and the church in *Don Carlos*, invoke, protect, and justify the sacred unity of god and the state.

In *Aida*, the victims of authoritarianism are Radames and Aida, their love doomed by their duty to god and country. *Aida* is a human and political drama in which its principal characters become helpless and powerless, impotent to resist the awesome demands of state and religion. As in *Don Carlos*, in *Aida* Verdi was moralizing his fears about the use and abuse of power and its consequential, horrible effects on humanity.

In 1871, Verdi was 58 years old. He had composed 25 successful operas, and his ideological mission and agenda for the liberation and unification of Italy was a *fait accompli*. Even though he opposed the opera world gravitating toward the revolutionary musico-dramatic ideas of Richard Wagner, and he was disheartened with the esthetic state of Italian opera, he was tired and ostensibly unwilling to fight another battle. He yearned for and welcomed the relief of retirement. Nevertheless, when he was presented with the *Aida* story, he was overwhelmed with excitement; his passions overcame reason, and his retirement was temporarily postponed.

In the 1870s, the East had a particular fascination for Europeans who were gaining influence in the Arab world through their colonial adventures, trade, and commerce. In addition, Egyptologists' discoveries, such as Schliemann's uncovering of Troy and the sphinxes, were arousing curiosities as well as a European appetite for exoticism.

At the time, Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire. Its Khedive, Ishmail Pasha, was the first of three viceroys appointed to Egypt by the Ottoman Sultans in Constantinople. Khedive Ishmail was notoriously irresponsible and profligate, his big spending running up an enormous Egyptian national debt that was mostly owed to the Europeans. In fact, it was specifically because of his wanton spending that eight years later he was relieved of his position and sent back to Istanbul.

The Khedive's great achievements were the openings of the Suez Canal in 1868 and the Cairo

Opera three years later in 1871. During the Khedive's rule, he tried to make Cairo the Paris of the East. As he impressed the world with Egypt's modernization, the by-product was that he would be able to attract more creditors from Europe. But his personal mission was to appear before the civilized world as a munificent patron of the arts, so his obsessive desire was to celebrate his new Cairo Opera with a singular and spectacular work based on an Egyptian story. (The Cairo Opera actually opened with *Rigoletto*; *Aida* eventually premiered at the new Cairo Opera in December 1871.)

The Khedive wanted his new opera to be composed by the man he considered the world's greatest reigning opera composer: Giuseppe Verdi. Initially, Verdi was disinclined to accept the offer, and consequently named a huge price that he thought would serve to frighten the Khedive. Surprisingly to Verdi, the Khedive quickly accepted his counteroffer.

Nevertheless, the wily Khedive used a more powerful weapon to induce Verdi. He threatened that if Verdi refused, he would seek out one of his renowned contemporaries, either Gounod or Wagner. Verdi immediately yielded, put aside his retirement plans, and began to compose the opera for the Khedive.

Verdi was a close friend of Camille du Locle, the impresario and director of the Paris Opéra-Comique Theatre who had earlier assisted him in the revision of the librettos for *La forza del destino* and *Don Carlos*. Later, in 1875, he was the librettist for Bizet's *Carmen* and the director of the Opéra-Comique at the time of its bankruptcy, in speculation, partly due to *Carmen*'s initial failure.

Urged by the Khedive, du Locle presented Verdi with a four-page synopsis of an opera plot based on an Egyptian subject. The story was allegedly authentic, and supposedly written by the Khedive himself. In fact, the plot was actually written by another conspirator, the Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, later honored as Mariette Bey. Mariette was a well-known cataloguer and Egyptologist at the Louvre, and an archeologist who had uncovered sphinxes and other important ancient relics in the Egyptian sands. During his studies, he had actually discovered a story from ancient Egyptian history that

he developed into the *Aida* story.

Mariette Bey's spectacular story succeeded in stirring up Verdi's creative fires. Upon seeing the sketch, Verdi could scarcely hold his excitement, believing that behind the story was the hand of an expert. In addition, his interest and enthusiasm were stimulated by the opportunity to create exotic musical coloring and effects offered by a story located in ancient Egypt.

Du Locle and Verdi himself collaborated and became the librettists for the new opera. Verdi demanded complete control over the libretto and selected Antonio Ghislanzoni, who had helped him with the revisions of *La forza del destino* and *Don Carlos*, to versify the scenario, as well as translate their libretto from its original French into Italian.

Aida took Verdi only five months to compose. He did not go to Cairo for the premiere – he dreaded the idea of seasickness during a winter voyage. The original plan was to produce the opera toward the close of 1870, but the Franco-Prussian war erupted, and the scenery, painted in Paris, became a prisoner of war. The opera finally premiered in Cairo in December 1871, and in February 1872 at La Scala, Milan.

The success of *Aida* was resounding. A chorus of praise rang out throughout Europe, and Verdi's genius was again acclaimed in glowing terms. He had decisively added another magnificent jewel to his operatic crown.

Aida is grand opera, a genre of operatic performance that reached its pinnacle during the first half of the nineteenth century in France. Grand opera's precursors were those earlier imposing spectacles of Rameau and Gluck, as well as those of Italian expatriates composing in France, Luigi Cherubini and Gasparo Spontini. But it was a Frenchman, Daniel-Francois-Esprit Auber, who in 1828 composed one of the earliest and quintessential grand operas, *La muette de Portici* (*The Mute Girl of Portici*), a spectacle which may have stimulated Rossini, the Italian master of *opera buffa* and *bel canto*, to compose his final work, the grand opera *William Tell* (1829).

In grand opera, all the components of the art form are enlarged and magnified into spectacle. The opera stage becomes filled with complex scenery,

large casts and choruses costumed elaborately, vastly expanded orchestras, and sumptuous ballets. Conceptually, grand opera is concerned specifically with awe and spectacle. In those early grand operas, the musico-dramatic ideals that consumed opera's Camerata founders and its later reformers became secondary considerations.

The principal apostle of nineteenth-century grand opera was the German-born composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864). Meyerbeer's grand operas utilized every resource available: a gigantic orchestra, almost every style of singing, huge stages filled with dazzling marches and pageantry, and extravagant ballets. It was *The Ballet of the Nuns* in Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831) that would signal the beginning of the Romantic era in ballet.

Meyerbeer's operas were concerned with opulence and extravaganza rather than with musico-dramatic ideals. In today's retrospective, his melodies are considered short-winded and his musical and dramatical situations rarely insightful. One uncomplimentary critic once observed, "The inflated form leads to inflated music." Wagner, an enemy of Meyerbeer both personally and professionally, bombastically noted that his spectacles were "effects without causes." Nevertheless, Meyerbeer's works dominated the opera stage for more than 50 years, and in their time, all were sensational successes. In addition to *Robert le Diable*, his most popular operas were *Les Huguenots* (1836), *Le prophète* (1849), and the posthumously staged *L'Africaine* (1865).

Verdi's *Aida* is a truly majestic grand opera, comparable today only to that of spectacles in another genre, the film epics of Cecil B. De Mille. As grand opera, *Aida* presents a vast panorama of ancient Egypt: exotic oriental atmosphere, gigantic and spectacular scenery, pageantry, hundreds of choristers, large crowds of people dressed in exotic costumes, ballets, six outstanding solo singers, offstage bands, and a very large orchestra.

But *Aida* transcends its genre origins and is far from a superficial drama or spectacle for spectacle's sake. It is a powerful drama about love, duty, and sacrifice set against a background of war, processions, religious ceremonies, trials, and death.

From Verdi's musical pen, *Aida's* grandeur lies in its perfectly balanced integration of excellent effects *with* causes. Behind all of its grand opera pomp, pageantry, and spectacle, it is an intensely

intimate and human drama.

As Verdi's career evolved, his characterizations became bolder, more passionate, and contained more dramatic and psychological depth.

Shakespeare introduced characters who at first seem to be larger than life, but in the end, their essence is that they are profoundly human. The true greatness of Verdi's *Aida* is that its characters are, like those of Shakespeare, intensely and intimately human.

Aida's four principal characters, Aida, Radames, Amneris, and Amonasro, face the tensions and conflicts between love, honor, duty, and patriotism, and in their dilemmas and crises, they erupt into towering and volcanic eruptions of human emotions and passions.

The themes in *Aida's* prelude perfectly capture the opera's profound human conflict. At first, softly played strings introduce a tender chromatic theme that identifies the opera's heroine, Aida. In immediate contrast, the rigid, descending theme associated with the priests is heard. But afterwards, these contrasting themes clash and collide, just as all the individuals in the story clash, collide, and become impregnated with conflict as they confront the power of the state. (For the La Scala premiere of *Aida* in 1872, Verdi revised the prelude, adding Amneris's jealousy theme to its two other themes. This version is rarely performed today.)

The grandeur of *Aida* lies in its perfectly balanced integration of these complex human conflicts. Each character in this human and political drama becomes helpless and powerless, impotent to resist the awesome demands of state and religion. In *Aida*, Verdi found another platform to moralize his fears about the use and abuse of power, and its consequential horrible effects on humanity.

As the opera's protagonists face their dilemmas, they explode into towering and volcanic eruptions of passions. On the surface, they are seemingly stock figures reminiscent of characters from myth, legend, or ancient history, but Verdi makes these characters positively human, skillfully painting their complex and intense inner feelings and emotions. As opera's quintessential dramatist, he presents humanity truthfully; in the end, *Aida* is a very human drama about love and the yearning for love within the human heart.

Radames is both warrior and Aida's lover, so his music is bold as well as romantic. In his opening *romanza*, "Celeste Aida," Verdi's musical language

alternates from the dreamy, rapturous, and sentimental to the heroic.

Aida's chromatic identifying theme, first heard in the prelude, is exquisitely simple, tender, and loving. But Aida's dramatic conflict leaves her in continuing despair. She faces the ultimate conflict of love vs. duty, so she prays often, always pleading for pity, mercy, relief, and reconciliation, as in her poignant prayer, "Numi pietà" ("Gods, have mercy").

The opening of Act III is a magnificent mood picture. Aida awaits Radames for what she believes to be their final farewell. She senses doom, and even considers casting herself into the Nile. Verdi's undulating and coiling music is synonymous with her sensibilities and aptly describes her inner turmoil. But afterwards, in perhaps the finest example of a true aria that contains eloquent expressive power, pure and beautiful melody, perfect form, and subtle harmonies, Aida pours out her tragic soul in "O patria mia."

A trademark of Verdi's *Aida* score is how quickly and suddenly passions are inflamed and ignited. In the opening scene, after Amneris notices that Radames has cast loving glances at Aida, their calm conversation suddenly erupts into an explosion of Amneris's anger and jealousy. But Radames fears that he may have betrayed their secret, and Aida senses her tragic conflict. Verdi's underlying music for this trio is twisted, as well as tense, conflicting, and explosive.

Another example of extroverted passions occurs in the confrontation in Act III between father and daughter, Amonasro and Aida. At first, Amonasro evokes the images of Ethiopia's green landscapes to persuade Aida to confront her duty: "Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate" ("You will see again, those balmy forests"), or "Pensa che un popolo cinto straziato" ("Think of your people trampled by the conqueror"). But their confrontation explodes when Aida refuses, and Amonasro bursts into a condemnation of his daughter: "Non sei mia figlia! Dei Faraoni tu sei la schiava!" ("You are not my daughter. You are a slave of the Pharaohs!") This is a supreme moment of gigantic Verdian passions.

Amneris is an exciting multidimensional character in the drama, musically and textually sculpted in depth. Her mood varies from loving and sensuous to imperious, to explosions of anger, jealousy, and terror. After her attendants' chorus opens Act II, she expresses her sensuous longing for

Radames's return: "Ah vieni!" ("Oh come!")

Amneris is a woman obsessed and possessed with her love for Radames, and she is determined to rid herself of Aida, her rival for his love. The Act II confrontation between Aida and Amneris is a marvel of Verdi's striving toward his own unique musico-dramatic ideal, a profound dramatic synthesis and fusion of text and music. For this scene, Verdi battled for every word and every detail in order to achieve dramatic emphasis. He became obsessed with what he called the *parola scenica*, literally, "the dramatic word." These are powerful words, words that could almost stand alone without musical underscoring, and words which perfectly express the situation; however, when these words are fused with the music, they add explosive immediacy to the action, and a shuddering clarity and vividness to the dramatic structure.

In this powerful showdown between two princesses, Amneris is at first inquisitorial, devious, and cunning, using every tool in her arsenal to learn the truth. Is Aida having a secret love affair with Radames? She assures Aida, now distressed and in a state of hopelessness after hearing of the Ethiopians' defeat: "Time will cure your unhappiness, and so will love." The word love elicits its effect: Aida turns pale and trembles while Amneris senses victory, becoming more determined than ever to discover the truth.

She weakens Aida's defenses through cajolery and makes her betray her secret lover. "Trust to my love, confide in me," she says, pretending sisterly love and good will. And then Amneris delivers her final coup: "Just because our valiant leader was mortally wounded on the field of battle..." Amneris is unable even to finish her sentence when Aida convulsively erupts. Amneris then gloats in her triumph: "Tremble! I read your heart! You love him!"

In this incredibly powerful confrontation scene, Verdi abandoned his librettist's polished verses and substituted violent prose, nothing more explosive than Amneris's conclusion: "Yes, you love him, but so do I! Do you hear me? I am your rival! I, the daughter of the Pharaohs!" And finally, Amneris curses Aida as her detested rival. Aida, in vain, can only plead for mercy and pity.

Similarly, the Act IV confrontation between Amneris and Radames contains *Aida's* trademark explosions and eruptions of passions. Almost lawyerly, Amneris pleads with Radames to be objective and allow reason to conquer his emotions.

If he gives up Aida, Amneris will use her power to save his life.

Amneris is a woman whose heart beats desperately and ardently for Radames's love. As she tries to reason with him, his intransigence inflames her: Verdi marked his score, "con agitazione, animando, con espressione" ("with agitation, animated, and with expression"). Amneris declares: "Ti scolpa e la tua grazia io pregherò dal trono, e nunzia di perdono, di vita, a te sarò." ("You can exculpate yourself, and I will secure a pardon for you from the throne.") The emotive power of Verdi's music reveals her desperate soul. But Radames is indifferent and unsympathetic, and Amneris realizes that she has lost Radames to Aida.

The split stage configuration in the final scene of *Aida* was Verdi's own idea. Below, Radames despairs in his sealed tomb, and above, in the temple, Amneris sobs on the stone that has been sealed.

In ancient Egypt, life on earth was closely tied to death; earthly life was only a passage to the afterlife, and heaven was a blessed welcome. Verdi's soft, almost transcendent musical language portrays that spiritual ideal. He consciously strove to portray *Aida's* final moments as a mellow farewell to life on earth—serene, simple, and poignant.

Aida has hidden herself in the crypt in order to die with Radames. With peaceful resignation, suggesting that Radames and Aida are speeding to celestial havens, the two lovers bid farewell to earth. Verdi's music provides images of the final consummation of their love through an ironical quietness that fails to express the cruelty of their fate.

Offstage the priestesses chant their prayer "Immenso Fthà" ("Powerful Phthà") almost in a whisper. In the temple above the crypt, Amneris, in breathless phrases, prays for peace for Radames's soul. It is an irony of this drama that in its final moments, Amneris remains outside the crypt that has sealed the fate of the man she loves, and she does not know, nor will she ever know, that her rival was by birth not a slave, but a princess like herself, who will be dying with the man she loves.

In *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann commented on the final moments of *Aida*:

"You in this tomb," comes the inexpressibly moving, sweet and at the same time, heroic voice of Radames, in mingled horror and rapture. Yes, she has found her way to him, the beloved one for whose sake he has forfeited life and honor, she has awaited him here, to die with him; the intoxication of final

union. The repentant Amneris is in the temple praying for Radames's soul.

Aida has been referred to as a necklace of musically fine jewels, so rich in melody and harmony, its music so closely wedded in its expressive power to the meaning of the text, and so broadly dramatic in all of its aspects, that it claims a place among the most phenomenal artistic creations of the second millennium. *Aida* is without doubt a true operatic masterpiece.

Within *Aida's* panorama of war, processions, ceremonies, trials, and death, the opera presents the pulsing life of human beings. It is most of all an opera story about human passions.

Aida became Verdi's declaration that Italian opera and its focus on melody and voice remained supreme. With *Aida*, Verdi rejuvenated and even revolutionized Italian opera. The throbbing passions which explode throughout the entire *Aida* story certainly influenced the next generation of Italian *verismo* opera composers, represented by Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890), Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (1892), and certainly by Puccini, who, as a young man, was determined to become an opera composer after he saw *Aida*.

Aida again revealed the extraordinary powers that Verdi had within his musical arsenal, but in this opera, they are revealed with renewed purpose. The grand old man of Italian opera had given the world a masterpiece in *Aida*, an opera that in every conceivable respect transcends the best works of his predecessors Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini. It is a work with opulent musical color, gorgeous orchestral instrumentation, and melodic splendor and beauty in every musical measure.

The only Italian opera composer who has rivaled *Aida* is Verdi himself, who would resurface 15 years later with perhaps the ultimate music drama, *Otello*, and later with *Falstaff*—the great Italian master's reconciliation with the evolution of the operatic art form; the Italian *music of the future*.

In *Aida*, Verdi ennobled powerful, towering, and intense human emotions and passions as each character faces conflicts of love, honor, and duty. *Aida's* passions are timeless and ageless, perhaps the secret of its magical and eternal youth.

Verdi himself would have the last word about his *Aida*. He was amazed at his incredible creation, and commented: "*Aida* is certainly not one of my worst operas...."