

# Verdi's *Aida*

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These study materials are produced for use with the  
Bob Jones University Opera Association production of *Aida*

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## An Introduction to Verdi's *Aida*

Verdi's *Aida* is an Italian opera, but it is structured in the manner of French grand opera and set in Egypt. Because it is also usually produced on a large scale, it is regarded as the grandest of all grand operas. The very name *Aida* conjures up images of a magnificent spectacle with monumental sets, great crowd scenes, temples, the Nile River, Egyptian priests, Ethiopian slaves, and even camels and elephants.

Verdi composed *Aida* at the request of Ismail Pasha, Khedive of Egypt. This "prince" greatly admired the composer's talent and negotiated with him for "something grandiose" to be produced at the Cairo Opera.

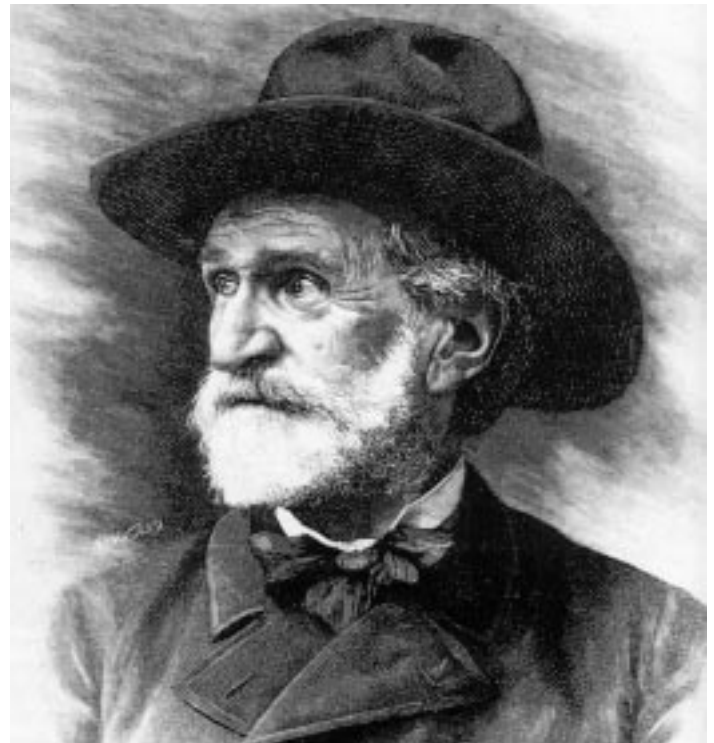
Verdi did not comply in time for the November 1, 1869, inaugural performance at the new opera house, built to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal during the same month. Instead, the Cairo Opera opened with his *Rigoletto*.

Later the composer's interest was drawn to the project when he received an outline for the story written by Auguste Mariette, a renowned French scholar of Egyptian culture and founder of the Cairo Museum. Employing an archeological framework for a drama about ancient Egypt appealed to Verdi. The prayers, rituals, chants, and dances of a mysterious pagan religion served to spur his imagination.

Working with Camille Du Locle, director of the Paris Opera-Comique, Verdi prepared a detailed prose scenario, based on Mariette's outline. He then hired Antonio Ghislanzoni to transform the French prose into Italian poetry. Verdi collaborated closely with Ghislanzoni on this phase of the work. Mariette supervised the fine points of costume and staging, taking care to make every detail drawn from the Kingdom of the Pharaohs accurate.

In the final analysis, however, it is the human element that makes *Aida* the most successful of all the composer's works. Verdi and Ghislanzoni created a simple, direct plot and characters who easily draw the audience into identification with their feelings. The result is a dramatic conflict that is just as engaging in the scenes of grandiose spectacle as in the-

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Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

## **Aida Plot:** The Short of It

Act I: The captain of the Egyptian army, Radames, is in love with the Ethiopian slave, Aida. When he is appointed commander of his country's troops against Ethiopia, he hopes to win Aida's hand in marriage by defeating the country ruled by her father. But Amneris, daughter of his own king, also loves Radames.

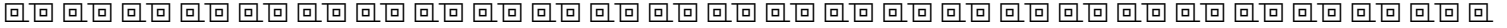
Act II: Radames returns in triumph from the war. Aida's father, the Ethiopian king Amonasro, is among his captives.

Act III: At her father's urging, Aida tricks Radames into betraying his country. The act of treason is overheard by Amneris, and Radames is immediately arrested by Egyptian priests.

Act IV: Radames is entombed to die of suffocation. Aida emerges from her hiding place, and the pair die together. Above their tomb, Amneris weeps.



# AIDA



## SCENE 4: THE TEMPLE OF ISIS ON THE BANKS OF THE NILE

Accompanied by the high priest, Amneris pays her vows at Isis' temple in preparation for her wedding to Radames. Aida secretly follows, hoping to meet Radames one last time. Her father appears and with great effort persuades her to trick Radames into revealing the hidden location of the Egyptian troops. In his encounter with Aida, Radames both agrees to escape with her to Ethiopia and discloses unintentionally the direction the Egyptian troops will take into battle.

Amonasro, having overheard Radames confide a military secret to Aida, steps forward. He urges Radames to flee with him and Aida. At that moment Amneris emerges from the temple, having also heard Radames commit treason. Aida flees with her father, and Radames submits to arrest.



## SCENE 5: PALACE JUDGMENT HALL

Amneris offers to arrange Radames' pardon if he will renounce his love for Aida. He refuses, and the priests condemn him to be buried alive. The princess at last abandons Radames to his doom in a prison vault.

## SCENE 6: TEMPLE OF PTAH WITH THE CRYPT BELOW

While priests and priestesses perform religious rites above, Radames, confined below, contemplates his death and muses about Aida's fate. Aida appears, having entered the vault earlier. The couple bid farewell to life and love as they suffocate in each other's arms. Above them, Amneris kneels in penitent prayer as the priests perform their rites.

# Aida: An Introduction *continued*

more intimate ones. Originally the entire libretto was written in verse.

The story centers around the themes of love and patriotism. Its main characters are the leader of the Egyptian army, Radames, and the two women who are rivals for his love: Amneris, daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh, and Aida, daughter of the Ethiopian king and slave to Amneris.

As captives in a foreign land, the figures of Aida and her father, Amonosro, provided the composer an opportunity to express his own intense patriotism. Verdi was a lifelong passionate supporter of Italian nationalism. Even though Italy was unified and politically strong in 1871, Verdi still enjoyed championing the cause of the politically oppressed. During the time of the pharaohs, Egypt had long proved su-

perior in wars with Ethiopia. The opera thus presents the persistence and courage of Aida and her Ethiopian compatriots in a sympathetic light.

After the dramatic component of *Aida* had been set, Verdi confronted the musical tasks and problems. In the end he created a score of exceptionally beautiful melodies and imaginative orchestration. The Triumphant Scene, with its striking array of musical effects, is one of opera's most famous scenes musically and dramatically.

As a result *Aida* is, paradoxically, both the composer's most spectacular and his most intimate opera. It was first performed at the Cairo Opera on Christmas Eve, 1871. For the occasion, the Khedive and his harem occupied places of prominence in box seats. In the more than a century since that occasion, *Aida* has attained the status of the world's best known and best loved opera.

## Highlights of 58 years of *Aida* production by Bob Jones University Opera Association

The inaugural season for the Bob Jones University Opera Association was 1942. The year 2000 production represents the Association's seventh mounting of Verdi's great operatic venture into ancient Egyptian culture. The company's first *Aida* in 1943 was followed by productions in 1948, 1955, 1962, 1974, and 1987.



ABOVE  
1955: Daniza Illtsch as Aida, conductor Dwight Gustafson, Claramae Turner as Amonasra, and Lloyd Thomas Leech as Radames

RIGHT  
1962: Elinor Ross as Aida & Frank Guarrera as Amonasro



ABOVE  
1948: Ella Flesch as Aida, George London as Amonasra, Ramon Vinay as Radames, Alexander Sved as the High Priest, with Marjorie Lawrence seated above as Amneris



LEFT  
1948: In the role of Amneris, Marjorie Lawrence, unable to walk because of a handicap, was carried onstage.

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