

Aida, One of the Greatest Operas of Giuseppe Verdi

Presentation by **George Kurti Plohn**

Aida is an opera in four acts, with the action set in Egypt. Isma'il Pasha, the Khedive, or governor, of Egypt under the Ottoman rule, commissioned Verdi in 1870 to write an opera to celebrate the opening of the newly built Cairo Opera House, paying him 150,000 francs, a huge amount of money at that time. Verdi then first studied the so-called "Egyptian style," their ancient history, geography, and religion for this opera. Contrary to popular belief, the opera was not written to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal a year before in 1869, for which Verdi had been invited to write an inaugural hymn, but had declined. Aida was met with great acclaim when it opened in Cairo in 1871, and a short time later at the Scala in Milan.

It was an immediate worldwide success, so much so that already in 1873, only two years after the Cairo debut, it reached already New York City, presented by the then Academy of Music, and later in 1886 by the Metropolitan Opera.

Since then, the work holds a central place in the operatic canon, receiving performances every year around the world; at New York's Metropolitan Opera alone, Aida has been sung more than 1,100 times since 1886, making it the second most frequently performed work by the company after *La bohème*. May be the most famous of all was the iconic performance in 1955 with Maria Callas as Aida and Richard Tucker as Radamès. In our days, "Aida" is considered one of the most famous operas in the world. After the debut of Aida, Verdi wrote, trying to dissimulate his pride: "This opera is one of my less bad," and he went on: "Time will give it the place it deserves." By now we can say that it did for sure!

Synopsis

Act 1.

In ancient Egypt, in the capital city of Memphis, a Nubian princess, Aida, is held prisoner in Egypt, but she lies about her true identity. Now, she is a slave of Amneris, the Egyptian king's daughter. The Egyptian General, Radames, is secretly in love with Aida, and she with him. The king, the Pharaoh, appoints Radames to supreme commander against Nubia, a powerful empire between today's Egypt and Ethiopia.

Radamès dreams both of gaining victory on the battlefield and of Aida, the Nubian slave, with whom he is secretly in love, singing one of the most beautiful aria of this opera: *Celeste Aida, forma divina* ("Heavenly Aida, divine form, Mystical garland of light and flowers, You are the queen of my thoughts,

You are the splendor of my life.”) Aida is deeply conflicted about her own love for her country, Nubia, and her love for Radames.

Amneris, the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh enters the hall; she too loves Radamès, but fears that his heart belongs to someone else. Aida appears and, when Radamès sees her, Amneris notices that he looks disturbed. She suspects that Aida could be her rival, but is able to hide her jealousy and approaches Aida in a friendly manner.

The Pharaoh enters, along with the High Priest, Ramfis, and the whole palace court. A messenger announces that the Nubians, led by King Amonasro, are marching towards the capital. The Pharaoh declares war and proclaims that Radamès is the man chosen to be the leader of the army.

Alone in the hall, Aida feels torn between her love for her father, her country, and Radamès, singing her famous aria: *Ritorna vincitor* – ‘Return a conqueror.’ Solemn ceremonies and dances by the priestesses are followed by the installation of Radamès to the office of commander-in-chief. All present in the temple pray for the victory of Egypt and protection for their warriors.

Act 2

Amneris, the Pharaoh’s daughter, also loves Radames. Amneris still in doubt about Radamès’ love wonders whether Aida is in love with him. By falsely telling Aida that Radamès has died in the battle, she tricks her into professing her love for him. In grief, and shocked by the news, Aida confesses that her heart belongs to Radamès eternally. This confession fires Amneris with rage, and she plans on taking revenge on Aida. In the meantime Radamès wins the war, and returns triumphantly to Egypt. The “Triumphal March” is the most famous melody in this opera. In this scene, Radames wins the war, and returns to Egypt, in an always spectacularly designed scene. The cavalry with real horses often appears on the stage. You would get a real feeling of luxury. The Pharaoh intends to reward Radames by bestowing Amneris on him, and for him to become his successor. Amneris is ecstatic, but Radamès is very confused, and Aida feels deep sorrow.

Act 3

Among the prisoners marched in, Aida recognizes her own father, Amonasro, the Nubian King. He compels Aida to betray Radamès by eliciting from him his military secrets. On the eve of Amneris and Radamès’ wedding, outside Aida waits to meet with Radamès as they had planned. Amonasro appears and makes his daughter Aida agree to find out the location of the Egyptian army from Radamès. When he arrives, Amonasro hides behind a rock and listens to their conversation.

Aida proposes to Radamès that they escape from Egypt and live together. In order to make their escape easier, Radamès proposes that they use a safe

route without any fear of discovery and reveals the location where his army has chosen to attack. Upon hearing this, Amonasro comes out of hiding and reveals his identity. Radamès feels dishonored. Then, Amneris and Ramfis appear and, seeing Radamès with their enemy, call the guards. Amonasro and Aida try to convince Radamès to escape with them, but he refuses and surrenders to the imperial guards. Aida and Amonasro run away through a secret route.

Act 4

To leak military secrets results in the death penalty. Amneris offers to save Radames only if he promises to love and marry her. But, he refuses and is prepared to die. She asks Radamès to deny the accusations, but Radamès refuses. Certain that, as punishment, he will be condemned to death, Amneris implores him to defend himself, but Radamès firmly refuses.

Radamès' trial takes place offstage; he does not reply to Ramfis' accusations and is condemned to death, while Amneris, who remains onstage, pleads with the priests to show him mercy. As he is sentenced to be buried alive, Amneris curses the priests while Radamès is taken away.

Radamès has been taken into the lower floor of the temple and sealed up in a dark vault, where he thinks that he is alone. As he hopes that Aida is in a safer place, he hears a sigh and then sees Aida. She has hidden herself in the vault in order to die with Radamès. They accept their terrible fate and bid farewell to Earth and its sorrows, waiting for death to come. Above the vault, in the temple Amneris weeps and prays to the goddess Isis. And so ends this great opera, this Verdian masterpiece.

The opera Aida has been adapted for motion pictures on several occasions, most notably in a 1953 production which starred Lois Maxwell and Sophia Loren, and a 1987 Swedish production as well. In both cases, the lead actors lip-synched to recordings by actual opera singers.

Our DVD is a 2009 recording from the Metropolitan Opera with Johan Botha, an outstanding tenor from Republic of South Africa as Radamès, Violetta Urmana, a Lithuanian-born soprano as Aida and Dolora Zajick, the Oregon-born mezzo-soprano as Amneris in the principal roles.

I would like to mention that our tenor, Mr. Johan Botha regretfully passed away last year at age 51, of cancer.

Renee Fleming will introduce the opera and as a bonus at the end of Act 2 she will also have a backstage interview with the principal singers.