

AIDA
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Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* was born in a geopolitical thicket, amidst the tangled roots and snaking vines of a dozen ambitious nations.

In 1869, the Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, asked Verdi to compose an anthem for the opening of the Suez Canal – the waterway linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Egypt had built this deep-water canal with help from the French, who intended to control it, disrupt British trade, and cut off Britain from its largest colony, India. Napoleon I had had similar intentions when he invaded Egypt in 1798, but he was driven out by the combined forces of the British, who were expanding their influence in North Africa, and the Ottoman Turks, who had ruled Egypt for three centuries. Ottoman control was weak, though, and Egypt was on the rise, developing and modernizing on a European model. The opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869 would be a grand symbol of Egyptian advancement and prestige.

Ismail Pasha wasn't able to procure a Verdi anthem for the canal opening, or a new Verdi opera for the unveiling of the new Cairo opera house (he settled for *Rigoletto*, nearly 20 years old), but he did contract Verdi to compose an Egyptian-themed opera to premiere in Cairo in early 1871.

At the time of the Khedive's request, Verdi was in his mid-50s, the undisputed king of Italian music. He had already composed many of his greatest works (*Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino*) and his melodies and lyrics had become the soundtrack for the Risorgimento, the great awakening of Italian national consciousness that led to the foundation of the Italian nation in 1859. Prior to then, Italy had been an assortment of rival territories ruled alternately by France, Spain, and Austria. During the Risorgimento, through a series of foreign alliances and wars, the scattered kingdoms and duchies of Italy united and expelled the Austrians. The Pope, backed by France, managed to control Rome until 1871, when the French were too distracted by the

Franco-Prussian War to defend it. That year the Italians took Rome and made it their capital. Italian unification was complete. So, not incidentally, was German unification. Until that time, Germany had also been a loose confederation of states dominated by Austria. When Prussia, the most powerful of those states, defeated France in 1871, Germany became a single nation, independent from Austria, under the Prussian king.

Aida premiered in Cairo the same year. To anyone in the audience, which would have consisted mostly of well-heeled French expatriates and Egyptian officials, and in the audiences that would soon see *Aida* performed in Italy, Germany, and Austria, the opera's plot would have felt all too familiar. Transported back 27 centuries to the 8th century B.C.E., they would have watched the Egyptians and Ethiopians* engage in a war much like the one that had just raged across northern Europe, and like the new wars flaring up across Africa as European powers launched aggressive colonizing campaigns. Both European and later African audiences might have recognized, in the plight of the lovers – Radamès, an Egyptian army captain, and Aida, daughter of the Ethiopian king – the plights of relatives and friends who had been caught up in such wars, perhaps displaced or killed. What makes the story of *Aida* so profound and moving is the mirroring of the political and the personal, the macrocosm and the microcosm, the battlefield and the bedroom, and the idea that the desires and ambitions that motivate nations are the same as those that motivate individuals – only amplified.

Aida is often criticized for having flat characters, but the characters are certainly deep enough to fulfill their obligations to the plot. Radamès and Aida are differentiated in the first scene of Act I. Ramfis, the chilly, authoritarian Egyptian high priest, informs Radamès that the Ethiopians are invading Egypt, and hints that the goddess Isis may have chosen Radamès to command the Egyptian army. Radamès launches into the aria *Celeste Aida*. “If I were that warrior, if my dreams were to come true! A valiant army led by me...and victory...and the acclamations of all Memphis!” He calls Aida a “form divine, mystical garland of light and flowers,” and vows to return her to the “lovely sky, the gentle breezes of [her] native land,” where he will crown her queen. But this is a fatuous dream. Aida is an Ethiopian slave. She belongs to Amneris, daughter of the Egyptian king, and Amneris – a clever, calculating aristocrat – is also in love with Radamès. Amneris intends to marry Radamès and make him the next king of Egypt. Radamès is

proposing to kill Aida's countrymen, take over their country, and install Aida as their queen. Presumably, if he is in love with Aida, he plans to become *her* king – the king of Ethiopia, Egypt's enemy. Or will he be king of Ethiopia *and* Egypt? It's difficult to imagine that this will go down well with Amneris and her father. But Radamès isn't the kind of person who pauses and mulls over practicalities. He's impulsive and passionate and egocentric.

Aida is perceptive, astute, alert to nuances and limitations. She is deeply in love with Radamès, but not blindly: she understands the terrible predicament they're both in. When the Egyptian king announces that Radamès will lead the Egyptian army, and the Egyptian ministers and captains, filled with bloodlust, shout "War and death to the foreigner!" Aida worries, "For whom shall I weep? For whom shall I pray? What power binds me to him!...and he is an enemy, a foreigner!" Aida is aware of her conflicting emotions, her irreconcilable allegiances, and she understands – unlike Radamès – that they will necessitate dangerous deceptions and choices. It's telling that while Aida sings, "I must love him, and he is...a foreigner!" Radamès, caught up in visions of glory, shouts along with the crowd, "War and death to the foreigner! Exterminate them!" Not only is he unconcerned that his beloved is one of these foreigners, and that he's calling for the extermination of her family and friends, but he's oblivious to the agony she's suffering right in front of him. He rushes off to slay Ethiopians, leaving Aida behind to sing *Ritorna vincitor*, an aria whose feverish, slashing music and parrying reversals of thought ingeniously portray the intensity of her confusion and anguish.

The central military battle in *Aida*, in which the Egyptians defeat the Ethiopians, occurs entirely off-stage. This is telling. There's no question that Verdi and his librettist could have written and staged a massive, extravagant battle scene between the two armies, complete with elephants and chariots and thundering brass, but instead they chose to take us to Amneris's chambers and show us the intimate, personal battle between Amneris and Aida. A group of young slaves dances for Amneris's amusement. These slaves were certainly captured during one of Egypt's many imperialist wars, and might be Ethiopians, Libyans, Assyrians, Persians or Arabs. We can envision Amneris resplendent in gold jewelry (the gold probably came from Ethiopian mines), reclining on a couch in an opulently-furnished room, longing for Radamès while her slaves sing hopefully for an

Ethiopian defeat and invite Radamès to “receive the reward for glory” – the reward lying on the couch. It’s an odd, tyrannical ventriloquism, the slaves entertaining Amneris with her own desires. Amneris, using a cruel lie, tricks Aida into admitting that she loves Radamès. Amneris warns Aida, “I, daughter of the Pharaohs, am your rival.” Aida asks for mercy. Amneris isn’t moved. “Tremble, vile slave!...this love can mean your death.” They are fighting over territory, and even though it’s human territory – a person, not a nation – the stakes are high. “A fury of hate and vengeance rages in my heart,” Amneris sings, her bloodlust echoing that of Ramfis and the priests as they called for “War and death...terrible, unrelenting!” against the Ethiopians. Just as the Egyptian leadership is outraged by Ethiopian insubordination, Amneris is outraged by Aida’s. “I am the arbiter of your fate,” Amneris tells her. *I control you, and your future.* Is there any other statement that so concisely summarizes the intentions of a conqueror?

If we divide the characters in *Aida* into two groups, passionate idealists (Radamès and Aida) and calculating realists (Ramfis, Amneris), Amonasro belongs in the second. At Thebes, the Egyptian army returns past a triumphal arch that must have reminded 19th century-audiences of the triumphal arches in Rome and Paris and other cities of great empires. Following behind the army are the captured Ethiopian prisoners, one of whom is Amonasro, Aida’s father and – unbeknownst to the Egyptians – the Ethiopian king. Even though Amonasro is more concerned with staying alive to fight the Egyptians another day than just staying alive, his request for mercy is articulate and convincing. “Today we are struck down by fate,” he tells the Egyptian king, “but tomorrow fate may strike at you.” Ramfis and the Egyptian priests urge the king to “Crush...this savage rabble, close your heart to their perfidious voices.” The Egyptian people ask the king to have “compassion for the wretched ones.” Aida and her fellow slaves also cry for mercy. Radamès is moved by Aida’s compassion. Amneris is too disturbed by the visible affection between Radamès and Aida to care what happens to prisoners. She’s even more upset when Radamès asks her father not for her hand in marriage but for the lives and liberty of the Ethiopian captives. The Egyptian king is ready to grant his request when Ramfis reminds him, correctly, that the Ethiopians “harbor vengeance in their hearts” and that “emboldened by pardon they will hasten to take up arms once more.”

This is a magnificent scene, and despite its apparent simplicity – one group calling for mercy, the other for pre-emptive violence – manages to convey the difficulty of surviving and acting morally in a world where everyone is maneuvering for advantage. One must be clear-eyed and hard and stand up for oneself; one must be forgiving and generous and stand up for others. The value of *Aida*, the art of *Aida*, is its dramatization of this difficulty at both the personal level and at what we might call the geopolitical level, and its understanding of how the desires, fears and actions of individuals and those of nations flow into and influence each other, with results ranging from liberation to ruin. The resulting chaos is the world, in which one thing seems to have remained constant throughout the epochs: the common people, the civilians, suffer the most, and no one can predict how or when. Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, a sixth-century Arabic poet, expressed this with marvelous succinctness: “I have seen the Fates stamp like a camel in the dark: Those they touch, they kill, and those they miss live to grow old.” The common people of *Aida* understand this, and understand that the only sensible response to the randomness and universality of human suffering is mercy.

Is it any wonder that those who suffer long for relief, for deliverance? For the opportunity to pursue happiness and live in peace with their loved ones unmolested by violence and war? At the beginning of Act III, Aida, convinced that she has lost Radamès to Amneris, contemplates suicide. In her aria *O patria mia*, she laments the lost Ethiopia of her youth. “Oh blue skies, oh soft native breezes, where the light of my youth shone in tranquility, oh green hills, perfumed shores, oh my homeland, I shall never see you again!” Aida longs for the “tranquil refuge... once promised me by love” and declares that the “dream of love has faded.” Verdi and his librettist (the talented, overworked, infinitely-patient Antonio Ghislanzoni) employ this opportunity artfully by having Aida mourn not only her lost homeland and youth, but that ideal, enduring love one dreams of most fervently when young – the perfect relationship that will last forever, that will always survive the intrusions and complications of an indifferent world. The fancifulness of Aida’s lament echoes Radamès’s airy idealism when he vows, in *Celeste Aida*, to return Aida to her “lovely sky, the gentle breezes of [her] native land.” The implication is that pure, uncomplicated love, free from outside interference or disruption, is the “native land” or ideal desired state of every human being, but that we are condemned to live in a

different state, an imperfect world in which pure, uncomplicated love rarely exists, and if it does, it does with difficulty.

The character who comes to understand this most acutely, even though she doesn't die for the cause, is Amneris. Amneris undergoes the most profound and interesting transformation in the opera. In Act I, she's ensconced high in the power structure of an authoritarian society capable of giving her everything she wants, fulfilling her every desire; by the beginning of Act IV she finds herself in the same agonizing situation as her own slave girl, torn between her love for a man and her love for her country. Radamès has betrayed Egypt by revealing to Aida the location of the Egyptian army. Amneris struggles with her outrage. "He revealed the great secret of the war...he wanted to flee...with her...Traitors...! Death to them! Death! Oh, whatever am I saying? I love him, I love him still." Notice how closely this language resembles Aida's in *Ritorna vincitor*: "Destroy the squadrons of our [Egyptian] oppressor! Ah! Wretched one! What did I say? Can I forget [my] ardent love?" Amneris begs Radamès to justify his betrayal to the priests and, more importantly, to renounce Aida, who has escaped into the countryside. Radamès refuses. Amneris is furious, but moments later curses her jealousy and blames herself for his impending death. She turns her vitriol on Ramfis and the priests, begging them for pity and mercy. There's a strong echo here of the mercy pleas made for the Ethiopian war captives, as well as of Amonasro's "Tomorrow fate may strike at you." Amneris calls Ramfis and the priests "fatal and inexorable ministers of death" and, as they bully the resolutely silent Radamès into justifying his betrayal, "wicked tigers, thirsting for blood...you have punished where there is no guilt!"

This is an astonishing statement, coming from Amneris. Clearly there *is* guilt: Radamès betrayed her by falling in love with Aida, and betrayed his country by giving away a crucial military secret. But Radamès is no traitor to love. He's steadfast, loyal, and prepared to die for it. Amneris is beginning to realize the depth and intensity of her own love, the immense power love has over her, and the despair she'll feel when she loses the object of it. She's standing not only in Aida's shoes, but in Radamès's, and toward the end of the opera, in a startling reversal, she is more loyal to these two and their love – to love in general, love as a ruling principle – than she is to her nation and the heartless priests in charge. In the opera's final scene, we see the interior of the Temple of

Vulcan “resplendent with gold and light” and the crypt below with “long rows of arches disappearing into the darkness.” Aida has stolen into the crypt and joined Radamès; she wishes in a delirium for a place where “torment ceases and love reigns.” As they die in each other’s arms, singing “farewell, vale of tears...we fly to the light of eternal day,” and the priests chant grimly above, Amneris, separate from the priests, dressed in mourning, throws herself down onto the stone that seals the crypt. “Peace I beg...beloved corpse,” she sings. She asks Isis to open heaven for Radamès, and repeats “Peace I beg...peace, peace...peace!” Love has made her selfless and compassionate.

Love has made her merciful.

* In *Aida*, Ethiopia refers not to the area of Africa associated with contemporary Ethiopia, but to the ancient kingdom of Nubia, which existed in what is now northern Sudan.