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Visit our web site (http://www.toledopera.org/events/main/aida/) for information about the vocal artists who are playing the characters in Toledo Opera’s production of *Aida*. Read about the Conductor, the Stage Director and other aspects of the production.
Plot Synopsis*

AIDA

Ancient Egypt, during the Old Kingdom

Act I
Radamès, the Captain of the Guard, is in love with Aida, the Ethiopian slave of the king’s daughter Princess Amneris, and dreams that victory in war will enable him to free and marry her. But Amneris also loves Radamès and jealously senses his feelings for Aida.

The king names Radamès to lead the army against the invading Ethiopians, and all join in an anthem wishing for victory. Left alone, Aida is torn between her love for Radamès and loyalty to her father Amonasro, the Ethiopian king.

In the temple of Vulcan, the priests consecrate Radamès.

Act II
Ethiopia has been defeated and Amneris waits for the triumphant return of Radamès. She tricks Aida’s into revealing her love for Radamès, and then spitefully assures her that a slave will never win his love from a princess.

At the city gates the king and Amneris crown Radamès with a victor’s wreath. Captured Ethiopians are led in, including Amonasro, whose identity as king has been hidden from the Egyptians. Radamès asks for the prisoners to be freed. The king grants his request but then declares that Radamès and Amneris will marry.

Act III
Outside the temple, Aida is waiting to meet Radamès in secret. Amonasro appears and makes her promise to ask Radamès which route the Egyptian army will take to invade Ethiopia. While Amonasro hides, Radamès enters and assures Aida of his love and Aida asks him about his army’s route. Just as Radamès reveals the secret, Amonasro emerges and reveals his identity. Radamès is ashamed by his betrayal and surrenders to the priests.

Act IV
Amneris offers to save Radamès if he renounces Aida but he refuses. The priests condemn him to be buried alive in the temple’s underground vault, despite Amneris’s pleas for clemency.

Aida has hidden in the vault to share Radamès’s fate. They express their love for the last time as they die while Amneris, above, prays for Radamès’s soul.

*Visit our web site (http://www.toledoopera.org/events/main/aida/) for an expanded plot synopsis.
THE COMPOSER AND HIS TIME: GIUSEPPE VERDI

Giuseppe Verdi was the greatest composer of Italian opera in the nineteenth century. When he was born, ‘Italy’ was only a figure of speech; it was composed of small states, each with its own dialect that could not be easily understood by the citizens of other parts of the peninsula. Only the speech of Tuscany, with its capital, Florence, and of other nearby states would be understood as Italian today. The states shared little history; most were under the domination of some foreign power, and each state used different currencies. Music formed the only common bond, and Verdi provided that.

Almost all of Verdi’s earlier operas had an underlying theme of revolt against oppression, at least to the extent allowed by the censors. The audience understood that the oppressed people in Verdi’s works were lightly disguised Italians. Since each Italian city had an opera house as its principal center of recreation, opera was the perfect medium for stirring up patriotic feeling among the oppressed citizens. Applause for Verdi meant applause for independence.

Giuseppe Verdi was born in October 1813 in Le Roncole, a village in the province of Parma. In later years, Verdi liked to claim he had illiterate peasant roots, but he really came from a family of small landowners and traders which was able to provide him with a classical education. Young Verdi was quiet and precocious. He started studying Latin at age four. Verdi was fascinated by music, especially the sound of the church organ and, when he was seven, his father, who ran an inn and store, bought him a broken down piano which a neighbor repaired.

Verdi developed musically to the point where, at the age of ten, he was sent to nearby Busseto to live and study, under the patronage of Antonio Barelli. When he was 12, he was appointed organist at Le Roncole and each Sunday walked the six miles round trip from Busseto to play. By the age of 14, he was teaching and giving concerts and soon began to compose pieces for the local Philharmonic Society. He moved in with the Barelli family and fell in love with one of the daughters, Margherita, one of his piano and voice students.

Later Verdi went to Milan to study, his cost underwritten by Barelli. Artistic life there flourished especially in music, and the opera house of La Scala became the social center of Milan. At the age of 23, upon completion of his studies, Verdi returned to Busseto, married Margherita Barelli, and started working on his first known opera, *Oberto*. Produced when he was 26, *Oberto* was a moderately successful work. Tragically, his wife and two children all died within two years of its premiere, and his second opera, the comedy *Un giorno regno*, was a failure.

The despondent Verdi resolved to give up composing but was later persuaded to return to music by the impresario Bartolomeo Merelli and the soprano Giuseppina Strepponi. The latter, who had been scheduled to sing in *Oberto*, was to become his second wife. Verdi started working again, this time on an opera based on *Nabucco*, the Biblical story of the Israelites’ captivity in Babylon.
The opera was an immediate success; the Italians identified the captivity of the Israelites with their own dominance by foreigners. The chorus “Va, pensiero”, including the words, “Oh, my country so beautiful and lost! Oh, memory so dear and fatal!” became almost a national anthem and Verdi became, involuntarily, a leading figure in the movement toward a free, united Italy.

Verdi became a national figure. His name was used to name hats, shawls, and sauces. In its first season, more seats were sold to Nabucco than the city had inhabitants. He continued to test the limits of censorship. Audiences saw allusions everywhere and Verdi gave them plenty to identify. The choruses “O Signore” from I Lombardi and “Va pensiero” are still taught as patriotic anthems in elementary schools of Italy.

Operas followed one after the other, including one based on Joan of Arc and another on Attila the Hun. After the premiere of Nabucco, Verdi wrote 16 operas in 11 years. By the time he was 40 he was the most famous and most frequently performed Italian opera composer in Europe. He commanded huge fees and began to accumulate land and buildings. For a time after the composition of Macbeth, based on Shakespeare’s play, Verdi and Giuseppina lived in Paris, but when a rebellion started in Milan, Verdi hurried back to Italy.

By 1861, the unification of Italy was well on its way, and Verdi was elected to the first Italian parliament where Vittorio Emmanuele II, King of Piedmont, was proclaimed King of Italy. Verdi was not an active member of parliament, and his formal political career was short. It was during this time that Verdi achieved some of his greatest successes as a composer. The most important of his operas during this time are: Rigoletto (1850), Il trovatore (1853), La traviata (1853), Simon Boccanegra (1857), and Un ballo in maschera (1859). Verdi started to experiment with his compositions during this time. He wanted to make the music more continuous and concentrated on the words, not just as poetry, but with their meaning enhanced by the music.

In 1859, Verdi announced to his friends that he was retiring from composing. He had written 21 operas in two decades, and he was tired. At the age of 46, he preferred to live the life of a gentleman farmer on his estate. During his “retirement,” he lived simply in the country at Sant’Agata, farming and hunting. This hiatus, however, lasted only three years.

Verdi resumed composing with La forza del destino. He traveled extensively to Russia, Paris, Madrid, and London, supervising productions of his operas. He also played the role of farmer and closely supervised all aspects of the management of his farm. He became a national monument. When Verdi and his librettist, Boito, walked onstage after the premiere of Otello, they received over 20 curtain calls; the audience wept from sheer emotion. At the end of the evening, Verdi’s carriage was pulled back to his hotel by the cheering crowd and he was serenaded for hours. A similar reception met Falstaff, composed when he was eighty years old.

Verdi was also a philanthropist. The composer built a hospital near his estate for the benefit of the neighboring people and took an active interest in it until his death, modestly refusing to have his name on it. During particularly hard times he ordered free polenta (a grain made from corn)
be given away every day at noon. After his operas and the famous Requiem, his most lasting monument is the Casa di Riposo in Milan, built as a home for 100 impoverished musicians. Verdi established an endowment for it, and it is still in operation today.

In all, Verdi wrote 26 operas, several in two different versions. During his last illness, the streets near his rooms were covered with layers of straw so that he would not be disturbed by the noise of carriages. Crowds waited silently for news of his condition. He died in Milan on January 17, 1901, at the age of 87. The composer asked for a funeral with no music and no singing but, as his coffin was placed in the ground, someone in the crowd started to sing “Va, pensiero” and soon everyone joined in the famous melody. A special session of the Roman Senate was called to listen to eulogies, and schools were closed for the day. One month later, the coffins of Verdi and his wife were moved to the Casa di Riposo, where they rest today. Two hundred thousand people lined the black-draped streets of Milan and Maestro Arturo Toscanini conducted a choir of eight hundred in “Va, pensiero” in tribute to Verdi, the artistic symbol of Italy’s drive for freedom.

*Courtesy of Atlanta Opera*
Verdi and the Composition of Aida

After working with Verdi on the libretto for Don Carlos for the Paris Opéra, Camille du Locle tried in vain to interest the composer in another project for the French capitol. Verdi would have none of it. His experience with the Opéra was an unpleasant one overall and he considered any kind of a return tantamount to a death wish. But du Locle persisted, sending the composer a number of possible ideas for operatic treatment. The only one that seemed to inspire Verdi was a synopsis of an opera set in ancient Egypt based on a story by Auguste Mariette. Mariette was an important Egyptologist who lived in Cairo and was an intimate of the Khedive who was busy at the time building the Suez Canal. (Mariette, originally an employee of the Louvre, was sent to Egypt to discover and catalogue Coptic manuscripts but in his explorations stumbled upon some of the most spectacular discoveries of the 19th century, including the Temple of Serapis and the tombs of the Apis bulls). Mariette suggested to the ruler that an opera be commissioned from a famous composer (Verdi, Gounod and Wagner were suggested, in that order) to celebrate this monumental achievement. The task was given over by Mariette to du Locle who had marital connections to the administrator of the Paris Opéra. (Mariette also hoped for a return to visit France with his family and he pushed du Locle to complete the deal).

Verdi finally accepted the proposal of Aida after it was threatened that the commission might be offered to Wagner! Du Locle wished to make Aida a French grand opera (and it does, indeed, resemble some of the better forms of that genre, at least structurally) and offered his libretto in French, but Verdi insisted that it be translated into Italian and he chose another Don Carlos collaborator, Antonio Ghislanzoni, to provide that translation as well as some additions to the libretto itself. However, it seems that Verdi himself was as involved in the production of this libretto as in any other of his operas.

The oft-repeated stories that Aida was written for the opening of the canal or that it was written for the premiere of the Cairo Opera House are both incorrect. Du Locle’s synopsis of the story wasn’t received by Verdi until after the canal was completed, and the opera house had opened even earlier! It may well have been the Khedive’s original intention to have an opera celebrate the canal, but it certainly didn’t work out that way. And, in fact, the original date of the performance Aida in Cairo (January, 1871) had to be postponed because the scenery was stuck in Paris during the Franco-Prussian war and nothing was being shipped in or out of the country. The premiere ended up being eleven months late, finally occurring on Christmas Eve, 1871.

The Italian premiere of Aida took place on February 8, 1872 with the great soprano Teresa Stoltz in the title role. The opera was enthusiastically received both in Cairo and Milan. Some of the critics actually accused him of using some Wagnerian techniques, an accusation he dismissed as pure hogwash.

Reprinted courtesy of San Diego Opera Education and Outreach Program: Operapaedia
The Libretto of Aida

To this day there is considerable confusion over what the actual source of Aida was. Was that original synopsis written by Mariette himself? By the Khedive? By the Khedive with help from Mariette? Did Mariette steal the synopsis from his brother Edouard who had begun a novel entitled La Fiancée du Nil?

Mariette did indeed send a synopsis of the Egyptian story to du Locle who passed it along, with four or five other prospects, to Verdi. But Verdi was evidently never completely clear as to the story’s provenance. Nine years after the premiere in Cairo a controversy over the source of the libretto boiled over in Milan’s musical press. Du Locle wrote a public letter insisting on Mariette’s authorship. In the midst of this Verdi wrote to du Locle: “I’m utterly taken aback. I think you will remember yourself that you sent me four little printed pages without any author’s name; you told me that the Khedive would like an opera on that subject because it’s an Egyptian one. I supposed that the author of those pages was the Khedive himself. All I knew about Mariette Bey was that he had been commissioned to look after the costumes, etc.”

As if this wasn’t enough, Auguste Mariette’s brother Edouard joined the fray, accusing his own brother of having plagiarized the synopsis from his unfinished novel, La Fiancée du Nil. More recently, writer Matteo Glinski suggested in 1954 that the entire story was based on a libretto by Metastasio, the great eighteenth century poet who essentially defined the opera libretto for many generations of Italian composers. The work was called Nitteti and it was set to music by no fewer than 13 composers. Verdi scholar Julian Budden dismisses this theory as “the reddest of herrings” but a complete description and argument in favor of this theory can be found in Charles Osborne’s The Complete Operas of Verdi. At this point the jury is still out, but Osborne’s drawing of parallels between Aida and Nitteti makes for interesting reading.

Budden points out that the love triangle is so common a plot in opera that many different sources could have inspired its story, as it is nothing more than that rather creaky plot placed within the context of a culture that had sparked the imagination of nineteenth century audiences, especially in Italy and France where many of the spoils of Egyptian exploration had been rudely and permanently ensconced.

One very interesting point is made by Budden in his brilliant three-volume study, The Operas of Verdi. Although Mariette’s synopsis is incredibly rich in theatrical detail, “…for all his insistence on correctness of dress and appearance, [he] was not a great stickler for accuracy in matters of custom. His original synopsis is full of anachronisms and historical impossibilities: the Pharaohs always commanded their armies themselves [therefore no need for the character of Radames!], never attacked by surprise [hence making the great conflict about Egypt’s secret plans between Aida and her father null and void!], never erected triumphal arches [rendering the Triumphal Scene unnecessary!] and never worshipped the god Vulcan [erase all references to Phta!!].” Budden concludes, “Fortunately such solecisms are for the Egyptologist rather than the music-lover to worry about.” —The bracketed comments are by the author of this article, Nicolas Reveles

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The Music of Aida

*Aida* would have been impossible had it not been for Verdi’s experience of writing *Don Carlo* for the Paris Opéra. *Aida* is essentially a French grand opera in the Meyerbeer tradition, but sung in Italian. It has all of the French hallmarks: a huge chorus and orchestra, brilliant instrumental effects, a tendency toward the “exotic,” an integral approach to ballet, a larger number of principal roles and a dual approach to musical style that is both “intimate” and “grand.” But unlike *Don Carlo*, *Aida* is one of those works that looks backward rather than forward. It is one of Verdi’s more conservative efforts with numbers and musical pieces that are closed (i.e., a clear beginning and ending; a “closed” aria could easily be excerpted in a recital without damage to its structure). That is not to argue that *Aida* is an inferior work in Verdi’s canon; it is simply more in the spirit of *Il trovatore* than *Rigoletto* or *La traviata*, emphasizing more traditional operatic forms.

The glory of *Aida* is to be found in its melody which spills out of every page of the score. The Prelude itself is based on two melodic ideas which instantly inspire the ear. The first, so quietly played by the violins in the first bars of the piece, is associated with the character of *Aida* herself. The second, a descending scale passage with a darker color, is later associated with the priestly caste which eventually condemns Radames, the Egyptian Captain and war hero. It is this second melodic idea that eventually leads to a statement by the full orchestra at the center of the Prelude, reiterating the *Aida* theme. This is a perfect example of how the entire opera works musically; one moment we hear exquisitely intimate music, the next we are nearly in Wagner territory with the entire orchestra blaring away ferociously.

One need only point to the most famous moments in Aida to show Verdi’s melodic gifts in full swing: Radamès’s opening aria “Celeste Aida,” *Aida*’s brilliant exit scene/recitative/aria “Ritorna vincitor!,” the ritual opening of the second scene in Amneris’s apartments with its haunting prayer to Phta by the High Priestess, the brilliant succession of memorable melodies in the Triumphal Scene including the march and ballet, and certainly the beautiful duet “terra addio” at the end of the opera which sends audiences away humming.

Critics occasionally mumble their disappointment in the musical characterization of the two main characters, who admittedly do not change at all during the course of the drama. They are archetypal figures, two lovers against an unbending world, something that we’ve seen in opera way too many times to count! But look to Amneris for true characterization and fascinating growth of character. Like Azucena and Eboli before her, Princess Amneris is the dynamic force in this opera who moves from suspicion to love to jealousy to despair, and whose music matches those changes in mood perfectly.

One of the great achievements of this opera is Verdi’s use of local color, a touch of the exotic throughout, and this is truly something from the French tradition. With brilliant touches of instrumental timbre we’re kept in that world, caught up in it; and we exult in it. Verdi did such an incredible job of particularizing the music to that place and time that to move it to any other world would be impossible.

*Reprinted courtesy of San Diego Opera Education and Outreach Program: Operapaedia*
Student/Class Activities

Before the Performance

Opera is in essence a story told in music. Combining story and music in a performance makes opera a powerful, often emotional, experience for those in the audience. Before going to the opera, you may want to read about the story, the characters and the cast and production team members. You may want to find out more about the Aida’s famous composer, Giuseppe Verdi. However, once the curtain goes up in the theater, we encourage you to enjoy and “soak up” all that is happening on stage.

After the Performance

Grades 6-8

• Compare your experience with this professionally-produced opera to other theater or music performances that you have experienced. What was different? How do you think those differences impacted your response to the performance?
  o ODE*: Music: Grade 8: 4RE: Express how music performance and settings affect audience response.

• Create your own review of the opera, commenting on aspects such as the story, the music, the performances of principal vocal artists and the chorus, the role of the orchestra, and the visual elements of scenery, costumes and lighting. The Blade newspaper will publish a review of Toledo Opera’s Aida in the Saturday, October 5th issue, both online (The Blade.com) and in print. On what points do you agree and or disagree with the reviewer?
  o ODE: Drama/Theater: Grade 8: 1PR: Compare and contrast personal opinions about a dramatic or theatrical work with those of a professional critic.

• Who are the primary characters in the opera? What are the personal conflicts or problems between them? What do the characters do that exacerbate or help resolve these problems? Are any of the conflicts resolved in the end? Could Aida, in particular, have avoided her fate?
  o ODE: Drama/Theatre: Grade 7: 1CE: Consider and discuss the consequences of a character’s actions in a drama production.
• ODE: Drama/Theatre: Grade 8: 1CE: Analyze and discuss the conflicts and emotions of the characters in a selected dramatic work.

• The author of the “The Music of Aida” above argues in his concluding paragraph that Aida couldn’t be set in a different time or place. Do you agree? What elements of the plot or drama would be effected and need to change?
  o ODE: Drama/Theater: Grade 6: 3RE: Explain how changes in a production concept (such as time period or modernization) would alter the presentation of a work.

**Grades 9-12**

• Is Aida a socially relevant work of art? Consider the political realities of Verdi’s time and the impact of his earlier opera Nabucco described in the article “The Composer and His Time” above. Has the social relevancy of opera as an art form, and works like Aida in particular changed since Verdi’s time?
  o ODE: Music: Level II: 8CE: Describe how music reflects the social and political events of history and the role of the musician in history and culture.
  o ODE: Drama/Theatre: Level III: 3RE: Assess how drama and theatre provide a social voice.
  o ODE: Drama/Theatre: Level III: 2CE: Analyze a dramatic and theatrical work in the context of its time period and culture.

• The plot of Aida has been described as a classic “love triangle.” Would you describe it that way? If yes, what makes the triangle interesting and exciting? How does it compare to other love triangles you’ve read or seen?
  o ODE: Drama/Theatre: Level I: 2RE Evaluate variations of universal themes and characters across different time periods and cultures and explain how they were used in selected dramatic works.

• Create your own review of the opera, commenting on aspects such as the story, the music, the performances of principal vocal artists and the chorus, the role of the orchestra, and the visual elements of scenery, costumes and lighting. The Blade newspaper will publish a review of Toledo Opera’s Aida in the Saturday, October 5th issue, both online (The Blade.com) and in print. On what points do you agree and or disagree with the reviewer?
ODE: Drama/Theatre: Level III: 5RE: Compare and contrast personal and professional criticism of a specific dramatic performance.

*Ohio Department of Education Standard