



## AIDA

*Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi is one of the most popular and often performed operas in the repertoire. The title can immediately call to mind the ultimate in grand, spectacle opera and that would not be wrong. There is certainly a long tradition of performing *Aida* in outdoor stadiums and arenas, with casts of hundreds, along with horses, elephants and camels. The Act 2 Triumphant scene is indeed intended to be a spectacle.

But at the heart of the opera is a more intimate, personal drama, and many of the work's most effective moments are in the introspective solo arias, and complex one-on-one confrontations.

At the time of the opera's composition, Verdi was by far Italy's leading operatic composer. He wore the triple crown of *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore* (all composed in an amazing burst of creative genius within two years!) His early, "galley" years (as he called them) when he was turning out opera after opera, were long behind him. In fact the only operas he had written for several years were all generated by highly lucrative commissions by theaters outside Italy. (*La Forza Del Destino* for St. Petersburg, and *Don Carlos* and *Les Vepres Siciliennes* for the Paris Opera.) *Aida* followed the same pattern.

In 1870, the Khedive (or Viceroy) of Egypt invited Verdi to compose a Grand opera for Cairo's opera house. The composer initially declined. It was only when the Khedive said "Then Wagner might do it!", that Verdi accepted. (Wagner being the only operatic composer of comparable fame and success at that time.)

Antonio Ghislanzoni (who had collaborated earlier with Verdi on *La Forza*) was chosen to write the libretto, and *Aida* had its world premiere in Cairo on December 23, 1871. The production was more than lavish, with 320 people on stage, and it was an enormous triumph. Six weeks later, the opera had its Italian premiere at La Scala. In fact, Verdi had been casting and supervising both productions virtually simultaneously.

*Aida* has never lost its place in the repertoire of theaters all over the world and its leading roles have been sung by the famous artists of each succeeding generation. Given the rewarding vocal and dramatic opportunities, it is little wonder. The hero Rhadames has his famous aria "Celeste Aida" within two minutes of the curtain rising, a highly unusual situation, which has caused tenors throughout history no small amount of concern. (NO singer wants to sing their big aria before being fully warmed up!)

*Aida* has two great solo scenes, the intense, dramatic "Ritorna vincitor" (Act 1) and the very beautiful, elegiac "O Patria mia" (Act 3), in which she remembers the beauty of her fatherland, Ethiopia, which she fears she will never see again. But, even the great title role is given stiff

competition by her rival, the Egyptian princess, Amneris (mezzo-soprano). She is one of the most fully-developed characters in all of opera. Much more than a stock villainess, she is a three-dimensional woman.

With these personal conflicts and dramas of these characters, what gives *Aida* its reputation as a spectacle? The Act 2 Triumphal scene, with its glorious choruses, ballet, blazing trumpets in the famous march and all the principals joining voices in the finale of the scene. It is undeniably thrilling. But even this cannot eclipse the human, personal drama that Verdi brought so completely to life.

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