AIDA as Chamber Opera

The Triumphal Scene is *Aida*'s monumental set-piece, its most famous excerpt, the big moment guaranteed to elicit gasps and sustained applause from the audience, even if the rest of the performance is miserably sung. It is also the most incongruous segment of the entire opera.

When I was growing up, the term "grand opera" was synonymous with *Aida*, but apart from the fact that the term itself seems old-fashioned today, it is in many ways wrongly applied to Verdi's masterpiece. *Aida* is one of the most profoundly intimate works the composer ever created, an opera dominated by searching private dialogues between individuals. Quite beyond its diverting dose of spectacle, the Triumphal Scene serves a definite dramatic purpose: to show the ways in which matters of state (and later in the opera, matters of religion, which here amount to the same thing) ultimately trample the concerns of individuals.

Any production of *Aida* is doomed to fail unless it gets across the central idea that Verdi and his early collaborator, Camille du Locle, were grappling with: individuals pushing against events and traditions that are finally much bigger than they are. This concept was quite literally illustrated when the Metropolitan Opera premiered the Sonja Frisell-Gianni Quaranta staging of *Aida* in 1988, the one that still remains in that company's repertory. Aida, Radames, Amneris, and Amonasro shuffle almost pitifully, like insects, before a background of ancient Egyptian temples and tombs that shoot up above the proscenium, out of sight of the audience.

These were dramatic concerns that had occupied Verdi in his previous opera *Don Carlos*, which had its premiere at the Paris Opéra in 1867, four years before *Aida* reached the stage. Verdi's difficulties with Paris, both with *Don Carlos* and with *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* back in 1855, were legion. After his disappointing experience with *Don Carlos*, Verdi decided that his goals as a composer were incompatible with the massive theatrical machine that the Paris Opéra had become, and he returned to Italy. In the next few years, he considered and rejected other possible subjects until he came across a synopsis that Camille Du Locle had written, based on a story by Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, about an Ethiopian slave girl, an Egyptian princess, and the Egyptian military hero they both love. Mariette had hopes that it could be transformed into an opera to coincide with the opening of the Suez Canal. (In her comprehensive biography of Verdi, Mary Jane Phillips-Matz presents compelling evidence that Temistocle Solera is actually the author of *Aida*.) The deadline has passed by the time Du Locle brought the synopsis to Verdi's attention in 1870, but the composer agreed to work on it with great speed, planning it for an 1871 premiere at the Cairo Opera House where Verdi was revered; the theater had opened two years earlier with a production of *Rigoletto*. Du Locle wrote a libretto in French, which Verdi demanded be translated into Italian by Antonio Ghislanzoni, the former journalist who had collaborated with the composer on the 1869 revision of *La Forza del Destino*.

Aida bowed in Cairo, almost a year later than anticipated, on December 24, 1871, and at Milan's La Scala a few weeks later, and was a rousing success in both places. The opera has contin-

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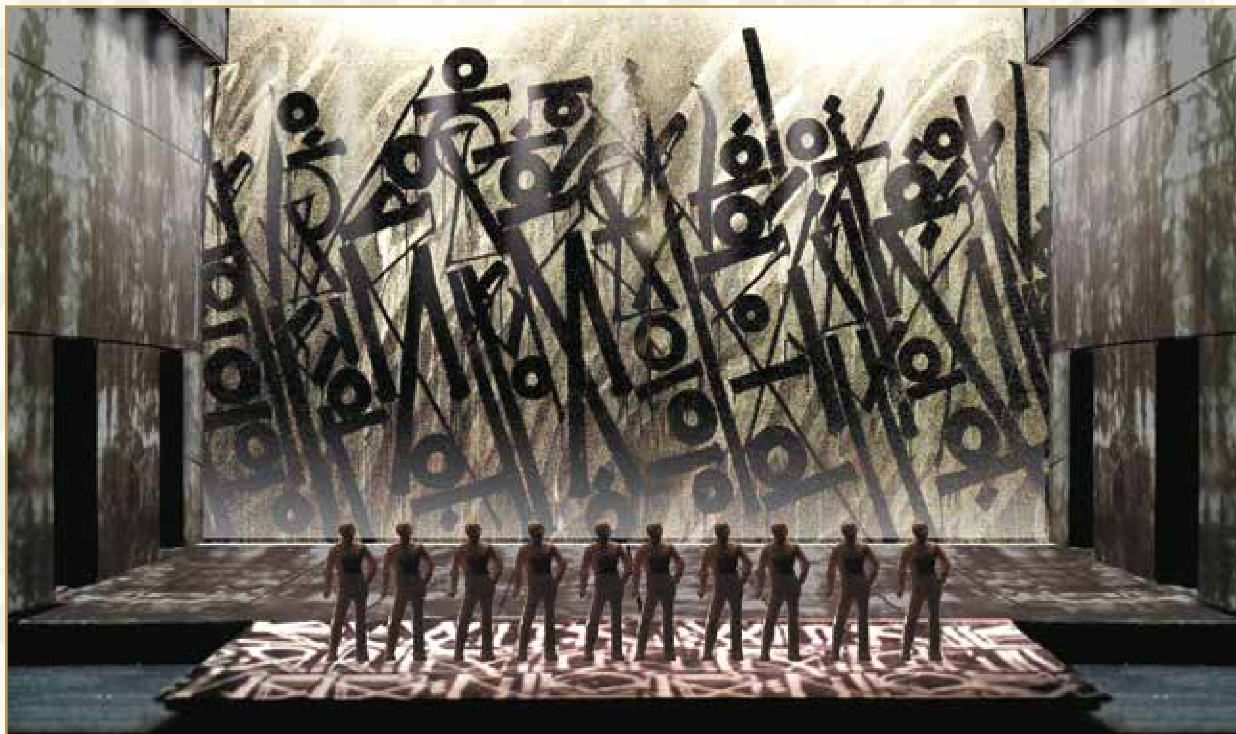
ued an uninterrupted record of worldwide success ever since, one of the most popular operas in the repertoire, racking up (as of this writing) 116 performances at San Francisco Opera. Although it once attracted huge audiences in Rome, through its spectacular summer performances at the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, where live animals were paraded through in the Triumphal Scene, it is still the work's intimacy, rather than its grandeur, that takes hold of us most powerfully.

The spell is cast in the prelude, where we encounter the two themes that will engage in a duel throughout the opera. The love of Aida and Radames is introduced by *pianissimo* violins. There is something exquisitely tentative and fragile about this theme, contrasted with the next one we hear—the intensely grim music associated with the priests, softly but insistently played by the cellos. The Aida/Radames theme generally lifts upward, while the second theme moves rigidly and oppressively downward.

This juxtaposition continues throughout. Aida's first aria, "Ritorna vincitor," is not an expression of defiance (as we sometimes might assume after listening to young sopranos who perform it out of context in singing competitions). Again, it is a highly introspective moment, all the more so for coming immediately off a thundering ensemble in which the King exhorts the Egyptian Army, under Radames' leadership, to victory over the Ethiopians. The aria is partially an expression of the self-loathing that Aida's bitter dilemma churns up: "Ritorna vincitor! E dal mio labbro usci l'empia parola!" ("Return the conqueror! And from my own lips came that impious word!") The aria begins with great agitation, then turns quietly inward, its subdued instrumentation underpinning the delicate "Numi, pieta del mio soffrir!" ("Gods have pity on my suffering!"). As music critic and journalist Charles Osborne points out, "Most of the music for its three principal characters, Aida, Radames and Amneris, is scored with the clarity of texture of chamber music."

This sensitive approach to orchestration is also heard in the shimmering, evocative opening pages of Act III's Nile Scene, and in "O patria mia," with the oboe triplets that achingly accompany Aida as she ascends to a sweetly floated high C. And it is there in "O terra addio," the final duet in which Aida and Radames are entombed together. Apart from the Triumphal Scene, the scoring only becomes truly inflamed toward the end of "Già i sacerdoti adunansi," the blazing Amneris/Radames duet in Act IV, and at the end of the great Judgment Scene, in which Amneris waits in agony as the priests decide Radames' fate. Even here, however, the focus is intensely personal, and the point of view inspired: rather than put us in the room with the priests, Verdi, Du Locle, and Ghislanzoni allowed us to experience it from the outside, along with Amneris. What overwhelms us about this scene is how paralyzingly alone Amneris is at this moment. It's a master stroke that a filmmaker such as Val Lewton or Alfred Hitchcock surely would have admired: what we *don't* see and hear contributes immeasurably to

Images by Los Angeles artist RETNA were an important inspiration behind this new production of Aida. RETNA's 2015 painting I Only See Systematics *is integrated into the set design of Act II.*



Clockwise from the top: Soprano Leontyne Price made her role debut as Aida with San Francisco Opera in 1957; tenor Luciano Pavarotti made his role debut as Radames with the Company's 1981 production; the Act II Finale from the last time San Francisco mounted Verdi's masterpiece, in 2010.

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our own anxiety. Ramfis accusingly proclaims Radames' name on an A, then twice more, in eerily escalating half-tones, and the scene ends with the orchestra whipped into a full *fortissimo* fury.

Aida has certain links with its immediate predecessor in Verdi's canon, *Don Carlos*, particularly in the doomed love triangle. Aida's divided loyalties between Radames and Amonasro, so deeply plumbed in the Nile Scene, are akin to the torment Don Carlos experiences when he must surrender his betrothed, Elisabeth de Valois, to his father, Philip II. But it is the battle between the individual and authority that truly unites the two operas. The Judgment Scene, with the relentlessly foursquare music signifying the power of the priests, is apt to call to mind the ominous chords of the Grand Inquisitor Scene in Act IV of *Don Carlos*. With its large chorus in the Fontainebleau act and its *auto-da-fe* scene, *Don Carlos* is more obviously a grand opera, but both works show people pushing in vain against all-powerful religious institutions, desperately trying to sort out where their ultimate responsibilities lie, in ways that are practically Shakespearean in scope.

In spite of all this emphasis on the character's internal battles, nothing will ever prevent audiences from wanting to view *Aida* as a big, colorful show. Obviously, the opera delivers on that level as well. But many lovers of the opera—including a number of music critics—seem to want their *Aida* heavy on fire and bombast. This came to light in 2001 when Nikolaus Harnoncourt led the Vienna Philharmonic in a recording of the opera that was met with its share of critical scorn. *Gramophone* complained about the conductor's "slow speeds" (which in truth were sometimes very close to what Verdi indicated), the weak leads as Aida and Radames, and the overall lack of Italianate flavor. Some of this criticism was legitimate, but it was refreshing to hear the orchestration revealed in such transparent detail. And it served as a reminder that Verdi was concerned first and foremost with human plight and struggle; it's precisely what made him the superb musical dramatist that he was.

Brian Kellow is the author of biographies of Ethel Merman and Pauline Kael, and the most recent book Can I Go Now?: The Life of Sue Mengers, Hollywood's First Superagent.