



Aida, 2016 production: Act III sketch by David P. Gordon

# Aida

VERSES BY ANTONIO GHISLANZONI

Sung in Italian

New production created by Sarasota Opera

Giuseppe  
Verdi

## Cast

Opera in  
Four Acts

**CONDUCTOR**

Victor DeRenzi

**STAGE DIRECTOR**

Stephanie Sundine

**SCENIC DESIGNER**

David P. Gordon

**COSTUME COORDINATOR**

Howard Tsvi Kaplan

**LIGHTING DESIGNER**

Ken Yunker

**HAIR & MAKE-UP DESIGNER**

Joanne Middleton Weaver

**CHORUS MASTER**

Roger L. Bingaman

**CHOREOGRAPHER**

Miro Magloire

**ASSISTANT CONDUCTORS**

John F. Spencer IV

Kevin Miller

**SURTITLE SUPPLIER**

Words for Music

**SURTITLE TRANSLATOR**

Victor DeRenzi

THE KING

Jeffrey Beruan

AMNERIS, his daughter

Leann Sandel-Pantaleo

AIDA, an Ethiopian slave

Michelle Johnson +

RADAMÈS, the captain  
of the guard

Jonathan Burton ++

RAMFIS, chief priest

Young Bok Kim

AMONASRO, King of Ethiopia  
and Aida's father

Marco Nisticò

A MESSENGER

Matthew Vickers\*

\* Studio Artist

Sarasota Opera Orchestra

Chorus: Sarasota Opera Apprentice & Studio Artists

+ The Jan Schmidt Endowed Artist

++ The David and Edith Chaifetz Endowed Artist

Production Sponsor: Bud and Betty Shapiro in honor and memory of Harry M. and Eva Shapiro on the 100th anniversary of their marriage.







Jan. 30

Feb. 4, 7m, 10, 20m, 23, 28 Mar. 2, 5, 13m, 15, 19



## ACT I

### Scene I

*A hall in the palace of the King of Egypt in Memphis*

The Egyptian warrior Radamès is in love with the slave Aida, who in reality is the daughter of the Ethiopian King, Amonasro. Amneris, the daughter of the King of Egypt, is also in love with Radamès and suspects the true nature of his relationship with Aida.

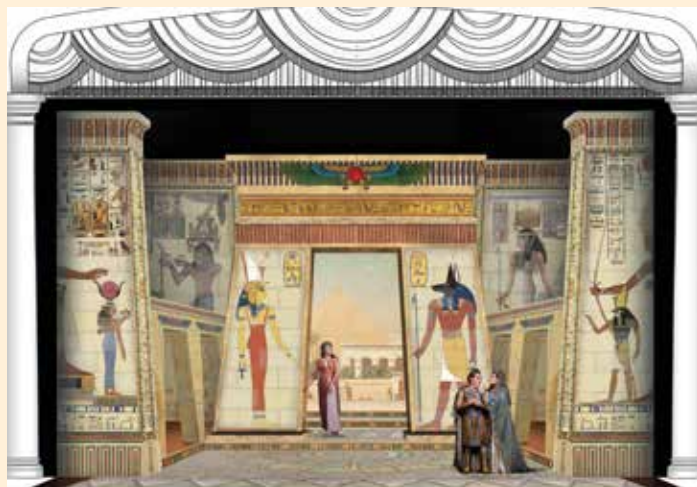
The King of Egypt informs Radamès that he has been named to lead the army against the threatening Ethiopians. As Amneris and the crowd send off Radamès, Aida is left alone conflicted, since her lover's victory would mean destruction of her father and country.

### Scene II

*Within the Temple of Vulcan in Memphis*

Ramfis and the priests present Radamès with the sacred sword and invoke the god Phtha to assist him.

INTERMISSION



*Aida*, 2016 production: Act I, Scene I sketch by David P. Gordon

## ACT II

### Scene I

*A room in the apartments of Amneris*

Amneris feigns friendship for Aida and tells her falsely that Radamès was killed in battle. When Aida reacts passionately to the news, Amneris knows the true nature of Aida's feelings for Radamès and vows to crush her rival.

### Scene II

*A gate at the city of Thebes*

A triumphal procession greets the victorious Radamès. Among the Ethiopian prisoners Aida discovers her father Amonasro, dressed as a soldier. Radamès asks the King for clemency for the prisoners, which he grants, keeping Aida and her father as hostages. The King bestows Amneris' hand on the warrior to the distress of the two lovers and the satisfaction of Amneris.

INTERMISSION

## ACT III

*On the banks of the Nile*

On the eve of her wedding, Ramfis escorts Amneris to the temple to pray.

Aida, waiting for Radamès to arrive, is interrupted by Amonasro, who convinces her to extract the location of the Egyptian troops from her lover.

Radamès tells Aida he must once again lead the Egyptians against the Ethiopians in battle. She convinces him to flee with her to Ethiopia. As they plan their escape he divulges the location of the Egyptian troops, which a hidden Amonasro overhears. Realizing that he has betrayed his country Radamès surrenders himself to Ramfis, as Aida and Amonasro flee.

INTERMISSION

## ACT IV

### Scene I

*A hall in the palace of the King*

Amneris tries to convince Radamès to defend himself and to renounce Aida, but he is resolute that he is ready to die. He is condemned to be buried alive by the priests, to Amneris' despair.

### Scene II

*The interior of the Temple of Vulcan. Below is a tomb*

Radamès has been sealed into the tomb and discovers the hidden Aida. The two lovers bid farewell to life, as Amneris prays above.

World Premiere: CAIRO, OPERA HOUSE, DECEMBER 24, 1871

As the most successful living opera composer, it made perfect sense that the Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, would turn to Giuseppe Verdi to celebrate the Khedive's achievements. Verdi was first approached for a hymn to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal, the type of request the composer typically refused. He was then asked for a work for the new Cairo Opera House (which had opened in 1869 with *Rigoletto*), but with no interesting subject in sight, this was also turned down. Finally, through his friend Camille du Locle, he was offered the outline of a story with an Egyptian subject which he found interesting and discussion began in earnest.

The scenario was by Auguste Mariette, an Egyptologist in the employ of the Khedive, although the suggestion was made that it was the work of the Khedive himself. Verdi didn't believe this, recognizing that it was by an experienced theatrical author. Whoever the author, Verdi was intrigued by the exotic locale and the possibilities that it offered and entered into a contract in June 1870.

The terms of the contract were very generous, but stipulated that the opera should be ready to be performed in January 1871. Verdi turned to Antonio Ghislanzoni, baritone turned librettist, who had helped the composer revise *La forza del destino* for La Scala, to versify the scenario. Work proceeded quickly and arrangements were made to give the work at La Scala shortly following the Cairo premiere. Mariette was sent to Paris to arrange for the sets and costumes, which were to be built in the French capital with the assistance of du Locle.

All was proceeding well until a crisis ground everything to a halt. The Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent Siege of Paris in September 1870 stopped work on the sets and costumes. All of the craftsmen working on the production were conscripted and what work had been done, couldn't leave Paris. When all communication between the city and the outside world ceased, the premiere and planned La Scala performances were cancelled.

With the cessation of hostilities in January 1871, work on the production resumed and the premiere was scheduled for December 1871 in Cairo and at La Scala the following January.

*Aida* is arguably Verdi's largest work. When he began its composition he wrote to du Locle that it would be on a scale as if it were being written for "Le grande boutique" (the big store), his unflattering name for the Paris Opera. Verdi had adapted one opera and written two others for that important theater and his experiences there had been frustrating. In some ways it seemed as if he were writing *Aida* in order to exorcise those experiences and to create a work on a grand scale, but on his own terms. Certainly *Aida* has many of the elements of French Grand Opera: large chorus, ballet, patriotic displays, and lavish scenic elements. Act II, Scene ii, the "Triumphal Scene" may be one of the grandest in opera, calling for an extended procession of soldiers and slaves, a ballet, and multiple choruses. And just in case you are wondering, although Verdi left a detailed description for the staging for the opera in a document called the "Diposizione scenica," nowhere in that document or in the score are elephants mentioned.



Giuseppe Verdi

Both premieres, in Cairo, which Verdi did not attend, and at La Scala, which he supervised, were great successes. The work was immediately taken up by theaters around the world and by the mid-twentieth century it was the most performed opera in the international repertoire (the commonly referred to ABCs of opera are: *Aida*, *La bohème*, and *Carmen*.)

With such success of course, there inevitably would be dissension. Because *Aida* was more through-composed than earlier operas, minimizing the use of the set numbers that had characterized Italian opera, and because the orchestra in *Aida* has a more dominant role than his earlier operas, critics accused him of imitating Wagner. Verdi's response was typically bitter: "A good thing, after an almost 40-year career to be called an imitator."

Another criticism would have a more comical result. Prospero Bertani traveled from Reggio Emilia to Parma to see *Aida* because everyone raved about the piece. Disappointed by this first hearing, he returned again, but still found it wanting. So he wrote to the composer:

*The opera contains absolutely nothing thrilling or electrifying, and if it were not for the magnificent scenery, the audience would not sit through it to the end. It will fill the theater a few more times and then gather dust in the archives.*

Claiming that he was dependent on his parents, he asked Verdi if he would reimburse him for the cost of the tickets, the train travel to Parma, and "a deplorably bad meal at the station." Verdi instructed his publisher to send money to Bertani, except for cost of the dinner, "since he could have eaten at home," on the condition that he agree to never to see his future new works. Verdi also had the letter published, and poor Bertani became a laughing stock.

Of course history is on Verdi's side and *Aida* remains the exemplar of grand opera. Sarasota Opera's 2016 production of *Aida* is the first in the history of the company and a fitting way to crown the Verdi Cycle Grand Finale.

*Richard Russell* is Sarasota Opera's Executive Director.