

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Aida



Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni

After a scenario by Auguste Mariette

Opera in Four Acts

Location: Memphis and Thebes
Time: During the reign of the Pharaohs

Characters

The King of Egypt (bass) Paelo Pecchioli
Amneris, his daughter (mezzo-soprano)..... Kate Aldrich
Aïda, an Ethiopian slave (soprano) Adina Aaron
Radamès, Captain of the Guards (tenor) Scott Piper
Ramfis, Chief Priest (bass)..... Enrico Giuseppe Iori
Amonasro, King of Ethiopia, Aïda's father (baritone)..... Giuseppe Garra
A Messenger (tenor) Stefano Pisani
The High Priestess (soprano)..... Micaela Carosi

Conducted by Massimiliano Stefanelli
Stage direction and set design by Franco Zeffirelli
Orchestra e Coro della Fondazione Arturo Toscanini

Première performance in Opera House, Cairo, Egypt on December 24, 1871

Synopsis

Act I

Scene 1: In ancient Egypt, in the royal palace at Memphis



A young army captain named Radamès is deep in conversation with the high priest, Ramfis. War seems imminent — Ethiopia’s army is gathering at Egypt’s borders, threatening to descend to the valley of the Nile. The oracle of the goddess, Isis, has revealed to Ramfis the name of the warrior who will lead Egypt to triumph, a name the king will announce that very day.

As Ramfis departs, Radamès eagerly anticipates becoming that leader, and then muses on his beloved Aïda, an Ethiopian slave of the Princess Amneris, in the famous aria, “Celeste Aïda.” He wants to return her to her homeland in triumph and build her a throne near the sun.

Radamès’ daydreams are interrupted by the arrival of Amneris, the daughter of the King of Egypt. She is in love with Radamès and tries to tell him about the depth of her feelings for him. But Radamès becomes distracted when Aïda suddenly enters. Amneris notices the longing glances, confirming the unspoken intensity between them.

A series of fanfares heralds the King of Egypt, Ramfis and a large group of followers. A messenger announces that Amonasro, King of the Ethiopians, is advancing his troops on Thebes. The King of Egypt reveals that Isis has named Radamès as their commander and he immediately declares war on Ethiopia. The people echo the call for war and implore Radamès to return victorious (“Ritorna vincitor!”).

The crowd disperses, leaving Aïda alone. She is torn between her love for Radamès and her love for her native land — though now a slave, she is in fact the daughter of Amonasro, King of Ethiopia. Aïda hopes that Radamès will be victorious — a victory that would destroy her father and her homeland. She prays to the gods for mercy (“Numi, pietà”).

Scene 2: In the Temple of Vulcan

During a solemn ceremony priests invoke the aid and protection of the god Phtha. Ramfis presents to Radamès the sacred sword he is to carry into battle. The young general joins the priests in a passionate prayer for victory.

Act II

Scene 1: A room in Amneris’ Apartments

The Egyptians have crippled Ethiopia’s armies and halted the attack and Radamès is triumphant. In her apartments, Amneris is preparing for Radamès’ victory procession into Thebes. When Aïda approaches, Amneris dismisses her other attendants and tries to learn Aïda’s private thoughts, first pretending Radamès is dead, then saying he is still alive. Certain from Aïda’s reactions — horror, followed by joy — that her slave loves Radamès, Amneris leaves for the festivities. She decides to humiliate Aïda before Radamès by making her attend the celebration as Amneris’ personal slave.

Scene 2: A Gate of the City of Thebes

A huge crowd cheers the arrival of the victorious army. The triumphant procession dazzles the grateful crowd, culminating with the arrival of Radamès. The spectacle includes a retinue of Ethiopian prisoners. Aïda recognizes her father among them, Amonasro, who signals her not to betray his identity as King of Ethiopia.

Impressed by Amonasro's eloquent plea, Radamès asks as his reward that the priests' death sentence on the prisoners be overruled and that they be freed. The King grants this, as well as Amneris' hand, ensuring Radamès' future as the next king of Egypt. He, however, decides to keep Amonasro in custody.



Act III

Moonlit Bank of the Nile

Amneris, led by Ramfis enter the Temple of Isis to pray to the goddess for a blessing on the princess' upcoming marriage to Radamès. Waiting nearby for Radamès, Aïda is overcome with nostalgia for her homeland. Amonasro suddenly appears and preys on these feelings, forcing his daughter to agree to ask Radamès where the Egyptian army plans to enter Ethiopia. When Radamès arrives, he promises Aïda that they will be together once the war has ended. Aïda still fears revenge from Amneris and begs Radamès to run away from Egypt with her. When he reluctantly agrees, she asks him how they can pass through the lines of his own army. Radamès tells her. Amonasro, who has been eavesdropping, steps forward and reveals his identity to the stunned general.

Amneris and Ramfis emerge from the temple just as Radamès is pleading with Aïda and Amonasro to escape. Aïda escapes with her father, and Radamès surrenders to the priests as a traitor.



Act IV

Scene 1: A Hall in the King's palace



Although Aïda has escaped, Amonasro is dead and Radamès stands accused of treason. Still hoping that her love can save him, Amneris has Radamès brought to her and offers to save him if he will renounce Aïda. He refuses, telling her that he cannot live without Aïda. Amneris listens with mounting hysteria as the priests question Radamès. He refuses to defend himself, and the priests have no alternative but to condemn him to death. Amneris tries to intervene, but it is hopeless. When Radamès is led away she cries in anguish, cursing the judges who are robbing her of the man she loves.

Scene 2: A Crypt in the Temple of Vulcan

Radamès has been buried alive, sealed in the crypt in the Temple of Vulcan. He discovers in the darkness that Aïda is waiting for him — she has hidden in the temple to share his fate. As death overtakes them, Aïda and Radamès bid farewell to earth. Above the sealed tomb, Amneris kneels and weeps for Radamès, wishing him peace.

Giuseppe Verdi

Born in Le Roncole, Duchy of Parma, October 10, 1813; died in Milan, January 27, 1901



Giuseppe Verdi was born into a family of small landowners and taverners. When he was seven he helped the local church organist; at 12 he studied with the organist at the main church in nearby Busseto, whose assistant he became in 1829. He already had several compositions to his credit. In 1832 he was sent to Milan, but was refused a place at the conservatory and studied with Vincenzo Lavigna, composer and former La Scala musician. He might have taken a post as organist at Monza in 1835, but instead he returned to Busseto where he was passed over as *maestro di cappella*. He became town music master in 1836 and married Margherita Barezzi, his patron's daughter. They had two children who died in infancy.

Verdi had begun an opera and tried to arrange a performance in Parma or Milan, but was unsuccessful. He had some songs published and decided to settle in Milan in 1839 where his *Oberto* was accepted at La Scala and further operas were commissioned. This one was well received, but his next one, *Un Giorno di Regno*, failed totally. His wife died during its composition.

Verdi nearly gave up, but was excited by the libretto of *Nabucco* and, in 1842, saw its successful production, which carried his reputation across Italy, Europe and the United States over the next five years. *Nabucco* was followed by another opera, *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*, which was also with marked political overtones, and again was well received.

Verdi's gift for stirring melody and tragic and heroic situations struck a chord in an Italy struggling for freedom and unity, causes with which he was sympathetic. Much opera of this period had political themes, and the involvement of Verdi's operas in politics were easily exaggerated.

Now began the period Verdi later called his "years in the galleys," with a long and demanding series of operas to compose and (usually) direct, in the main Italian centers and abroad. They include *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, *Luisa Miller* and eight others in 1844-1850, in Paris and London as well as Rome, Milan, Naples, Venice, Florence and Trieste (with a pause in 1846 when his health gave way). Features of these works include strong, somber stories, a vigorous, almost crude orchestral style that gradually grew fuller and richer, forceful vocal writing including broad lines in 9/8 and 12/8 meter and, above all, a seriousness in his determination to convey the full force of the drama, modeled after the late Rossini, Mercadante and Donizetti. He took great care over the choice of topics and about the detailed planning of his librettos. In *Ernani* he established his basic vocal types early — the vigorous, determined baritone, the ardent, courageous but sometimes despairing tenor, the severe bass.

The "galley years" had their climax in the three great popular operas of 1851-1853. First among them was *Rigoletto*, produced in Venice after trouble with the censors— a recurring theme in Verdi. It was a huge success. No less successful, in Rome, was the more direct *Il Trovatore*, at the beginning of 1853. Six weeks later *La Traviata*, the most personal and intimate of Verdi's operas, was a failure in Venice though, with some revisions, it was favorably received the following year at a different Venetian theater. With the dark drama of the one, the heroics of the second and the grace and pathos of the third, Verdi had shown how extraordinarily wide expressive range.

Later in 1853 he went to Paris with the soprano, Giuseppina Strepponi, to prepare *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* for the Opéra, where it was given in 1855 with modest success. Verdi had been living with her for several years, and they eventually married in 1859. Verdi remained there for a time to defend his

rights in face of the piracies of the Théâtre des Italiens and to deal with translations of some of his operas. The next new one was the somber *Simon Boccanegra*, a drama about love and politics in medieval Genoa, given in Venice. Plans for *Un Ballo in Maschera*, about the assassination of a Swedish king, in Naples were called off because of the censors and it was given instead in Rome (1859). Verdi was involved himself in political activity at this time, as representative of Busseto (where he lived) in the provincial parliament; later, pressed by Cavour, he was elected to the national parliament, and ultimately he was a senator. In 1862 *La Forza del Destino* had its premiere at St. Petersburg. A revised *Macbeth* was given in Paris in 1865, but his most important work for the French capital was *Don Carlos*, a grand opera after Schiller in which personal dramas of love, comradeship and liberty are set against the persecutions of the Inquisition and the Spanish monarchy. It was given in 1867 and several times revised for later, Italian revivals.

Verdi returned to Italy, to live at Genoa. In 1870 he began work on *Aïda*, given at Cairo Opera House at the end of 1871 to mark the opening of the Suez Canal (Verdi was not present) — again, in the grand opera tradition, and more taut in structure than *Don Carlos*. Verdi was ready to give up opera; his works of 1873 are a string quartet and the vivid, appealing Requiem in honor of the poet Manzoni, given in 1874-5, in Milan (San Marco and La Scala, aptly), Paris, London and Vienna. In 1879 the composer-poet Boito and the publisher Ricordi prevailed upon Verdi to write another opera, *Otello*; Verdi, working slowly and much occupied with revisions of earlier operas, completed it only in 1886. This, his most powerful tragic work, a study in evil and jealousy, had its premiere in Milan in 1887. It is notable for the increasing richness of allusive detail in the orchestral writing and the approach to a more continuous musical texture, though Verdi, with his faith in the expressive force of the human voice, did not abandon the “set piece” (aria, duet, etc.) even if he integrated it more fully into its context — above all in his next opera. This was another Shakespeare work, *Falstaff*, on which he embarked two years later — his first comedy since the beginning of his career, with a score whose wit and lightness betray the hand of a serene master, was given in 1893. That was his last opera; still to come was a set of *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, although Verdi was a non-believer.

Verdi spent his last years in Milan — rich, authoritarian but charitable, much visited, revered and honored. When he died on January 27, 1901, at the age of 87, over 28,000 people lined the streets for his funeral.

What is Grand Opera?

Grand opera is exactly what it sounds like — opera performed on a grand scale. Cultivated to appeal to the tastes of a newly enfranchised middle-class Parisian audience, grand opera had become a virtual genre by the early nineteenth century. It built on an aesthetic style that had flourished with Napoleon and his followers, and was an exercise in sensory overload that emphasized spectacle and splendor, usually in the context of a sprawling and lofty story with a historical setting. Casts were huge and productions were lavishly ornamented with ballet sequences and monumental stage tableaux, not unlike the Hollywood blockbuster films of a century later.

It was the Italian composer, Rossini, who originated the concept of grand opera while writing in Paris. Rossini premiered his last opera, *Cuillaume Tell* (William Tell), in Paris in 1829 at a time when audiences were apparently ready for its innovations. Not only did *Cuillaume Tell* have a monumental scale (and length), its superbly integrated score achieved a magnificence equal to the eye-popping spectacle unfolding onstage.

Cuillaume Tell became the prototype for grand opera, a movement that would find its master in the German-born émigré, Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864). Meyerbeer was the composer of *Le Prophete*, *Les Huguenots*, *Robert le Diable*, and *L'Africaine*, operas rarely performed today, despite passages of beauty and grace, because they are unconscionably long, almost absurdly preoccupied with spectacle, and inconsistent in their musical quality. For these very reasons, Paris audiences loved Meyerbeer's operas. Going to the opera was a social occasion as well as a cultural one, and Meyerbeer's operas, with as many as five substantial acts, afforded many intermissions for socializing. And, when Parisians turned their attention to the stage, Meyerbeer saw to it that they were dazzled — and often. His skillful music seemed

to spring from nothing more profound than his desire to please his singers and tickle the ears of his audiences. There is, however, a vast gulf between cleverness and art. To listeners who have experienced grand opera as conceived by Verdi, Wagner and Puccini, Meyerbeer's pleasant melodies and his taste for bombast sounded mindless and empty. Both he and his operas were overwhelmingly popular, yet derided by sophisticated observers — much in the same way Andrew Lloyd Webber's musicals are today.

Grand opera began to lose its vogue after Meyerbeer's death, its demise hastened as Verdi and Wagner offered striking alternatives to its mere pomp and circumstance. Because of this, it is interesting that Verdi chose to refer to the Meyerbeer model one last time with *Aïda*, almost as if he wished to prove that he could get it right. He did a good deal more than that, creating what is surely the finest grand opera of them all, and one of his absolute masterpieces.

Aïda

Aïda's greatness lies not simply in Verdi's grasp of spectacle, but in his ability to tell, in musical terms, a powerful human drama that is also startling in its intimacy.

Verdi chose Antonio Ghislanzoni as his Italian librettist, who had won his confidence in assisting with the revisions of *La Forza del Destino* for its La Scala premiere in 1869. Once the Egyptian khedive's commission for *Aïda* had been accepted — for a fee so lavish that even Verdi was nervous about the amount becoming public knowledge — Verdi and his wife made an Italian translation of Marlette's outline, and the composer added extensive preliminary notes about dialogue. After the composer and librettist met face to face in mid-July of 1870, the actual writing and basic composition of *Aïda* took only a few months. Verdi inaugurated a blizzard of correspondence with Ghislanzoni to get exactly the libretto — with precisely the verses — he had imagined.

Verdi was adamant about the tiniest details, from the poetic meter of a line and how its stresses affected a musical phrase to the selection of words that would not detract from the musical flow. He asked for revisions repeatedly to hone the text to its leanest and most insightful expression, and to make it as lucid as it was concise. He wanted the libretto to speak so clearly that he could amplify its more profound meaning through the music. He wanted the audience to have no trouble understanding what was sung and where the story was going. The musical treatment shaped a deeper awareness of the drama's poetry.

While *Aïda* was being written, France declared war on Prussia, a development that exasperated Verdi. He sympathized with the French, despite his contempt for the arrogance of the Second Empire. His strong nationalistic feelings would be reflected in the character of *Aïda* herself. The war ended in a matter of months, but it derailed the timetable established for *Aïda's* premiere. du Locle and Mariette were in a besieged Paris and production plans could not be finalized, nor could the designs for the scenery and costumes, which were being created in Paris. Verdi continued to demand revisions from Ghislanzoni. Ultimately, the delay caused by the Franco-Prussian War allowed Verdi the luxury of orchestrating his score at his own pace and planning the stage production in comprehensive detail. Although Verdi informed his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, that he had finished composing the opera in November 1870, Ricordi was presented with the finished product in August 1871.

The world premiere of *Aïda* took place in Cairo on Christmas eve of 1871, though Verdi did not attend. He later joked in a letter to a friend that he was afraid of being "mummified." Although a boatload of dignitaries from Italy did make the trip, Verdi steadfastly refused to join them. His reasons for not



going are unclear — it is known that he was a guarded, intensely private man. Verdi, who was involved with every aspect of this production, composed a full-scale *Aida* overture for the occasion that he immediately and wisely discarded in favor of the brief, ethereal prelude he had originally written. (Both Arturo Toscanini and Claudio Abbado have recorded the alternate *Aida* overture, which runs a little over ten minutes and seeks to encapsulate the drama — the opera does not need it.)

The Cairo premiere was a triumph but, from all reports, the first performance at La Scala far outshone the Egyptian production. Thunderous ovations greeted arias and ensembles within the opera. Verdi was hailed once again as a national hero and was presented with a baton bearing his name which was encrusted in precious jewels. Just after the La Scala opening, in early February 1872, he modestly wrote to a friend, “The audience reacted favorably. I don’t want to affect modesty with you, but this opera is certainly not one of my worst.”

Aida has remained at the forefront of the international repertoire ever since its premiere, despite the fact that it is an expensive and demanding opera to stage and perform. As with other Verdi operas of this period, the score’s richness and scale of expression push lyric singers to become more forceful and heroic — the Italian word, *spinto*, is often used to describe this kind of singing. The score is especially challenging in *Aida*, in which larger-than-life public moments contrast suddenly with intimate, private ones. Lyric singers who lack the stamina and solid techniques have come to grief in the opera’s four leading roles, while other singers, though heroic, may lack the tenderness and vulnerability that are crucial to the characters.

Aida has been performed in venues of virtually every size and shape, from amateur stages to the massive outdoor arenas at Verona and the Baths of Caracalla in Rome. An Italian film of *Aida* was made in the early 1950s with Sophia Loren in blackface, lip-synching the role of *Aida*. A Broadway musical based on Verdi’s score, *My Darlin’ Aida*, was staged in 1952 — an adaptation that did not succeed. Verdi’s lofty opera has flourished in an unbroken triumph that has now lasted well over a century.

***Aida*: the Broadway Musical**

Disney’s second Broadway effort, which opened in 2000, is considered a “teen-friendly” telling of the classic operatic story. “The great Egyptian hero Radames sends the captured Nubian princess Aida as a gift to the Egyptian princess, Amneris. Then, as he prepares to marry the vain and shallow Amneris, he falls completely in love with Aida, and is finally forced to choose between love and life.” New songs from Elton John and Tim Rice combine with a knockout performance by a young and enthusiastic cast in a crowd-pleasing and visually stunning Disney production.

***Aida*: The Video (2001)**

Starring Kate Aldrich, Scott Piper and Adina Aaron; Franco Zeffirelli, director



This production was staged as part of the commemorative of the 100th anniversary of Verdi’s death in his home town of Busseto, in the small 350-seat Teatro Giuseppe Verdi. Franco Zeffirelli, celebrated director and stage designer, had originally organized the production as a workshop for talented young performers. It is set on a small stage with a small orchestra and the singers are relatively unknown and in their mid-twenties. It’s sort of a paradox — the biggest Verdi work staged in a mini opera house — and the result is fantastic.

Aida is an opera which has always been presented on a grand scale and is the first opera we think of when referring to “Grand Opera.” This production uses a completely different approach to this massive work — it’s been made very intimate and very immediate, focusing on the relationships among the various characters of the story and not on the spectacle. All the lead singers are young and beautiful, and the lavish sets and costumes are

stunningly gorgeous. Overall, this is a wonderfully refreshing way to experience *Aïda*. A profoundly moving performance.

Franco Zeffirelli designed and directed this production and, while he's so often accused of excess, the tiny Busseto opera house, simply does not allow for big anything. The end result is that Zeffirelli took all of his creative power and infused it into a spectacular small-scale production where all of his big ideas could shine through with what has to be the youngest professional cast of any *Aïda*, or any opera on DVD.

The lead singers, chosen by Zeffirelli himself, are all in their mid-twenties, with excellent voices and great acting skills. In this most Italian of operas, they are all young American singers — and the Italians absolutely loved them! The legendary tenor from the 1950s, Carlo Bergonzi, served as their vocal coach.

Adina Aaron is *Aïda*, looking very much like the Ethiopian princess. She sings and acts beautifully, showing no sign of strain or fatigue. Kate Aldrich nearly steals the show as Amneris, the daughter of the King. She is beautiful and sings with incredible sensitivity, suppleness and perfect technique, delivering a fierce, passionate Amneris. Scott Piper sings the role of Radames with great confidence. Though his spinto voice is a bit lighter than some of the dramatic tenors who sing this role, it has a fresh, lyrical quality that never tires or strains. Conductor Massimiliano Stefanelli makes the very small orchestra sound like a big one. He conducts with authority and sensitivity, observing all of Verdi's dynamic markings, thus making the intimacy of this performance very immediate.

This production omits the traditional triumphal march and dance sequences in Act II. Zeffirelli quipped (with a twinkle in his eye), "They're going to expect elephants, but they won't get them." The Triumphal March takes place off-stage. The performers turn their backs to the audience, and we must imagine the procession going past. Only *Aïda* faces front, sharing the pain she's experiencing at knowing that her own people are being marched by as prisoners.

The DVD quality is excellent, with great digital picture, and sound that gives you a fantastic sonic experience. It is a combination of authentic Verdi combined with outstanding picture and sound qualities.



The ornate 350-seat Teatro Giuseppe Verdi in Busseto, Italy