

Verdi's Aida

Visions and Voices presents the Metropolitan Opera's HD telecast of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*. To help you learn more about Verdi's masterpiece, Ross Scimeca of the USC Libraries has selected the following resources.

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Introduction

Giuseppe Verdi composed twenty-eight operas during his lifetime. *Aida* is the twenty-sixth, followed by his late masterpieces, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. What is unique about *Aida* is that it is a grand opera, meaning it features extended choruses, ballets, and marches composed in a theatrically spectacular style. Like *Don Carlos*, which preceded *Aida* by five years and premiered at the Paris Opera, Verdi brilliantly integrated these spectacular elements with the vocal elements of traditional opera.

Camille du Locle took the plot for his French-language libretto for *Aida* from the work of Egyptologist Mariette Bey. The libretto was later translated into Italian verse by Antonio Ghislanzoni. Commissioned by the Khedive of Egypt, *Aida* premiered at the Italian Theatre in Cairo on December 24th, 1871. It was a sensational success, as it was two months later at Milan's La Scala. The opera reached New York's Academy of Music on November 26th, 1873. You can find the Italian-language libretto of *Aida* and an English translation in the Opera Classics Library by clicking on the Databases tab from www.usc.edu/libraries/eresources.

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Synopsis

In four acts and seven scenes, *Aida* depicts a "love-triangle" between Radames, the commander of the Egyptian army; Aida, an Ethiopian slave who is actually the daughter of Amonasro, the King of Ethiopia; and Amneris, daughter of the King of Egypt.

The Metropolitan Opera's *Opera News* provides a helpful summary:

ACT I. In ancient Egypt, near the royal palace at Memphis, Radamès learns from the high priest, Ramfis, that Ethiopia soon may bring war to the Nile valley. The young officer hopes he will be chosen as commander of the army, envisioning triumph so he can free his beloved Aida, who is the Ethiopian slave of the proud Princess Amneris. Amneris, who herself loves Radamès, jealously senses his feelings for Aida when the three meet. A procession led by the King arrives to confirm that the Ethiopians are advancing on Thebes. He appoints the jubilant Radamès as Egyptian commander, at which shouts of victory fill the air. Left alone, Aida is torn between her love for Radamès and for her native land: though now a slave, she is in fact the daughter of Amonasro, king of Ethiopia. She prays to the gods for mercy. In the temple, as priestesses chant the praises of Ptah, priests consecrate Radamès' sword in a sacred ritual.

ACT II. Ethiopia has been defeated. Amneris, entertained by slaves, prepares for Radamès' triumphal entry into Thebes. When Aida approaches, the princess dismisses her first attendants and tries to learn Aida's private thoughts, first pretending Radamès is dead, then saying he is still alive. Certain from Aida's reactions — horror, followed by joy — that her slave loves Radamès, Amneris leaves for the festivities. Aida reiterates her prayers. At the city gates, victory is celebrated in parade and dance, a ceremony observed by the King and Amneris. Radamès is borne in and crowned with a victor's wreath. Captured Ethiopians follow, among them Amonasro, Aida's father, who signals her not to betray his identity as king. 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, but keeps Amonasro in custody.

ACT III. On a moonlit bank of the Nile, Amneris is led by Ramfis to a temple of Isis for a wedding vigil. Nearby, waiting for Radamès, Aida is overcome with nostalgia for her homeland. Amonasro, who suddenly appears, preys on these feelings, forcing his daughter to agree to ask Radamès where the Egyptian army plans to enter Ethiopia. This she does when Radamès appears, ardent with dreams of their future life together. Just as he reveals the military secret, Amonasro steps out of hiding, and Ramfis and Amneris come forth from the temple. While Aida escapes with her father, Radamès surrenders to the priests as a traitor.

ACT IV. In a temple of judgment, awaiting trial, Radamès is unmoved by Amneris' offer to save him if he will renounce Aida and marry her. When he is led away, Amneris' pride dissolves, and her love for Radamès revealed by her agony in hearing him condemned to death. Enraged, the princess curses the judges. Buried alive in a crypt, Radamès is joined by Aida, who has hidden there to share his fate. The lovers bid farewell to earth as Amneris, above the tomb, prays for peace.

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Further Reading

Verdi with a Vengeance: An Energetic Guide to the Life and Complete Operas of the King of Opera

By William Berger

Music Library and Online Library

ML410.V4829 2000

The Operas of Verdi [3 volumes.]

By Julian Budden

[Volume 3 deals with the last four of Verdi's operas, including Aida.]

Music Library

ML410.V4B88 1992

Verdi's Aida: A Record of the Life of the Opera on and off the Stage

By Clyde T. McCants

Music Library

ML310.V4M34 2006

The Complete Operas of Verdi

By Charles Osbourne

Music Library and Grand Library

MT100.V4708 1970

Verdi's Theater: Creating Drama through Music

By Gilles de Van

Music Library

ML410.V4V2313 1998

Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents

By Giuseppe Verdi, translated by Hans Busch

Verdi's letters and other documents pertaining to Aida

Music Library

ML410.V4V33

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Recommended Recordings

More than 60 recordings (of Verdi's *Aida* are currently available. Many great sopranos have performed the title role, including Maria Callas, Renata Tebaldi, Leontyne Price, Zinka Milanov, and Montserrat Caballe. You can find many of these recordings at USC's Music Library on the ground floor of Doheny Library. Three recordings are essential for any opera lover's collection:

- Jonel Perlea's 1956 RCA monaural recording with the Rome Opera House and Chorus featuring performers Zinka Milanov, Jussi Bjorling, and Fedora Barbieri

Music Library 14242mus

- Herbert von Karajan's 1959 Decca/London stereo recording features the Vienna Philharmonic with Renata Tebaldi, Giulietta Simionato, and Carlo Bergonzi.

[Not currently available at the libraries.]

- Riccardo Muti's 1974 EMI recording with the New Philharmonia Orchestra and the Royal Opera Chorus features Montserrat Caballe, Placido Domingo, and Fiorenza Cossotto.

Music Library 4125mus

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