

State TheatreNJ.org
Keynotes

AIDA



Welcome!

The State Theatre is proud to present Verdi's *Aida*, captured in live performance at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Italy's celebrated festival of opera. This HD presentation captures all the grandeur and excitement of the live event.

This *Keynotes* performance guide has been created by the State Theatre Education Department to add to your understanding and enjoyment of the opera. We hope it will encourage you to take advantage of our other HD opera offerings this season.

CONTENTS

About the Opera.....	3
The Story	4
Who's Who	5
Meet the Composer	6
Musical Highlights	7
Themes in the Opera	8
Historical Context.....	9
Opera Voices	10

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Keynotes

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The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.



Following the premiere of his *Don Carlos* in 1867, Giuseppe Verdi returned to his estate at Sant'Agata. He was 54 years old, a giant in the music world, wealthy, and immensely popular. Over the course of the next year, he would be in touch with Camille du Locle, his French librettist, who was constantly presenting ideas for new operas to Verdi, all of which were rejected. Except for one: a four-page synopsis of an opera to be set in ancient Egypt. This brief synopsis had been written by Du Locle after a story by the famous French Egyptologist, Auguste Mariette.

Mariette was responsible for the discovery of many important archeological sites at Giza, Abydos, Sakkara, and Thebes, and while there is some doubt that the plot that would eventually become *Aida* was totally of his own creation, he nonetheless sent the story to Du Locle with the precise mission of engaging a famous composer to write an opera for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1870.

Verdi was the first choice, but by the time the synopsis was in Verdi's hands, the Canal had already been open for several months. The story that *Aida* was intended for the opening of the Cairo Opera House is also false, since Verdi's *Rigoletto* was performed at the opening in 1869.

Verdi agreed to write the new opera—not in French as Du Locle proposed, but in Italian. He hired Antonio Ghislanzoni to translate Du Locle's libretto, and he himself played a significant role in writing verses for the new opera. In a brief four months, *Aida* was finished. But, fate, and war were to intervene.

The Franco-Prussian war, which began in July 1870, was at its height. Paris was under siege, and the scenery that had been built there for *Aida* could not be shipped to Cairo. The delayed Cairo debut of *Aida* finally occurred on December 24, 1871, and the first Italian performances at La Scala in Milan six weeks later. At both premieres, *Aida* was a triumph, as it has been at every performance ever since.

Aida Fun Facts

- Verdi did not attend the premiere of *Aida* in Egypt.
- The legendary conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was leading a performance of *Aida* that was not going at all well. To add insult to injury, a camel relieved itself on the stage during the Triumphal Scene. As Sir Thomas watched the camel, he was heard to mutter to himself, "Terribly vulgar, but, Lord, what a critic!"
- The Khedival Opera House, where *Aida* had its premiere, burned to the ground on October 28, 1971. The site was rebuilt into a multistory garage, but the square overlooking the building is still called Opera Square. A new Cairo Opera House did not open until 1988.
- Sophia Loren starred in the 1953 film version of *Aida*. Her voice was dubbed by the legendary soprano Renata Tebaldi.

Act I, scene 1: The Royal Palace at Memphis, Egypt; around 1230 B.C.

Egypt is about to attack Ethiopia. At the royal palace, the priest Ramfis tells Radames that the gods have chosen a new commander for the Egyptian army. Radames hopes to be the one; if he can lead the army to victory, perhaps he will be able to win freedom for the woman he secretly loves—Aida, who is the slave of Amneris, the King's daughter. Amneris is in love with Radames. Her jealousy is aroused when she observes Radames and Aida together.

The King of Egypt announces that the gods have indeed chosen Radames to command the army. The crowd cries for victory. Radames leaves to prepare for battle.

Left alone, Aida is deeply distressed with herself for joining in the acclaim for Radames, the leader of her enemy. Torn by loyalty to her country and her love for Radames, Aida prays to the gods for pity.

Act I, scene 2: Inside the temple of Vulcan at Memphis

The priests and priestesses perform a ceremony giving Radames his sacred armor and sword.

Act II, scene 1: Amneris' room in the palace

The Egyptian army has defeated the Ethiopians. In preparation for meeting Radames, Amneris is dressed by her slaves, while dancers perform for her entertainment. Hoping to uncover Aida's true feelings, Amneris first tells her that Radames has been killed in battle, then reveals that he is still alive. Aida's reactions betray her, confirming Amneris' suspicions. Furious, the princess reminds Aida that she is just a slave and can be put to death at any time. Aida once again calls upon the gods for help.

Act II, scene 2: The city of Thebes

The Egyptians welcome the returning army and Radames, their hero. The prisoners are led in; among them Aida recognizes her father, Amonasro, King of Ethiopia. He warns her not to reveal his identity to anyone. Amonasro pleads with the Egyptians not to kill the prisoners, but Ramfis and the priests demand death. In reward for leading his troops to victory, Radames asks that the prisoners be set free. The King releases everyone but Amonasro. Then he offers Radames Amneris hand in marriage, leaving Aida in despair.



Act III: The banks of the Nile River

Ramfis leads Amneris into the temple of Isis to bless her upcoming marriage to Radames. Aida arrives to wait in secret for Radames. Overcome with homesickness, she laments that she will never see Ethiopia again.

Amonasro appears. He orders his daughter to trick Radames into telling her the Egyptians' plans for invading Ethiopia. Aida reluctantly agrees. Her father hides as Radames approaches. Aida persuades Radames to run away with her. She asks him which road they must take to avoid the Egyptian army. His reply unwittingly discloses the Egyptians' attack route. Amonasro comes out from hiding and reveals that he is the King of Ethiopia.

Amneris overhears them and denounces Radames as a traitor. Amonasro tries to stab Amneris, but Radames stops him. Radames surrenders as Aida and her father escape.

Act IV, scene 1: Hall of judgment, also Radames' cell

Radames is led into the hall of judgment. Amneris offers to save him if he will give up Aida, but he refuses. Burning with jealousy, Amneris lets him go to his doom. Radames makes no attempt to defend himself as the priests sentence him to death. Amneris curses the priests.

Act IV, scene 2: Temple of Vulcan

Radames, buried alive in a tomb beneath the temple, thinks of Aida. Suddenly, Aida comes out from the shadows, where she hid herself in order to die with her beloved. Radames tries unsuccessfully to move the huge stone that seals them in. As they bid farewell to the earth, the lovers look forward to being together forever in heaven. In the temple above, Amneris prays to Isis for peace.

WHO'S WHO

The characters in *Aida* are Egyptians and Ethiopians. During the time the story takes place, Egypt has invaded Ethiopia and killed or enslaved many of its people. The conflict in the opera revolves around the divided loyalties of its three central characters—Aida, Radames, and Amneris—as they must choose between love and country.

AIDA [eye-EE-duh] - a princess of Ethiopia (known today as Nubia) who was captured by the Egyptians and made a slave to the princess Amneris. No one in Egypt knows that Aida is a princess; if they did, they would probably kill her. Aida is in love with Radames, an Egyptian soldier.

RADAMES [rah-dah-MAZE] - a captain in the Egyptian Army who is in love with Aida.

AMNERIS [ahm-NAIR-ees] - a princess of Egypt. She is in love with Radames.

AMONASRO [ah-moh-NAZ-roh] - King of Ethiopia and Aida's father. When he is captured by the Egyptians, he does not reveal his identity.

RAMFIS [RAHM-fees] - High Priest of Egypt.

KING OF EGYPT - Amneris' father.

MESSENGER

PRIESTS & PRIESTESSES

SLAVES

PEOPLE OF EGYPT



HUI HE (Aida) is a native of Xi'An, China. The soprano's wide repertoire includes the title roles in *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Aida*, as well as Amelia in *Un ballo in maschera*, Odabella in *Attila*, and Liù in *Turandot*. She performs regularly at the leading international opera houses, including the Vienna Staatsoper, La Scala, the Arena di Verona, and the Royal Opera House Covent Garden.



MARCO BERTI (Radames), from Como, Italy, was the recipient of the 2005 Giuseppe Verdi Gold Medal. He has performed the big dramatic tenor roles—among them Don José in *Carmen*, Manrico in *Il trovatore*, Canio in *Pagliacci*, and Verdi's Otello—at the world's major opera houses, including Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera, La Scala, the Arena di Verona, and the Paris Opera.



LUCIANA D'INTINO (Amneris), from Pordenone, Italy, made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Princess Eboli in Verdi's *Don Carlo*. Among her other roles are Amneris in *Aida*, Azucena in *Il trovatore*, and the title role in *Carmen*, which she has performed at such prestigious venues as the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, the Berlin Staatsoper, the Rome Opera, and Carnegie Hall.



ZUBIN MEHTA (conductor), a native of Mumbai, India, has had a long and celebrated career conducting both opera and orchestral music. Among his many prestigious appointments, he has served as music director of the Montreal Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Israel Philharmonic, and the New York Philharmonic. He serves as chief conductor of the Teatro del Maggio Musicale

Fiorentino in Florence, where this production of *Aida* was created. Mr. Mehta made his debut as an opera conductor with *Tosca* in Montreal in 1963. Since then he has conducted at the Metropolitan Opera, Vienna State Opera, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, La Scala, the opera houses of Chicago and Florence, and the Salzburg Festival.

MEET THE COMPOSER

Born in 1813 in the Italian village of Le Roncole, Giuseppe Verdi spent his early years studying the organ. By the age of seven, he had become an organist at the church. After attending the local music school, Verdi applied for admission to the Milan Conservatory of Music. When he failed to get into the conservatory, he took private composition lessons in Milan with the music director of the world-famous La Scala opera house.

In 1836, Verdi married his childhood sweetheart, Margherita Barezzi, and soon had a young family. The composer's first opera, *Oberto*, was successfully performed at La Scala in 1839. He began work on his next opera, but was interrupted when, in little more than a year, his son, his daughter, and his wife fell ill and died. On top of that, his new opera was a complete failure. Even so, the director at La Scala still believed in Verdi, and produced his next work, *Nabucco*, which was a great triumph. This opera made Verdi famous and the best-paid composer of his time.

Beginning in 1851 with *Rigoletto*, followed soon after by *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*, Verdi established himself as the greatest opera composer in Italy, if not the entire world. Some of his other masterpieces included *Un ballo in maschera*, *La forza del destino*, *Don Carlos*, and *Aida*. After the success of *Aida* in 1871, Verdi wrote no new operas for 15 years. He came out of retirement to write two more operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, both based on Shakespeare's plays.

Verdi was also a patriot who fought for Italian independence all his life. (During much of the composer's lifetime, Italy suffered under foreign domination, particularly from Austria.) Many of his operas contained strong political messages that got him into trouble with the Austrian censors. His battles with the censors for artistic freedom made Verdi a hero of the Italian people. The composer served as a representative in Italy's provincial parliament; later he was elected to the national parliament, and ultimately he was a senator.

In 1893, the 80-year-old composer retreated to his country home in with his second wife, the singer Giuseppina Strepponi. His wife's death in 1897 left Verdi in a state of unbearable grief. He fled to Milan and, after four unhappy years, he died in 1901 from a massive stroke. Verdi's death left all Italy in mourning; 28,000 people lined the streets for his funeral. He still is revered throughout the music world as the greatest of operatic composers and in Italy as a patriotic hero and champion of human rights.



“The artist must yield himself to his own inspiration... I should compose with utter confidence a subject that set my musical blood going, even though it were condemned by all other artists as anti-musical.”

—Giuseppe Verdi, letter, 1853

MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

PRELUDE - The opening instrumental interlude presents the two contrasting themes that permeate the entire opera. Aida's theme, symbolizing her impossible love for Radames, is a soft, rising, yearning, melody played first by the strings and soon joined by a flute and clarinet. The second theme represents the stern priests and the laws of the gods. The soft descending melody is played first by muted cellos, then imitated by the higher strings and then the woodwinds.

“CELESTE AIDA” (“Celestial Aida”) - In this celebrated aria, Radames dreams of returning from battle as the conquering hero, and claiming Aida as his bride. The rising melody evokes the heavenly images of the text: “I want to raise you a throne next to the sun.” The end of the aria requires the tenor to sing the final phrase *pianissimo* (very quietly) and end on a high B-flat, marked *morendo* (dying out). Many tenors choose to ignore these fiendishly difficult instructions and go for a big, loud finish.

“RITORNA VINCITOR” (“Return Victorious”) - A spectacular chorus in which the people of Egypt cheer their army and their new general, Radames, to victory over the Ethiopians. Aida, to her horror, finds herself joining in the cheers.

“O PATRIA MIA” (“O, My Homeland”) - In this sad, touching aria, Aida longs for her homeland, afraid that she'll never see it again.

TRIUMPHAL MARCH - Radames returns at the head of the victorious troops. A huge chorus, blazing trumpets, hordes of marching soldiers and captives, and—occasionally—live elephants make this one of the most spectacular and iconic scenes in all of opera.

JUDGMENT SCENE - Radames' trial takes place offstage; he does not reply to Ramfis' accusations and is condemned to death, while Amneris, who remains onstage, pleads with the priests to show him mercy. As he is sentenced to be buried alive, Amneris curses the priests while Radames is taken away.

TOMB SCENE - Radames has been taken into the lower floor of the temple and sealed up in a dark vault. Thinking he is alone, he hears a sigh and then sees Aida, who has hidden herself in the vault to die with her lover. In the chamber above, Amneris mourns the loss of the man she loves and prays for peace. The composer ends the opera with the brilliant juxtaposition of these two musical themes.



Amneris

What'd They Say?

The HD broadcast of *Aida* is sung in Italian. You can follow the words in English with supertitles, a running translation that appears at the bottom of the screen.

Why are they singing in Italian if the story is set in Egypt and we're watching it in America? It's because the words and music for *Aida* were created by two Italians who were writing for an Italian audience. (To look at it another way, think of an American movie like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, where French characters speak in English.)

Before the introduction of supertitles, it was not uncommon for operas to be translated into the language of the audience. If you look hard enough, you can find historical recordings of *Aida* sung in German, French, or even Swedish!

Musical Themes

In *Aida*, there are musical themes that repeat throughout the opera. These themes can represent a specific character or an important idea. You have to listen carefully to recognize the musical themes, because they do not sound exactly the same each time they appear. They can be faster or slower, played by different combinations of instruments, with different rhythms, and even with some of the notes changed.

One of the most important musical themes is AIDA'S LOVE THEME.



Some places to listen for this theme:

- In the prelude (the orchestra's introduction at the very beginning of the opera); it's the very first thing you'll hear.
- At the end of the first scene, when Aida sings about being caught between loyalty to her country and her love for Radames.
- In the second scene of Act II, when Amneris is trying to trick Aida into confessing that she loves Radames.

Dramatic Themes

The story of *Aida* deals with some basic concepts and conflicts. Caught in

- **FORBIDDEN LOVE** - With its tale of two lovers from warring factions, *Aida* offers yet another variation on the *Romeo and Juliet* scenario.
- **LOYALTY** - Some of the characters in *Aida* are confronted with difficult decisions about where to place their loyalty. Aida herself must choose between her father and country and the man she loves. When she tricks Radames into revealing Egypt's military plans, she is helping her country defeat the enemy. But she is also betraying Radames, who is sentenced to die for treason.

Radames also faces a conflict between his career ambitions and his love for Aida. If he marries Amneris, the Princess of Egypt, he will one day be King of Egypt. But in choosing Aida, a slave, over Amneris, he puts his future and even his life in danger.

- **JEALOUSY** - Amneris is in love with Radames, and she becomes very jealous when she finds out that he loves Aida instead. Even though she loves him, she lets him die rather than letting him live with Aida.



Above: Aida and Radames

Below: Amneris and Aida



HISTORICAL CONTEXT



Geography and Mythology

- **Nubia** (referred to in the opera as “Ethiopia”) is a region along the Nile river, comprising parts of present-day northern Sudan and southern Egypt. The ancient kingdom existed at least as far back as 2300 B.C.
- **Memphis**, the capital of Egypt’s Old Kingdom, was strategically located at the mouth of the Nile River. A major manufacturing city, its patron was Ptah,* the god of craftsmen. Memphis is home to the oldest known pyramids.
- **Thebes** was the capital of Egypt during the Middle and New Kingdoms. It was held sacred by Amon, the supreme sun god. Some of the best-known monuments of ancient Egypt are located here: the temples and palaces at Karnak and Luxor and the necropolises of the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.

*Several scenes in *Aida* are set in the temple dedicated to Vulcan, a Roman god unknown to the ancient Egyptians. This god of the forge is a later counterpart to the ancient Egyptian deity Ptah, whose name is chanted by the temple priestesses in the opera’s final scene. Other deities mentioned in *Aida* are Isis, goddess of nature and motherhood; and her brother/husband Osiris, god of the dead.

Aida’s Pharaoh: Ramesses the Great

Aida is set sometime around the year 1230 B.C., during the reign of Ramesses II (c. 1303-1213 B.C.) Known as “Ramesses the Great,” he was the most powerful and celebrated pharaoh of the New Kingdom—Ancient Egypt’s Golden Age. He lived into his early nineties and reigned over Egypt for nearly 70 years (quite an incredible feat in an era where the average lifespan was less than 40 years).

Ramesses was a genius at self-promotion. He left behind an unparalleled legacy of monumental architecture dedicated to the glorification of himself and his wife, Nefertari. His greatest achievements were the mortuary temple known as the Ramesseum and the twin temples of Abu Simbel, carved out of the mountainside.

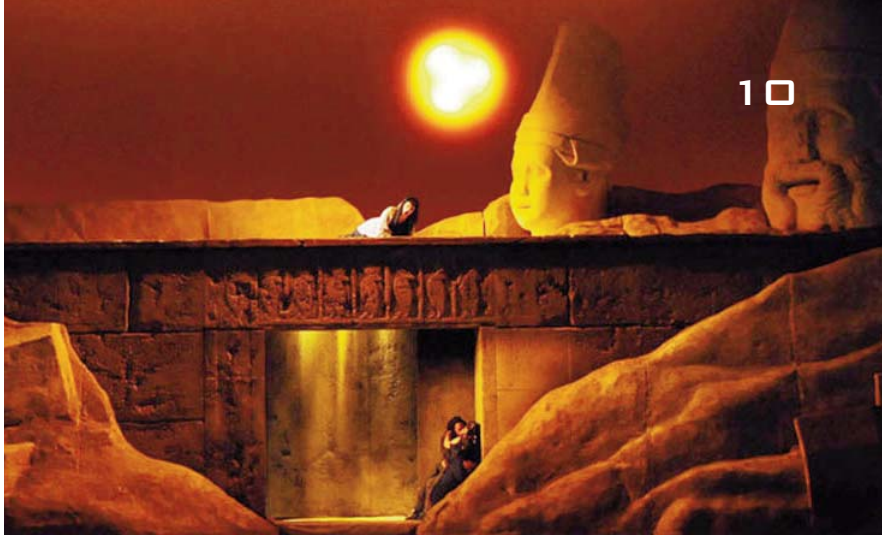
As a military leader, Ramesses led an army estimated at 100,000 men. After some initial blunders early in his reign, he led successful expeditions to regain territory lost to the Hittites and Nubians.



A relief from the south wall of the temple of Beit el-Wali in Nubia depicting Ramesses II attacking an enemy.



Temple of Ramesses II in Abu Simbel, in ancient Nubia



Opera is a form of theater in which the performers sing all or most of the words. Though it may seem odd at first, opera’s distinctive style of musical expression creates an extra level of meaning and emotion. If you’re not used to listening to operatic voices, you may at first find it strange or even unpleasant. Chances are, however, that if you keep listening, you’ll eventually be hooked.

Singing opera is a skill that requires many years of special training. An opera singer has to learn the special vocal techniques that make it possible to be heard in a large concert hall, with a large orchestra playing (and no microphone!)

Opera voices are divided into different categories, depending on whether it is a woman’s or a man’s voice, and how high or low it is. The types of opera voices are listed in order from highest to lowest:

- **SOPRANO** - the highest female voice
- **MEZZO-SOPRANO** - the middle-range female voice (“mezzo” means “middle.”)
- **CONTRALTO** - the lowest female voice
- **TENOR** - the highest male voice
- **BARITONE** - the middle-range male voice
- **BASS** (pronounced “bass”) - the lowest male voice

In an opera, the composer tries to match the sound of the voice to the character. For that reason, you’ll usually find the soprano playing parts such as a young woman or a princess, while the mezzo-soprano might be her mother or even a witch. The hero is usually a tenor, while the bad guy almost always has one of the lower men’s voices—a baritone or a bass.

Voices in Aida

- Aidasoprano
- Radamestenor
- Amneris.....mezzo-soprano
- Amonasrobaritone
- Ramfisbass
- King of Egypt.....bass

Good Vibrations

The human voice is an instrument that creates sound through vibration—just like a violin or drum. Our “instrument” consists of vocal folds (sometimes called vocal cords), two small membranes that are stretched horizontally across the larynx, or voicebox. When we talk or sing, air passes over the vocal folds, causing them to vibrate, which produces the sound. It’s easy to feel the vibration: just place your fingers lightly on your throat and say, “Aaaaah!”

Breathing is the most important part of singing correctly—especially in opera, where the ability to sing long, uninterrupted phrases is highly prized. Opera singers work extensively to master proper breathing. In learning a new role, they carefully study the score to decide where in the music they will take each breath.

One thing that gives opera singing its distinctive sound is the use of vibrato, which can add expression and nuance to both vocal and instrumental performance. The effect uses a small and

steady change of pitch to create a pulsating or ‘vibrating’ sound.

(You can actually see a violinist or cellist creating a vibrato by wiggling the left hand against the neck of the instrument while bowing the strings with the right hand.) For an opera singer, part of preparing for a role is deciding how much vibrato to use and where to use it. They may even

choose to vary the amount of vibrato they use on a single note!

