

AÏDA NOVA – SYNOPSIS

Act I. Scene I. After a very brief prelude, the curtain rises on a hall in the King's palace in Memphis. Through a high gateway at the back are seen the temples and palaces of Memphis and the pyramids.

It had been supposed that, after the invasion of Ethiopia by the Egyptians, the Ethiopians would be a long time in recovering from their defeat. But Amonasro, their king, has swiftly rallied the remnants of his defeated army gathered new levies to his standard, and crossed the frontier -- all this with such extraordinary rapidity that the first news of it has reached the Egyptian court in Memphis through a messenger hot-foot from Thebes with the startling word that the sacred city itself is threatened.

While the priests are sacrificing to Isis in order to learn from the goddess whom she advises them to choose as leader of the Egyptian forces, Rhadames, a young warrior, indulges in the hope that he may be the choice. To this hope he joins the further one that, returning victorious, he may ask the hand in marriage of Aida, an Ethiopian slave of the Egyptian King's daughter, Amneris. To these aspirations he gives expression in the romance, "Celeste Aida" (Radiant Aida).

[Music excerpt]

It ends effectively with the following phrase:

[Music excerpt]

He little knows that Aida is of royal birth or that Amneris herself, the Princess Royal, is in love with him and, having noted the glances he has cast upon Aida, is fiercely jealous of her -- a jealousy that forms the mainspring of the story and leads to its tragic dénouement.

A premonition of the emotional forces at work in the plot is given in the "Vieni O diletti" (Come dearest friend), beginning as a duet between Amneris and Aida and later becoming a trio for them and Rhadames. In this the Princess feigns friendship for Aida, but, in asides, discloses her jealous hatred of her.

Meanwhile the Egyptian hosts have gathered before the temple. There the King announces that the priests of Isis have learned from the lips of that goddess the name of the warrior who is to lead the army -- Rhadames! It is the Princess herself who, at this great moment in his career, places the royal standard in his hands. But amid the acclaims that follow, as Rhadames, to the strains of march and chorus, is conducted by the priest to the temple of Phtah to be invested with the consecrated armour, Amneris notes the fiery look he casts upon Aida. Is this the reason Rhadames, young, handsome, brave, has failed to respond to her own guarded advances? Is she, a princess, to find a successful rival in her own slave?

Meanwhile Aida herself is torn by conflicting emotions. She loves Rhadames. When the multitude shouts "Return victorious!" she joins in the acclamation. Yet is it against

her own people he is going to give battle, and the Ethiopians are led by their king, Amonasro, her father. For she, too, is a princess, as proud a princess in her own land as Amneris, and it is because she is a captive and a slave that her father has so swiftly rallied his army and invaded Egypt in a desperate effort to rescue her, facts which for obvious reasons she carefully has concealed from her captors.

It is easy to imagine Aida's agonized feelings since Rhadames has been chosen head of the Egyptian army. If she prays to her gods for the triumph of the Ethiopian arms, she is betraying her lover. If she asks the gods of victory to smile upon Rhadames, she is a traitress to her father, who has taken up arms to free her, and to her own people. Small wonder if she exclaims, as she contemplates her own wretched state:

"Never on earth was heart torn by more cruel agonies. The sacred names of father, lover, I can neither utter nor remember. For the one -- for the other -- I would weep, I would pray!"

This scene for Aida, beginning "Ritorna vincitor" (Return victorious), in which she echoes the acclamation of the martial chorus immediately preceding, is one of the very fine passages of the score. The lines to which it is set also have been highly praised. They furnished the composer with opportunity, of which he made full use, to express conflicting emotions in music of dramatic force and, in its concluding passage, "Nume pietà" (Pity, kind heaven), of great beauty.

[Music excerpt]

Scene 2. Ramphis, the high priest, at the foot of the altar; priest and priestesses; and afterwards Rhadames are shown in the Temple of Vulcan at Memphis. A mysterious light descends from above. A long row of columns, one behind the other, is lost in the darkness; statues of various deities are visible; in the middle of the scene, above a platform rises the altar, surmounted by sacred emblems. From golden tripods comes the smoke of incense.

A chant of the priestesses, accompanied by harps, is heard from the interior. Rhadames enters unarmed. While he approaches the altar, the priestesses execute a sacred dance. On the head of Rhadames is placed a silver veil. He is invested with consecrated armor, while the priests and priestesses resume the religious chant and dance.

The entire scene is saturated with local colour. Piquant, exotic, it is as Egyptian to the ear as to the eye. You see the temple, you hear the music of its devotees, and that music sounds as distinctively Egyptian as if Mariette Bey had unearthed two examples of ancient Egyptian temple music and placed them at the composer's disposal. It is more likely, however, that the themes are original with Verdi and that the Oriental tone colour, which makes the music of the scene so fascinating, is due to his employment of certain intervals peculiar to the music of Eastern people. The interval, which, falling upon Western ears, gives an Oriental clang to the scale, consists of three semi-tones. In the very eastern sounding themes in the temple scenes in "Aida," these intervals are G to F-flat, and D to C-flat.

The sacred chant,

[Music excerpt]

twice employs the interval between D and C-flat, the first time descending, the second time ascending, in which latter it sounds more characteristic to us, because we regard the scale as having an upward tendency, whereas in Oriental systems the scale seems to have been regarded as tending downward.

In the sacred dance,

[Music excerpt]

the interval is from G to F-flat. The intervals, where employed in the two music examples just cited, are bracketed. The interval of three tones -- the characteristic of the Oriental scale -- could not be more clearly shown than it is under the second bracket of the sacred dance.

Act II. Scene I. In this scene, which take place in a hall in apartments of Amneris, the Princess adopts strategy to discover if Aida returns the passion which she suspects in Rhadames. Messengers have arrived from the front with news that Rhadames has put the Ethiopians to utter rout and is returning with many trophies and captives. Naturally Aida is distraught. Is her lover safe? Was her father slain? It is while Aida's mind and heart are agitated by these questions that Amneris chooses the moment to test her feelings and wrest from her secret she longs yet dreads to fathom. The Princess is reclining on a couch in her apartment in the palace at Thebes, whither the court has repaired to welcome the triumphant Egyptian army. Slaves are adorning her for the festival or agitating the air with large feather fans. Moorish slave boys dance for her delectation and her attendants sing:

*While on thy tresses rain,
Laurels and flowers interwoven,
Let songs of glory mingle
With strains of tender love.*

In the midst of these festive preparations Aida enters, and Amneris, craftily feigning sympathy for her lest she be grieving over the defeat of her people and the possible loss in battle of someone dear to her, affects to console her by telling her that Rhadames, the leader of the Egyptians, has been slain.

It is not necessary for the Princess to watch the girl intently order to note the effect upon of the sudden and cruelly contrived announcement. Almost as suddenly, having feasted her eyes on the slave girl's grief, the Princess exclaims: "I have deceived you; Rhadames lives!"

"He lives!" Tears of gratitude instead of despair now moisten Aida's eyes as she raises them to Heaven.

"You love him; you cannot deny it!" cries Amneris, forgetting in her furious jealousy her dignity as a Princess. "But know, you have a rival. Yes -- in me. You, my slave,

have a rival in your mistress, a daughter of the Pharaohs!"

Having fathomed her slave's secret, she vents the refined cruelty of her jealous nature upon the unfortunate girl by commanding her to be present at the approaching triumphant entry of Rhadames and the Egyptian army:

"Come, follow me, and you shall learn if you can contend with me -- you, prostrate in the dust, I on the throne beside the king!"

What has just been described is formulated by Verdi in a duet for Amneris and Aida, "Amore! gaudio otmento" (Oh, love! Oh, joy and sorrow), which expresses the craftiness and subtlety of the Egyptian Princess, the conflicting emotions of Aida, and the dramatic stress of the whole episode.

This phrase especially seems to express the combined haughtiness and jealousy in the attitude of Amneris toward Aida:

[Music excerpt]

Scene 2. Brilliant indeed is the spectacle to which Aida is compelled to proceed with the Princess. It is near a group of palms at the entrance to the city of Thebes that the King has elected to give Rhadames his triumph. Here stands the temple of Ammon. Beyond it a triumphal gate has been erected. When the King enters to the cheers of the multitude and followed by his gaudily clad court, he takes his seat on the throne surmounted by a purple canopy. To his left sits Amneris, singling out for her disdainful glances the most unhappy of her slaves.

A blast of trumpets, and the victorious army begins its defile past the throne. After the foot soldiers come the chariots of war; then the bearers of the sacred vases and statues of the gods, and a troupe of dancing girls carrying the loot of victory. A great flourish of trumpets, an outburst of acclaim, and Rhadames, proudly standing under a canopy borne high on the shoulders of twelve of his officers, is carried through the triumphal gate and into the presence of his King. As the young hero descends from the canopy, the monarch, too, comes down from the throne and embracing him exclaims:

"Savior of your country, I salute you. My daughter with her own hand shall place the crown of laurels upon your brow." And when Amneris, suiting her action to her father's words, crowns Rhadames, the King continues: "Now ask of me whatever you most desire. I swear by my crown and by the sacred gods that nothing shall be denied to you this day!"

But although no wish is nearer the heart of Rhadames than to obtain freedom for Aida, he does not consider the moment as yet opportune. Therefore he requests that first the prisoners of war be brought before the King. When they enter, one of them, by his proud mien and spirited carriage, easily stands forth from the rest. Hardly has Aida set eyes upon him than she utters the startled exclamation, "My father!"

It is indeed none other than Amonasro, the Ethiopian king, who, his identity unknown to the Egyptians, has been made captive by them. Swiftly gliding over to where Aida

stands, he whispers to her not to betray his rank to his captors. Then, turning to the Egyptian monarch, he craftily describes how he has seen the king of Ethiopia dead at his feet from many wounds, and concludes by entreating clemency for the conquered. Not only do the other captives and Aida join in his prayer, but the people, moved by his words and by his noble aspect, beg their king to spare the prisoners. The priests, however, protest. The gods have delivered these enemies into the hands of Egypt; let them be put to death lest, emboldened by a pardon so easily obtained, they should rush to arms again.

Meanwhile Rhadames has had eyes only for Aida, while Amneris notes with rising jealousy the glances he turns upon her hated slave. At last Rhadames, carried away by his feelings, himself joins in the appeal for clemency. "Oh, King," he exclaims, "by the sacred gods and by the splendour of your crown, you swore to grant my wish this day! Let it be life and liberty for the Ethiopian prisoners." But the high priest urges that even if freedom is granted to the others, Aida and her father be detained as hostages and this is agreed upon. Then the King, as a crowning act of glory for Rhadames, leads Amneris forth, and addressing the young warrior, says:

"Rhadames, the country owes everything to you. Your reward shall be the hand of Amneris. With her one day you shall reign over Egypt."

A great shout goes up from the multitude. Unexpectedly Amneris sees herself triumphant over her rival, the dream of her heart fulfilled, and Aida bereft of hope, since for Rhadames to refuse the hand of his king's daughter would mean treason and death. And so while all seemingly are rejoicing, two hearts are sad and bewildered. For Aida, the man she adores appears lost to her forever and all that is left to her, the tears of hopeless love; while to Rhadames the heart of Aida is worth more than the throne of Egypt, and its gift, with the hand of Amneris, is like the unjust vengeance of the gods descending upon his head.

This is the finale of the second act. It has been well said that not only is it the greatest effort of the composer, but also one of the grandest conceptions of modern musical and specifically operatic art. The importance of the staging, the magnificence of the spectacle, the diversity of characterization, and the strength of action of the drama all conspire to keep at an unusually high level the inspiration of the composer. The triumphal chorus, *Gloria all' Egitto* (Glory to Egypt), is sonorous and can be rendered with splendid effect.

It is preceded by a march.

[Music excerpt]

Then comes the chorus of triumph.

[Music excerpt]

Voices of women join in the acclaim.

[Music excerpt]

The trumpets of the Egyptian troops execute a most brilliant modulation from A-flat to B-natural.

The reference here is to the long, straight trumpets with three valves (only one of which, however, is used). These trumpets, in groups of three, precede the divisions of the Egyptian troops. The trumpets of the first group are tuned in A-flat.

[Music excerpt]

When the second group enters and intones the same stirring march theme in B-natural, the enharmonic modulation to a tone higher gives an immediate and vastly effective "lift" to the music and the scene.

[Music excerpt]

The entrance of Rhadames, borne on high under a canopy by twelve officers is a dramatic climax to the spectacle. But a more emotional one is to follow.

The recognition of King Amonasro by his daughter; the supplication of the captives; the plea of Rhadames and the people in their favour; the vehement protest of the priests who, in the name of the gods of Egypt, demand their death; the diverse passions which agitate Rhadames, Aida, and Amneris; the hope of vengeance that Amonasro cherishes- all these conflicting feelings are musically expressed with complete success. The structure is reared upon Amonasro's plea to the King for mercy for the Ethiopian captives, "Ma tu, re, tu signore possente" (But thou, O king, thou puissant lord).

[Music excerpt]

When the singer, who takes the role of Amonasro, also is a good actor, he will know how to convey, between the lines of this supplication, his secret thoughts and unavowed hope for the reconquest of his freedom and his country. After the Egyptian King has bestowed upon Rhadames the hand of Amneris, the chorus, "Gloria all' Egitto," is heard again, and, above its sonorous measures, Aida's cry:

*What hope now remains to me?
To him, glory and the throne;
To me, oblivion -- the tears
Of hopeless love*

It is largely due to Verdi's management of the score to this elaborate scene that "Aida" not only has superseded all spectacular operas that came before it, but has held its own against and survived practically all those that have come since. The others were merely spectacular. In "Aida" the surface radiates and glows because beneath it seethe the fires of conflicting human passion. In other operas spectacle is merely spectacle. In "Aida" it clothes in brilliant habiliments the forces of impeding and on-rushing tragedy.

Act III. That tragedy further advances toward its consummation in the present act.

It is a beautiful moonlight night on the banks of the Nile -- moonlight whose silvery rays are no more exquisite than the music that seems steeped in them.

[Music excerpt]

Half concealed in the foliage is the temple of Isis, from which issues the sound of women's voices softly chanting. A boat approaches the shore and out of it steps Amneris and the high priest, with a train of closely veiled women and several guards. The Princess is about to enter upon a vigil in the temple to implore the favour of the goddess before her nuptials with Rhadames.

For a while they have entered the temple, the shore seems deserted. But from the shadow of a grove of palms Aida cautiously emerges into the moonlight. In song she breathes forth memories of her native land. (Oh, patria mia! -- O cieli azzuri! (Oh, native land! -- Oh, skies of tender blue!).

[Music excerpt]

The phrase, O patria mia! Mai piu ti rivedro (Oh, native land! I ne'er shall see thee more) -- a little further on -- recalls the famous "Non ti scordar" from the "Miserere" in "Trovatore." Here Rhadames had bid Aida meet him. Is it for a last farewell? If so, the Nile shall be her grave. She hears a swift footfall, and turning, in expectation of seeing Rhadames, beholds her father. He has fathomed her secret and divined that she is here to meet Rhadames -- the betrothed of Amneris! Cunningly Amonasro works upon her feelings. Would she triumph over her rival? The Ethiopians again are in arms. Again Rhadames is to lead the Egyptians against them. Let her draw from him the path which he intends to take with his army and that path shall be converted into a fatal ambush.

At first the thought is abhorrent to Aida, but her father by craftily inciting her love of country and no less her jealousy and despair, at last is able to wrest consent from her; then draws back into the shadow as he hears Rhadames approaching.

This duet of Aida and Amonasro is and will remain one of the beautiful dramatic efforts of the Italian repertory. The situation is one of those in which Verdi delights; he is in his element.

It is difficult to bring Aida to make the designs of her father agree with her love for the young Egyptian chief. But the subtlety of the score, its warmth, its varied and ably managed expression, almost make plausible the submission of the young girl to the adjurations of Amonasro, and excusable a decision of which she does not foresee the consequences. To restore the crown to her father, to view again her own country, to escape an ignominious servitude, to prevent her lover becoming the husband of Amneris, her rival -- such are the thoughts which assail her during this duet, and they are quite capable of disturbing for a moment her better reason. Amonasro sings these phrases, so charming in the Italian:

*Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate,
Le fresche valli, i nostri templi d'or!
Sposa felice a lui che amasti tanto,*

Tripudii immensi ivi potrai gioir! . .

*(Thou shalt see again the balmy forests,
The green valleys, and our golden temples.
Happy bride of him thou lovest so much,
Great rejoicing thenceforth shall be thine.)*

As she still is reluctant to lure from her lover the secret of the route by which, in the newly planned invasion of her country, the Egyptians expect to enter Ethiopia, Amonasro changes his tactics and conjures up for her in music a vision of the carnage among her people, and finally invokes her mother's ghost, until, in *pianissimo*, dramatically contrasting with the force of her father's savage imprecation, she whispers, *O patria! quanto mi costi!* (Oh, native land! how much thou demandest of me!).

Amonasro leaves. Aida awaits her lover. When she somewhat coldly meets Rhadames's renewed declaration of love with the bitter protest that the rites of another love are awaiting him, he unfolds his plan to her. He will lead the Egyptians to victory and on returning with these fresh laurels, he will prostrate himself before the King, lay bare his heart to him, and ask for the hand of Aida as a reward for his services to his country. But Aida is well aware of the power of Amneris and that her vengeance would swiftly fall upon them both. She can see but one course to safety -- that Rhadames, join her in flight to her native land, where, amid forest groves and the scent of flowers, and all forgetful of the world, they will dream away their lives in love. This is the beginning of the dreamy yet impassioned love duet -- "Fuggiam gli adori nospiti" (Ah, fly with me). She implores him in passionate accents to escape with her. Enthralled by the rapture in her voice, thrilled by the vision of happiness she conjures up before him, he forgets for the moment country, duty, all else save love; and exclaiming, "Love shall be our guide!" turns to fly with her.

This duet, charged with exotic rapture, opens with recitativo phrases for Aida. I have selected three passages for quotation: "La tra foreste vergini" (There 'mid the virgin forest groves); "Di fiori profumate" (And 'mid the scent of flowers); and "In estasi la terra scorderem" (In ecstasy the world forgotten).

[Music excerpt]

But Aida, feigning alarm, asks:

"By what road shall we avoid the Egyptian host?"

"The path by which our troops plan to fall upon the enemy will be deserted until tomorrow."

"And that path?"

"The pass of Napata."

A voice echoes his words, "The pass of Napata."

"Who hears us?" exclaims Rhadames.

"The father of Aida and king of the Ethiopians," and Amonasro issues forth from his hiding place. He has uncovered the plan of the Egyptian invasion, but the delay has been fatal. For at the same moment there is a cry of "Traitor!" from the temple.

It is the voice of Amneris, who with the high priest has overheard all. Amonasro, baring a dagger, would throw himself upon his daughter's rival, but Rhadames places himself between them and bids the Ethiopian fly with Aida. Amonasro, drawing his daughter away with him, disappears in the darkness; while Rhadames, with the words, "Priest I remain with you," delivers himself a prisoner into his hands.

Act IV. Scene I. In a hall of the Royal Palace Amneris awaits the passage, under guard, of Rhadames to the dungeon where the priests are to sit in judgment upon him. There is a duet between Rhadames and this woman, who now bitterly repents the doom her jealousy is about to bring upon the man she loves. She implores him to exculpate himself. But Rhadames refuses. Not being able to possess Aida he will die.

He is conducted to the dungeon, from where, as from the bowels of the earth, she hears the sombre voices of the priests.

Ramfis: (Nel sotterraneo.) Radames -- Radames: tu rivelasti

Della patri I segreti allo straniero. . .

Sacer: Discolpati!

Ramfis: Egli tace.

Tutti: Traditor!

Ramphis: (In the subterranean hall) Rhadames, Rhadames, thou didst reveal

The country's secrets to the foreigner. . . .

Priest: Defend thyself!

Ramphis: He is silent.

All: Traitor!

The dramatically condemnatory "Traditor!" is a death knell for her lover in the ears of Amneris. And after each accusation, silence by Rhadames, and cry by the priests of "Traitor!" Amneris realizes only too well that his approaching doom is to be entombed alive! Her revulsions of feeling from hatred to love and despair find vent in highly dramatic musical phrases. In fact Amneris dominates this scene, which is one of the most powerful passages for mezzo-soprano in all opera.

Scene 2. This is the famous double scene. The stage setting is divided into two floors. The upper floor represents the interior of the Temple of Vulcan, resplendent with light and gold; the lower floor a subterranean hall and long rows of arcades which are lost in the darkness. A colossal statue of Osiris, with the hands crossed, sustains the pilasters of the vault.

In the temple Amneris and the priestesses kneel in prayer. And Rhadames? Immured in the dungeon and, as he thought, to perish alone, a form slowly takes shape in the darkness, and his own name, uttered by the tender accents of a familiar voice, falls upon his ear. It is Aida. Anticipating the death to which he will be sentenced, she has

secretly made her way into the dungeon before his trial and there hidden herself to find reunion with him in death. And so, while in the temple above them the unhappy Amneris kneels and implores the gods to vouchsafe Heaven to him whose death she has compassed, Rhadames and Aida, blissful in their mutual sacrifice, await the end.

From "Celeste Aida," Rhadames's apostrophe to his beloved, with which the opera opens, to "O, terra, addio, valle di pianti!" (Oh, earth, farewell! Farewell, vale of tears!),

[Music excerpt]

which is the swan song of Rhadames and Aida, united in death in the stone-sealed vault, -- such is the tragic fate of love, as set forth in this beautiful and eloquent score by Giuseppe Verdi.