

AIDA

Program notes by Eugene H. Cropsey

Giuseppe Verdi composed *Aida* in 1870 while in the depths of a decade-long personal crisis. He was troubled by a slump in the European economy that was putting opera houses into financial ruin, and he was further unsettled over the influence Wagner was having on musical tastes. In addition, his lengthy involvement with a female singer was causing untold problems in his marriage.

Following the premiere of *Don Carlos* for the Paris Opera in 1867, Verdi considered himself retired. Writing operas to be premiered in Paris had garnered enormous rewards. But he grew tired of dealing with the unreasonable people who ran French opera houses and decided to settle back as a gentleman farmer on his estate at Sant'Agata. In 1869, his Parisian friend and librettist, Camille DuLocle, asked him to compose a hymn for the opening of the new Cairo Opera House. He refused, saying that he did not compose *pieces de circonstance*. Because of the success of *Don Carlos*, DuLocle tried to interest Verdi in writing another opera for Paris audiences. Again he refused, because of "not being able to have my work performed in Paris the way I want it."

In the same year, at the request of Viceroy of Egypt, DuLocle asked Verdi to compose a new opera based on a scenario by French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette. During his excavations, Mariette became fascinated with the idea of live burials in ancient Egypt. Only a great crime, like treason, committed by an exalted leader would call for such a severe punishment. It would win our sympathy only if it were brought about through love. Even though Verdi sensed the musical and dramatic possibilities of this scenario, he balked at first. But he eventually agreed and came out of retirement when DuLocle secured for him one of the largest commissions that had ever been paid to a composer up to that time. Later, Verdi claimed *Aida* to be the favorite of all his operas because it brought him the most money: 150,000 francs or about 20,000 dollars.

Antonio Ghislanzoni is generally credited with writing the libretto in Italian after a French prose version by DuLocle based on Mariette's scenario. But Verdi himself did the final extensive revision.

Aida is Verdi's most musically and dramatically exciting opera. He understood that ancient Egypt called for plenty of pageantry, great rousing choruses, crowds of people and exotic dances to enhance the oriental effect. With *Aida*, he further retrenched his art, as he had begun to do in *La forza del destino* and *Don Carlos*. Gone were the numbers written to exhibit the pyrotechnic skills of the singers in florid runs and trills as found in his earlier so-called "galley slave" operas. Instead, he wrote music that was always appropriate to the drama, yet melodious and beautiful. His orchestrations were richer and more colorful than in his early operas. *Aida* is considered the most classical opera Verdi had written to that point. It was composed predominantly in four-four time, giving it a certain solidness that suited the Egyptian architecture. Although no one knows what ancient Egyptian music sounded like, he invented a convincing Egyptian sound of his own. Some critics accused Verdi, unjustly, of being Wagnerian. Although he admitted being influenced to a small degree by Wagner, he never failed to remain true to the Italian tradition.

Contrary to legend, *Aida* was not composed to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal, which occurred in the early months of 1870, nor was it performed at the opening of the new Cairo Opera House on Nov. 1, 1869. *Rigoletto* held that honor. The premiere of *Aida* was originally scheduled for early January 1871. But the Franco-Prussian War caused a postponement for nearly a year. All the costumes and sets had been made in Paris, which was now under siege. They remained in a warehouse of the Paris Opera until the end of the year. The premiere of *Aida*

was finally performed on Dec.24, 1871, but without its distinguished original cast members or composer, all of whom now had other engagements.

Aida had its Italian premiere at La Scala in Milan on Feb.8, 1872. Its United States premiere was given on Nov. 26,1873, at the New York Academy of Music. The Metropolitan Opera first performed it on Nov. 12, 1886.