Cambridge Opera Journal, **14,** 1 & 2, 149–159 © 2002 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0954586702000101

Verdi's Egyptian spectacle: On the colonial subject of *Aida*

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In June 1867 Ismail Pasha, the new Viceroy of Egypt, arrived in Paris to represent his country at the *Exposition universelle*. The Egyptian pavilion, erected on a large corner of the Champs de Mars, featured a marvellous collection of architectural spaces that included a pharaoh's temple, a mediæval palace 'richly decorated in the Arabic style', and a modern-day bazaar showing all manner of merchants and artisans at work. If the temple, designed by the French archaeologist Auguste Mariette, was intended to display artefacts from the most remote corners of Egypt's history, other spaces transported spectators directly to the present, offering what one French commentator called 'a living Egypt, a picturesque Egypt, the Egypt of Ismail Pasha'.[1] An enormous panorama of the Isthmus of Suez, created by the Suez Canal Company with the help of M. Rubé, set designer from the Opéra, drew long queues of paying customers. Elsewhere visitors could gaze at authentic Egyptian peasants, or Bedouins on white dromedaries, all the races governed by the Viceroy 'personified by individuals selected with care', as the critic Edmond About put it.[2] Most dazzling of all was the exhibit within the refabricated royal palace, where the Viceroy himself was the featured attraction: poised on a divan in a bedroom painted to look exactly like the place of his birth, he smoked a hookah and daily received guests from the best Parisian society. The whole sumptuous spectacle, About would conclude, 'spoke to the eyes as well as to the mind. It expressed a political idea'.

Theatre and politics thus neatly converged at the exhibition space on the Champs de Mars and the Viceroy walked away a winner. Indeed, his lavish spectacle of Egypt, with its carefully selected cast, panoramic sets, museum-quality props and colourful costumes garnered no less than three gold medals, including best-in-show. And yet the glittering surface of this award-winning work, as About was quick to point out, also carried a deeper message, a 'political idea'. The idea was that of Egypt itself, represented now, for the first time, as a major player on the modern world stage. This same idea – that of a 'real' Egypt – certainly lay behind the Viceroy's next major theatrical project, the grand spectacle of Verdi's *Aida*, commissioned two years later, again with the help of his faithful archaeologist Mariette and countless workers from the Paris Opéra. This new representation of Egypt in *Aida* – the grandest of all grand operas – was no doubt also designed to 'speak to the eyes as well as to the mind', and yet the political idea it managed to express has never been entirely clear. It is the dual question of the Egyptian subject, and what Verdi made of it in *Aida*, that I shall explore in this essay.

[1] Georges Douin, *L'Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl*, vol. II, *L'Apogée, 1867–1873* (Rome, 1934), 5.
[2] Edmond About, *Le Fellah* (Paris, 1870), cited in Douin, 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586702000101 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I am of course not the first to broach what Michael Rose has called Verdi's 'Egyptian business'.[3] More than a decade ago, Edward Said raised a similar question in an effort to deal with his own deeply mixed feelings about *Aida* and to explain where he felt the composer had gone wrong. Ultimately, it was the arcane subject matter that led Verdi astray, Said suggests, causing him to produce a 'hybrid, radically impure work', full of 'anomalies . . . restrictions and silences'.[4] The eccentric place that *Aida* occupies in Verdi's career must be seen, according to Said, as an 'embarrassment' that discloses the true problem: the work is finally not '*about* but *of* imperial domination'.[5] Somewhat predictably, the dominating figure in Said's reading turns out to be Verdi himself, who, faced with a drama based on a non-European other, sees his way to controlling every aspect of the work's production. In this way, as Said concludes, 'an imperial notion of the artist . . . dovetails conveniently with an imperial notion of the non-European world'.[6] For him, the problem with *Aida* is that it is *too* monumental: the Egyptian subject has turned composer into empire builder.

It is easy enough to object to such arguments – as Paul Robinson did already several years ago when he raised the question of whether we should consider *Aida* an 'Orientalist opera' at all.[7] Robinson's most pointed challenge to Said poses an 'embarrassment' of a second order: for if the plot of the opera can indeed be said to represent an 'imperialist situation', it is, as Robinson suggests, one 'in which Egypt itself plays the role of aggressor'. Oppressed and oppressor turn black and white; and Egypt at once becomes the 'white' European, ruthlessly dominating its black Ethiopian neighbours.[8] To the extent that Verdi's sympathies would appear to lie with the underdog, the opposition is easily translatable into Italian terms; and so the 'ideological universe on display in *Aida*', in Robinson's view, becomes just another allegory of Risorgimento politics, in which Egypt plays the not-so-exotic role of Austrian oppressor.

The principal problem with both readings is that they insist on seeing the Egyptian plot, and its potential political meanings, exclusively in terms of what Verdi himself might have intended. But a spectacle as grand as *Aida*, which depended on so many players, from the Egyptian Viceroy down to the last supernumerary, would seem to belie the primacy of a single authorial intention. What would happen to our view of the opera if we were to begin not with the composer, but with the spectacle itself? I'd like do just that, to shift the focus momentarily away from the composer and his music, in order to look at the work superficially – *as* a particular staging of Egypt. I should like, in other words, to consider the part of the drama 'that speaks to the eyes', in order to speculate about the other sorts of political ideas that it might have conveyed to the minds of its first

[3] Michael Rose, 'Verdi's ''Egyptian Business'' ', in *Aida: Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Nicholas John, English National Opera Guide (London, 1980), 7–15.
[4] Said, 'The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*', in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), 114.
[5] Said, 114.
[6] Said, 116.
[7] Paul Robinson, 'Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?' *this journal*, 5 (1993), 133–40.
[8] Robinson, 135.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586702000101 Published online by Cambridge University Press

audiences. After that, I shall turn back to Verdi, to consider how the musical realization of one scene in Act III stages another sort of conflict, one that sheds a curious light on his Egyptian subject.

Opera and the new order

The idea of spectacle is one of the key concepts motivating Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt*, a study of the new Egyptian political order of the nineteenth century.[9] Mitchell argues that the transformation of Egypt in the colonial period must be viewed not simply as a story of imperial domination but in terms of the success of new strategies of representation, a staging of power that produced, among its most important effects, the appearance of order. The creation of a modern army in the 1840s, under Ismail's grandfather Mohammed Ali, was the first important manifestation of this new mechanism of power – whose novel disciplinary methods were in fact referred to in Arabic as *nizam jadid*, or the 'new order'. Later, with the 'Haussmannization' of Cairo under Ismail – as with the rebuilding of Egyptian villages and schools – such order became visible, represented in the wide boulevards, formal gardens and monumental public buildings that reorganized a formerly haphazard landscape with geometric precision. The Cairo opera house occupied a central position within this display, situated as it was along an axis that divided the new city from the old. In Mitchell's account, it is precisely this neat arrangement that serves to reflect a new moral or social order, creating a kind of disciplinary spectacle in which power, as he would have it, appears not as an arbitrary process but as 'order itself'.

Ismail's most famous operatic commission appears to have played a significant part in this orderly spectacle, reproducing inside the theatre a vision of the new order that increasingly defined the state of things outside. For the grandeur of *Aida* relied on a similarly grand precision, on the brilliant symmetries of the sets, as in the tomb scene, whose spectacularly split stage was, like Cairo's formal gardens, the product of French engineering. But even more compelling was the vision of the orderly masses that inhabited those sets, the choruses of priests and soldiers, of conquering and conquered, whose every move was to be executed, as we learn from the *disposizione scenica*, with 'severe discipline'. Standing in formation before the spectator, the most impressive move made by these performers was not to move at all, their 'perfect immobility' ensuring that 'the picture before the audience' would not be broken.[10] For audiences in 1871 this perfect picture of military discipline corresponded to a real, not imaginary, vision of the Egyptian state under Ismail: for among his more impressive accomplishments after coming to power in 1863 was

[9] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991).

[10] One fairly typical (if fervent) injunction runs: 'The stage director and the chorus master (I repeat this again) should use all their authority to obtain this perfect immobility, exercising severe discipline and explaining the aesthetic demands of the scene. Even the slightest movement would break the whole mood of the picture before the audience: the smallest distraction would destroy the entire illusion created by this phase of the drama'. Hans Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida': The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents* (Minneapolis, 1978), 614.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586702000101 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the monumental rebuilding of the army, increasing troop strength from 18,000 to 65,000 in less than a decade's time.[11] Once again, the boundary between theatre and politics was conveniently blurred.

Alongside immobile armies, however, the protagonists in *Aida* played their own part in representing a new political order of Egypt – indeed, in portraying the somewhat novel idea of 'politics' itself, which, as Mitchell also makes clear, began to appear for the first time in Egyptian writings just about a decade before *Aida*. One concept in particular, throws up intriguing possibilities in this context: Mitchell's account of the term *siyasa* (which means 'government', or, more basically, 'politics'), especially in terms of its relevance for our understanding of the opera's somewhat unyielding plot.

As it came to be redefined in official publications around 1860, the modern Egyptian notion of 'politics' – analogous but not equivalent to the European – expanded upon a prior concept of *siyasa*, to comprehend five distinct categories. In addition to its application to the 'prophetic' and 'monarchic' forms of government, which together constituted the older senses of *siyasa*, the term acquired two more modern meanings, the sense of 'public' and 'private' government. 'Public *siyasa*', was defined as ' "the leading of groups" (such as the leadership of princes over . . . armies)'. 'Private siyasa' embraced both 'the siyasa of the house', and, finally 'the *siyasa* of the self', or self-discipline: as described by one Egyptian writer, 'an individual's inspection of his actions, circumstances, words, character, and desires, and his control of them with the reins of his reason'.[12]

This composite conception of political thought and action revealingly brings into focus the dramatic condition of the figure Fabrizio Della Seta has called 'the most criticized character of the opera', the not-so-heroic lead Radames.[13] Indeed, Mitchell's explanation of the new politics may be just what we need to refine our understanding of his character, allowing us to see Radames less as a clueless tenor than as a kind of model citizen, a true 'Egyptian subject', who embraces all five categories of Egyptian government. Blessed by priests and chosen by the king, he is visibly linked to the values of ancient Egypt and the authority of its dynasties and its gods. And yet as a remarkably adept soldier he also fulfils a more public – and more modern – responsibility: a 'leader of armies', he is often to be seen on stage standing before a large and disciplined crowd.

In all but one crucial scene, that is. In Act III the soldier's authority is finally challenged: he confronts, in fact, the central *dis*order of the drama, first in the deliberately 'natural' setting at the Nile (whose most striking feature, it might be said, is its human scale, not to mention an absence of the right angles that dominated the previous scenes). Radames confronts this disorder more directly, of course, in facing the character that in many ways represents his foil: not Aida but her father Amonasro, a totally unreconstructed monarch belonging to the 'old'

[11] Juan R. I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabu' Movement* (Princeton, 1993).
[12] Mitchell, 103–4.
[13] Fabrizio Della Seta, ' "O cieli azzurri": Exoticism and Dramatic Discourse in *Aida*', *this journal*, 3 (1991), 49–62.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586702000101 Published online by Cambridge University Press

order – one who in his rage abuses his own daughter and tries to stab the princess Amneris. It is finally in this scene that we see Radames shouldering the full extent of his modern 'political' responsibility, forced to enact, so to speak, the 'private *siyasa*' through which he is no longer a leader of armies, but a leader of himself. The moment of truth comes, of course, at the end of the duet with Aida, when he succumbs to temptation and agrees to flee. We all know what happens: he reveals the military secret, is overheard by the Egyptian princess, and, in that one false move, has turned from *vincitor* into *traditor*.

What is most striking about this outcome, however, is its final turn; Radames gets the last word. Turning to Ramfis, he exclaims, 'Sacerdote, io resto a te' [I yield to you]. From the perspective of the audience at the Cairo première, these concluding words might have sounded as the completion of Radames's modern political responsibility, revealing the self-discipline by which 'inspecting his actions' he decides his own fate. Seen as a visual spectacle of modern Egypt, then, the drama would offer a predictable, political lesson of the new order. 'There's no turning back', it seems to say; and, heard from within an opera house whose façade looked strategically to the new city of Cairo, with the 'old city' conveniently at its back, such a lesson may have been more literal than we can possibly imagine. Accepting the moral consequences, Radames becomes a perfect representation of the colonial subject.

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Of course, armed with little or no knowledge of modern Egypt, Verdi is unlikely to have formulated any such view of the opera's leading Egyptian male. And yet the music that he fashioned for this scene of Radames's undoing – a duet whose conventional ending has been as much criticized as the character of Radames himself – could be said to respond, in a unique way, to his 'colonial' condition. In the remainder of this essay, I shall examine the contours of this crucial scene – the duet between Aida and Radames in Act III – in order to speculate about the meaning of its music, especially the much maligned cabaletta, which, as we shall see, offers a very different sort of perspective on the problem of 'order' in this drama.

Staging conventions

Let me begin just a bit before the beginning, with the pathetic coda that completes the duet between Aida and her father. An unforgivable outburst of paternal rage has caused Aida to utter a wrenching lament, whose sobbing melody is forged, like her destiny, by the same instruments (lower strings and bassoon) that accompanied her father's most manipulative moments of abuse in the previous scene. As if to underscore the sense of oppression, this darkly voiced ensemble now leads Aida in singing a melody that recalls, in the minor mode, the powerful and righteous music sung by the priests (those other oppressors) in the victory scene of Act II. The sheer pathos projected by the scoring certainly makes this slow monologue, as

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Pierluigi Petrobelli has commented, 'one of the most moving moments in Verdi's music' (see Ex. 1).[14]

Needless to say, Radames's unwitting entrance as heroic lover, after this arresting spectacle of grief, is doomed. Indeed, it brings about the dramatic irony that we, in the audience, have been awaiting ever since the beginning of the act, when Amonasro first interrupted Aida's bittersweet dream of home in 'O patria mia'. But it is the tone of the lover's entrance that now clinches the irony. Following Aida's heavy and desperate plea for forgiveness, the buoyant triplets of his 'Pur ti riveggo, mia dolce Aida' (squeaky clean in C major) are ridiculous; in fact, he sounds like a character who has wandered in from the wrong show (Ex. 2).

It is in the opening moment of their duet, in other words, that we experience most jarringly the conflict between the 'public' sphere that Radames represents, and the 'other' sphere of disorder that will bring his downfall. In many ways, the inappropriateness of this entrance, designed to evoke Radames's already established military virtue, prefigures the equally awkward music at the end of the duet, not so much in the reprise of this jaunty tune as in the misguided cabaletta that Radames sings just before it, 'Sì: fuggiam da queste mura'. How are we to take this graceless musical gesture? How, in other words, might it be seen to serve in Verdi's particular representation of Egypt? In pursuing these questions I shall consider not only how the cabaletta fails (spectacularly) as drama, but also, and more importantly, why that failure, in the context of *Aida*'s colonial subject, is so interesting.

Philip Gossett long ago exposed the dramatic sensibility that governed Verdi's music for the Aida–Radames duet, through the letters exchanged between Verdi and Ghislanzoni in September and October of 1870.[15] The correspondence reveals a creative tussle between Verdi and his librettist over the appropriateness of certain conventional forms – especially that of the closing cabaletta – for every scene of the opera. In one exchange Verdi affectionately chided Ghislanzoni for his apparent fear of 'not making cabalettas', especially in the Act III duets, where he found their presence awkward and intrusive: 'I remain of the opinion that cabalettas must be used when the situation demands them. Those of the two duets are not demanded by the situation'.[16]

Yet in the scene between Aida and Radames, the librettist seems to have had his way. If in the previous duet between Aida and her father Verdi had made it clear to Ghislanzoni that 'Aida is in such a state of fear and moral depression that she cannot and must not sing a cabaletta',[17] in composing the next duet he acquiesced, accepting the consequences of the more conventional form. Writing to Ghislanzoni in October he did admit that the verses for the second duet were 'greatly inferior to the other . . . perhaps [because of] the form', yet he decided to work with them

[14] Petrobelli, 'Music in the Theatre (Apropos of *Aida*, Act III)', in *Music in the Theatre: Essays on Verdi and Other Composers* (Princeton, 1994), 113–26.
[15] Gossett, 'Verdi, Ghislanzoni, and *Aida*: The Uses of Convention', *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1974), 291–334.
[16] Letter of 28 September 1870; quoted in Gossett, 324.
[17] Letter of 28 September 1870; Gossett, 324.

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Ex. 1: Act III – Duet, Aida-Amonasro (coda).

anyway, and told Ghislanzoni to go ahead and write more verses, 'since', as he put it, 'we have entered the path of cantabiles and cabalettas'.[18]

It is this inexorable path of convention that interests me. Gossett argues that the cabaletta's theme is in fact entirely conventional, 'in the mold typical of early Verdi',

[18] Letter of 16 October 1870; Gossett, 326.

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Ex. 2: Duet, Aida-Radames (entrance of Radames).

as he puts it, and the critics were none too pleased with this regressive turn.[19] But Verdi himself is hard to read on this subject. Did he simply follow the path of least resistance, hoping to stay on good terms with his librettist, or was there, perhaps, something in the dramatic situation that might have called for the cabaletta at this point?

[19] He cites, for example, the Milanese critic Filippo Filippi who claimed that 'the cabaletta is of that genre no longer adapted to the tastes of the public' (Annibale Alberti, *Verdi intimo: Carteggio di Giuseppe Verdi con il Conte Opprandino Arrivabene (1861–1886)* [Verona, 1931], 145n.; cited in Gossett, 327).

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No one can deny that the sound of Radames's opening statement of the cabaletta has a queer effect after the complicated bait-and-switch routine that Aida has performed immediately following her affecting and apparently sincere cantabile, 'Fuggiam gli ardori inospiti'. From those promised virgin forests, where she has led Radames treacherously into her own dark world of flat keys, she turns on him to announce, manipulatively, 'You don't love me. Go back to Amneris!' Recoiling at the thought, he refuses, his 'Giammai!' [Never!] paralleling Aida's own horrified response, in the previous duet with her father, at Amonasro's suggestion that she should be the one to squeeze Radames for the military secret.

It is at this same moment that Aida now tightens her grip, telling Radames that his refusal will only lead to her death. No longer on stable ground, he doubles back again, his next move almost prepared for him, as he announces his resolve to flee – crudely, impetuously – in the form of that silly cabaletta.

Aida willingly follows suit, doing the conventional thing and taking her turn in the next verse, as if to confirm his sense of resolve. Yet if for Radames this boisterous melody is (as we are to believe) totally – and fatally – sincere, for Aida it is, so to speak, merely a 'strain', as canned as everything else she has uttered in this encounter, where she sings not so much to her lover as to her father, hidden on stage.

It is precisely this bad-faith audience that gives the cabaletta its queer status, the condition that makes it, as Joseph Kerman put it, 'sit strangely in [the] scene'.[20] For Verdi has, in effect, staged Radames's fall *as* a convention, forcing the tenor to go through the motions of an emotion that appears all the more inappropriate because it is not so much listened to as overheard – by Aida, by the barely concealed King, and, quite possibly by Amneris herself. (In the original scenario, incidentally, Amneris becomes the supreme figure of surveillance, arriving after all three protagonists have fled to tell us that she has 'heard it all'.[21]) Staging 'Sì: fuggiam' in this way – as a convention to be monitored rather than enjoyed – ensures its dramatic failure, for neither the on-stage listeners (nor those in the opera house, evidently) can take it seriously.

Following the 'path of the cabaletta', like the gorges of Napata, turns out to be Radames's fatal mistake. By turning the conventional cabaletta into *Radames*'s failure, Verdi not only renders it 'foreign' to the scene (like Radames himself), he has also, paradoxically, created the situation that – as he stipulated to Ghislanzoni – would call for the cabaletta as a 'dramatic necessity'.[22] He has made a drama out of its 'foreignness', in other words, a drama that serves to underscore the compromised political position that Radames represents at the level of the plot. The cabaletta conveys, through its musical failure, a sense of 'no exit', showing us the radical impossibility of '*fuggire*': this is indeed the 'wrong way out', and we all know it. And yet this musical reading also shifts the ideological content of the opera's message. In Verdi's treatment, Radames's fall reflects not so much the virtue of

[20] Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988 [rev. edn.]), 125.
[21] The scenario, by Camille Du Locle, is reproduced as 'Document III' in Busch (see n. 10), 448–71, here 470.
[22] Letter of 28 September 1870; Gossett, 324.

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Ex. 3: Duet, Aida-Radames (cabaletta).

RAD:	Ah no! Fuggiamo!	Ah no! Let us flee!
	Sì: fuggiam da queste mura,	Yes, let us flee from these walls;
	Al deserto insiem fuggiamo;	let us flee to the desert together
	Qui sol regna la sventura,	here only misfortune reigns;
	Là si schiude un ciel d'amor.	there a heaven of love awaits us.
	I deserti interminati	The boundless deserts
	A noi talamo saranno,	will be the bridal couch,
	Su noi gli astri brilleranno	above us the stars will shine
	Di più limpido fulgor.	with a clearer radiance.
AIDA:	Nella terra avventurata	In the blessed land of my fathers
	De' miei padri, il ciel ne attende;	a heaven awaits us;
	Ivi l'aura è imbalsamata,	there the air is perfumed,
	Ivi il suolo è aromi e fior.	the soil is fragrant with flowers.
	Fresche valli e verdi prati	Cool valleys and green meadows
	A noi talamo saranno,	will be our bridal couch
	Su noi gli astri brilleranno	above us the stars will shine
	Di più limpido fulgor.	with a clearer radiance.

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his colonial subject, as the *verismo* of its staging; it was a question not of the new order of Egypt, but of the operatic spectacle itself: the new order of realistic representation. That there was no turning back from this new order Verdi realized, although with a keen sense of irony. Like the Viceroy, perhaps, who sat in a fake palace in order to make Egypt 'real' in the eyes of the world, Verdi knew that such realism carried a price. 'Ah, progress, science, realism', he laments ten years later, in revising *Simon Boccanegra*. 'Be a realist as much as you please, but . . . we are realists by design, by calculation'.[23]

[23] *Verdi, the Man in His Letters*, ed. Franz Werfel and Paul Stefan, trans. Edward Downes (New York, 1942), 360–1; cited in Kerman, 125–6.

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