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Beyond the exotic: How 'Eastern' is *Aida*?

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Abstract: Various commentators on *Aida* express disappointment that the music for the opera's main characters is not more distinctive, i.e., does not make much use of the exotic styles that mark the work's ceremonial scenes and ballets. Others argue that exotic style is mostly confined to female, hence powerless, characters. Much of this commentary draws on the same limited selection of data and observations: the exotic style of those few numbers, the opera's plot, and the circumstances of the work's commissioning (by the Khedive of Egypt).

The present study aims to broaden the discussion. Most unusually, it dwells on various aspects of words and music that are not in themselves 'markers' of exoticism or Orientalism but that nonetheless here manifestly announce traits of this or that character (or group) and thereby communicate indelible impressions of what Egyptians and Ethiopians supposedly 'are like' (or were like in an earlier era). For example, the music of the priests is mostly *not*, as commentators regularly claim, marked by imitative counterpoint; rather, it engages in *several* distinct archaicising tendencies, some of which characterise the priestly caste (and hence the Egyptian government) as rigid and menacing.

In addition, this study calls on such varied evidence (rarely if ever examined in this regard) as costume designs, directions in the *disposizione scenica* for the opera's first Italian production, relevant remarks by Verdi and early commentators (including two Egyptians writing in 1901 and a late interview with Verdi about European imperialism), some early sound recordings, and Western fears/knowledge of the Wahhabist strain of Islam then expanding across the Middle East. While such a multifaceted exploration certainly cannot be definitive, it can point to new possibilities for exploration.

As opera lovers know, Verdi's *Aida* invokes an imagined ancient Egypt in its ballet numbers, incantations by priests and priestesses, and in the atmospheric opening of Act III (set by the banks of the Nile at night). At the first performances (Cairo, 1871), Filippo Filippi reported 'an "Oh!" of admiration' and a 'cry of astonishment from the audience' at these various scenes of local and historical colour:

> And the music was not the least part of it, what with its hieratic colour and with the Oriental hues of the dances, whose rhythmic motives are still heard today here [in Egypt] in the traditional manner, hummed by the natives.[1]

Almost every commentator on the opera has followed Filippi's lead in linking specific musical traits with the Egyptian elements of the plot, and it is just as easy to identify 'Ethiopia' with descending minor-mode tunes (or oscillating major-minor mode tunes), especially when they are introduced or doubled on the oboe.[2]

Ideas in this paper were first presented at the meeting of the International Musicological Society in Leuven, Belgium (August 2002). I have received insightful suggestions or timely aid from Jonathan Bellman, Philip Carli, Martin Chusid, Alice Contarini, Thomas Donnan, Gabriele Dotto, Roger Freitas, Andreas Giger, Helen Greenwald, Rob Haskins, Karen Henson, Steven Huebner, Francesco Izzo, James Parakilas, Michael Pisani, Andrew Porter, Jürgen Thym, Michael Walter and two anonymous reviewers.

[1] Filippo Filippi, reviews in *La perseveranza*, dated 14 and 13 January 1872 (respectively), in Knud Arne Jürgensen, *The Verdi Ballets* (Parma, 1995), 304, 303.

[2] See Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols., rev. edn (New York, 1992), III: 203, 206, 209, 211, 236; Fabrizio Della Seta, ' "O cieli azzurri": Exoticism and Dramatic Discourse in *Aida*', *this journal*, 3 (1991), 49–62.

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But does the opera as a whole express or reflect attitudes (admiring, idealised, deploring, anxious . . .) towards Egyptians or Ethiopians, whether ancient or modern? Can these attitudes be understood as sustained throughout the opera, rather than confined to those few, scene-setting moments, with their odd scales and other devices for indicating Otherness? This question prompts another that at first sounds quite distinct: how does *Aida* portray the advantages, challenges, morality and price of imperial Egypt's rule over Ethiopia? The two questions are related by the fact that to establish and maintain an empire often entails a systematic Othering of a whole distant (or sometimes neighbouring) people, turning them into a category of not-Us, and thereby into objects to be dehumanised, possessed and used for Our own purposes, when not simply raped and mass-murdered on the spot.

Julian Budden has linked the two considerations, though in a wording that proves problematic. He notes regretfully that, for audiences and critics in recent decades, *Aida* has 'turned . . . just a little sour' because of its acceptance of Egypt's oppressive authority, and he asserts that the work is, quite to the contrary, marked by a 'complete absence of racialist and fascist overtones'. By recasting imperialism as fascism and denying its presence here, Budden seems concerned to neutralise political critique of the work. But the chosen word backfires: *Aida* can hardly be called 'fascist' in any meaningful sense (except perhaps for its specific uses under Mussolini) – that is, unless one defines fascism broadly enough to include imperial rule as it has been practised over millennia. Furthermore, by raising and immediately dismissing both issues – ethnic stereotyping and abusive state power – Budden gives the impression that those who denigrate the opera grasp at straws, so that only a 'complete absence' of criticism of the two national groups or of Egypt's war machine could allay their suspicions. But since *Aida*'s place in Western culture and in critical discourse is secure, thanks in large part to Budden and other devoted Verdians, we should be free to explore the work's messages without fearing that we will be heard as devaluing the opera, nor as suggesting that it should be censured or, even worse, censored.[3] I shall propose that, far from a simple reflection of late nineteenth-century colonialist prejudices, *Aida* is a stirring disavowal of imperial pursuits and the stereotyping of cultural Others (even while it re-engages certain of those same deeply rooted stereotypes).

Much of the commentary on *Aida*'s 'orientalism' has drawn on the same limited selection of data and observations: the plot, the exotic style of specific numbers and the circumstances of the work's commission (by the Khedive of Egypt).[4] The

[3] On the ethical questions raised by musical works, see my 'Musicology and/as Social Concern: Imagining the Relevant Musicologist', in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford, 1999), 499–530, here 499.

[4] A bare-bones bibliography might include (in addition to Budden and Della Seta, cited above) Massimo Mila, 'A Difficult Opera', and Mercedes Viale-Ferrero, 'Scenery and Costumes for *Aida*: Cairo (1871) Milan (1872)', in *Aida in Cairo: The Birth of an Opera by a Famous Italian Composer*, ed. Mario Codignola and Riccardo de Sanctis ([Rome], [1982]), 13–19 and 139–44; Claudio Casini, *Verdi* (Milan, 1981), 301–7; Jürgen Maehder, 'Die musikalische Realisation altägyptischen Lokalkolorits', in programme book for the Bayerische Staatsoper production, ed. Klaus Schulz (Munich, 1979), 54–66; Herbert Lindenberger,

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present study aims to broaden the discussion in several ways. Most unusually, it dwells on aspects of words and music that are not in themselves 'markers' of exoticism or orientalism but that nonetheless announce traits of this or that character (or group of characters, such as the priests) and thereby communicate indelible impressions of what Egyptians and Ethiopians supposedly 'are like' (or were like in an earlier era).[5] In addition, my study calls upon such varied evidence (rarely if ever examined in this regard) as costume designs, directions in the *disposizione scenica* for the opera's first Italian production, relevant remarks by Verdi and early commentators (including two Egyptians writing in 1901) and some early sound recordings. Such a multifaceted exploration certainly cannot be definitive in any one regard, but perhaps it can point to some new possibilities for further exploration.

My argument also involves some fairly constant shifts of position about which I will try to be explicit along the way. I propose both that the opera's exotic characters, groups and settings are more specifically exotic/ancient/Other than has sometimes been recognised and that they can also be taken (and I do mean 'also', rather than 'instead') as metaphors for other situations involving domination, submission, resistance, subversion. According to this way of thinking, the opera may not be fundamentally about ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians or about 'race', but rather about empire as Verdi and his contemporaries knew it – Austro-Hungary, Prussia, Britain – and about broad issues of social class and the dynamics of power and powerlessness. My analysis thus takes up three tasks that might at first seem incompatible. It reveals how thoroughly the Egyptians and Ethiopians are presented as 'Other'. It invites sensitivity to the range of attitudes towards empire in the work. And it demonstrates that what we see on stage in this opera – as in most 'exotic' and 'imperial' operas – can be taken at once literally and metaphorically, so that the various Others – people who are Others to *us*, whether they be the Egyptian imperialists or the Ethiopian victims/rebels – turn out to be Us after all, and become so all the more readily by virtue of the intensity and specificity of their portrayed Otherness.

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Opera, the Extravagant Art (Ithaca, 1984), 270–80, and his *Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage* (Stanford, 1998), 170–4; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), 111–32; Paul Robinson, 'Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?', *this journal*, 5 (1993), 133–40; John M. MacKenzie, 'Occidentalism: Counterpoint and Counter-polemic', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 19 (1993), 339–44; his *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester, 1995), 21–42, 155–6; Anthony Arblaster, *Viva la libertà!: Politics in Opera* (London, 1992); John Rosselli, 'Trust the Tale, Not the Teller', in *Verdi in Performance*, ed. Alison Latham and Roger Parker (Oxford, 2001), 38–41; and two articles in *this journal*, 14 (2002): Katherine Bergeron, 'Verdi's Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of *Aida*', pp. 149–59, and Steven Huebner, ' "O terra addio": Patriotism, Dream, Death', pp. 161–75. I explore further the previous literature, its sometimes unspoken ideological undercurrents, and its implications for understanding the Triumphal Scene, in particular, in '*Aida* and Nine Readings of Empire', forthcoming in *Nineteenth-Century Music Reivew*.

[5] For instances of how non-exotic style can shape exotic characterisations, see my 'Constructing the Oriental "Other": Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*', *this journal*, 3 (1991), 261–302.

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Nastier than we? Verdi's preening Egyptians

Verdi's operas are full of people being nasty to each other. Sometimes the nastiness is carried out quietly, insidiously, by a patriarchal figure: the elder Germont, never raising his voice, manages to batter Violetta with conventional, 'reasonable' social morality; the Grand Inquisitor hints to King Philip in a near-whisper that the Marquis of Posa needs to be assassinated lest he continue to stir up unrest in the Netherlands. Elsewhere, the nastiness carries an edge of punitive glee: Count di Luna seems to relish seeing Azucena roughly handled by his underlings, and comes fully alive in extorting 'love' from the faithful-to-her-tenor Leonora, much as will be the case with Puccini's Scarpia decades later. The Duke of Mantua indulges in what Roger Parker aptly terms a 'somewhat vulgar' cabaletta of relief and delight, full of appropriate 'melodic and orchestral brashness', after learning that Gilda has been forcibly abducted from her house for his pleasure.[6]

There is little point in trying to compare the amount of nastiness in one opera and another, but perhaps a difference of quality *is* worth noting. The nastiness in the libretto for *Aida* is not only frequent but dramatically pointed. Amonasro browbeats his daughter with manipulative images of the ghost of her dead mother, then physically mistreats the twenty-year-old. But, since Amonasro is simultaneously something usually admirable in Verdi – the fighter for national liberty – I'd rather save him and the other Ethiopians for separate consideration further below. The nastiness of the Egyptian leaders is more straightforward: Ramfis and the priests represent an inhumane system, in which transgressors are condemned to suffocate and a military hero is married off to a king's daughter whom he does not love. A less obvious figure of Egyptian heartlessness, the princess Amneris, treats the title character with manipulative highhandedness (the score directs her to address Aida 'with feigned loving concern'), then with extreme harshness: 'Fissami in volto', she commands Aida, as if grabbing her by the chin ('Look in my face'). At several other points she curses Aida in such terms as 'Trema, vil schiava!' An important function of such behaviour is to emphasise the wide class divisions that marked ancient Egyptian society – perhaps an important reason why Verdi, a democrat at heart, felt that he could 'never admire' ancient Egyptian civilisation, despite its magnificent but oppressively imperial architecture and its dignified but frankly authoritarian statues and wall carvings of pharaohs subjugating their kneeling enemies with a blow of the mighty mace.[7]

At the same time, the opera's portrayal of a condescending, dishonest, cruelly punitive (Egyptian) princess may have been partly inspired by class divisions that Verdi and his collaborators had observed in European society: unemployed working men huddling by a wall to stay warm, or a servant or other underling being unfairly chastised by his or her haughty master or mistress. Such portrayals of social injustice in Europe could most palatably be presented on stage by disguising the Europeans as Egyptians and by emphasising the historical fact that ancient Egypt was, unlike

[6] *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London. 1992) s.v. '*Rigoletto*'.
[7] Letter to Camille du Locle, 19 February 1868, in Hans Busch, ed. and trans., *Verdi's 'Aida': The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents* (Minneapolis, 1978), 3.

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the Europe of Verdi's own day, a slave society. I cannot recall a nineteenth-century opera about Europeans in which a noble spews such venom at a servant as Amneris does at Aida. The net result may have been to reinforce the audience's sense that 'we' Westerners know better than to treat others, even a social inferior (or, in the case of the Ethiopian princess-in-hiding, an apparent social inferior), so viciously.

Even the dancing – often treated by commentators as mere decorative accessory – contributes to this portrayal of the Egyptians as fundamentally abusive. In the number near the beginning of Act II in which the Little Moorish Slave Boys entertain Amneris in her boudoir, the boys' jerky motions and stiffly hopping musical figures remind us that Amneris's world is built on imperial conquest and enslavement (see Fig. 1).[8] In a similar spirit, early productions of the *ballabile* in the Triumphal Scene later in Act II visibly differentiated the four different nationalities of female slaves who participate in displaying the trophies of conquest. There are Egyptian slaves, of course, but also Ethiopian, Libyan and 'Asian' ones (the latter – with slanted eyes and 'Siamese'-style dotted puffy trousers narrowed at the ankle – suggesting far-flung military campaigns unknown to history).[9] And, when Verdi added a new section to the middle of the ballet at the request of the management of the Opéra in 1880, it was the most exotic music he would ever write and was danced by a trio of female Libyans, this time reminding us of Egypt's imperial reach not just east and south, but west as well.[10] Has any recent production of the opera thought to revive this clear, and ideologically resonant, display of multiple captive ethnicities?

More generally, the opera portrays its Egyptians as civilised, fashionable and given to conspicuous consumption, such as being surrounded by and having their exploits fêted by dozens of servants and clerics. This is particularly apparent in the costumes and sets, which have been repeatedly examined for their remarkable attention to historical accuracy but rarely for their role in characterisation.[11] The costumes and sets convey an aura of what Giuseppina Strepponi once called, in connection with Rossini's *Semiramide*, 'Asiatic luxury'.[12] A photograph of the 1880 Paris Opéra performances shows the Amneris bedecked in jewels based closely on surviving specimens from pharaonic tombs, her hair hanging in numerous tight braids.[13] And costume drawings provide close-ups of some of the supporting characters – such as

[8] The dancing is intentionally 'grotesque', according to the *disposizione scenica* (in Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 574).

[9] Costume sketch by Jules Marre, reproduced in Jean-Pierre Corteggiani, 'Mariette invente Aïda', in *Mémoires d'Égypte: Hommage de l'Europe à Champollion* (Strasbourg, 1990), 226–47, here 245.

[10] See Jürgensen, *Verdi Ballets*, 205–11.

[11] Most recently, see Karen Henson, 'Exotisme et nationalités: *Aida* à l'Opéra de Paris', trans. Dennis Collins, in *L'Opéra en France et en Italie (1791–1925): Une Scène privilégiée d'échanges littéraires et musicaux; Actes du Colloque Franco-Italien tenu à l'Académie musicale de Villecroze (16–18 Octobre 1997)*, ed. Hervé Lacombe (Paris, 2000), 263–97.

[12] 'Semiramide ha un'impronta locale, sente tutto il lusso asiatico di que' tempi pressocchè favolosi'. Cited in *Quartetto Milanese ottocentesco: Lettere di Giuseppe Verdi, Giuseppina Strepponi, Clara Maffei, Carlo Tenca e di altri personaggi del mondo politico ed artistico dell'epoca*, ed. Arturo di Ascoli [Claudio Sartori] (Milan, 1974), 67.

[13] *L'Avant-Scène Opéra*, 4 (1993), 142.

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Fig. 1: One of the *piccoli schiavi mori*, costume design for La Scala production, 1872. Reproduced by kind permission of the Archivio Storico Ricordi – BMG.

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an on-stage harpist, for the scene in Amneris's chamber – who remind us of the power and privilege enjoyed by Amneris and the royal family.[14] The *disposizione scenica* prescribes that Amneris's hall be 'elegant' and 'decorated in gold' and 'rich tapestries'; indeed, the gold motif was so prominent throughout one early Parisian production that one review inserted the French word for 'gold' repeatedly, even where it didn't fit, as in references to 'les parfums d'Or-ient' (set off thus, with a hyphen) and to the opera's composer 'Verdor'.[15]

An ancient (and empty?) grandeur

Some earlier commentators on the opera have noted that all this gold and grandeur ring hollow, but none has plumbed the extent to which Verdi and his collaborators may have used such scenic excess to place their own spin on plot and setting. Take, for example, the instructions in the *disposizione scenica* for the end of the Act I finale. The ballerinas are grouped in a vast pyramid-shaped configuration in front of the altar at centre; the priests, bowing low, flank the altar diagonally in two symmetrical double rows; and, when Ramfis and Radames cry out 'Immenso Fthà!' in loud thirds, the priests 'quickly stand erect' and lift their arms above their heads as they echo the cry while the ballerinas 'raise their fans, forming what appears to be a single enormous fan'.[16] Budden twits the big-fan tableau as 'a curtain eminently worthy of the Folies Bergère', as if miffed that such synchronised displays of excess undermine the dramatic integrity of the opera's grandest moment.[17] But perhaps this was exactly what Verdi and his collaborators intended: that the glory of Egypt would be felt as impressive and threatening but also as vibrating with dramatic irony, as built on shifting sand and doomed to collapse. Budden considers any such ironic reading invalid: 'In *Aida* state authority is never called into question except by Amneris, when the man she loves is condemned to death'.[18] Yet a century of listeners and commentators have felt Ramfis and the priests to be menacing and creepy, both at their stark entrance in the Triumphal Scene – Budden himself calls its sudden minor mode 'faintly ominous' – and in their implacability in the Trial Scene.[19] If Budden simply means here that no character other than Amneris rails against the priests (not even Radames, in the tomb), then he is, of course, correct. But the meaning of a dramatic work is surely not limited to the explicit remarks made by its characters. Furthermore, to bracket Amneris's remarks as if they are excused – made irrelevant – by her infatuation with Radames seems an unhelpful scruple.

Other writers have been even more outspoken in their opposition to a reading of the ceremonial scenes in *Aida* as hollow or distasteful, whether intentionally or

[14] *Immagini*, 25; also in *Aida in Cairo*, plate 10, p. [133].
[15] Arnold Mortier, review of the 1876 production at the Salle Ventadour (from *Les Soirées parisiennes de 1876*), in Jürgensen, *Verdi Ballets*, 313–14.
[16] Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 571–2.
[17] Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, III: 214.
[18] Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, III: 258.
[19] Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, III: 225. On the processional music for the priests in the Trial Scene, see my 'Reflections on Orientalism in Opera and Musical Theater', *Opera Quarterly* 10/1 (1993), 48–64, here 61.

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unintentionally. John Rosselli argues that any attempt to deflate the Egyptians and their heroic empire panders to the predominantly anti-colonial attitudes of our own day. Writers who so indulge – unnamed, but perhaps including Mercedes Viale Ferrero, Claudio Casini and Edward W. Said – turn supposed critical evaluation into, as he sarcastically puts it, 'an homage to contemporary virtue'.[20] Fabrizio Della Seta, similarly, dismisses as 'too fashionable' several readings that not only see nineteenth-century 'imperialistic expansionism' in Egypt's military actions but go on to read the portrayal as 'anti-colonial' critique.[21] Such objections to 'presentist' criticism may sound sensible, but there is nothing inherently presentist about a critical/contextual reading of *Aida*. Anti-colonialism, whether as threat or promise, was very much on people's minds throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thanks in part to violent uprisings against European hegemony in Indonesia, India, Egypt and elsewhere. Such issues were definitely on Verdi's own mind, as we shall see.

Though Budden and Della Seta discount the possibility of irony or alienation – an intended distancing of the spectator from certain characters or their values – we should hardly be surprised to find such qualities in a grand opera of this era.[22] After all, alienation as an artistic device was not a twentieth-century invention, but a natural outgrowth of the socially critical arts of the nineteenth, including the works of Balzac, Hugo, Dickens, Flaubert and Tolstoy. Verdi's previous operas had one foot in this tradition of sometimes scathing social depiction: one need only point to *Luisa Miller*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata* and *Don Carlos*; or to the ironic distance with which certain characters are treated in other operas of the period, such as Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Meyerbeer's four French historico-tragic operas. In some of these operas, the sense of latent critique is manifest even in the leading tenor roles, which are more or less turned into anti-heroes, as Della Seta, Anselm Gerhard, Gilles de Van and others have argued.[23] Certain features that later critics perceive in these works – such as the supposedly unconvincing theatrical extravagance and knee-jerk support of the political powers-that-be that Budden finds in *Aida* – may

[20] Rosselli, 'Trust the Tale', 40.

[21] Della Seta, ' "O cieli azzurri" ', 62n., referring in part to Viale Ferrero, 'Scenery and Costumes', 144 (Ramfis represents/is equivalent to the 'colonisers' and 'European businessmen' who later ruled Egypt), and to Casini's statement that Radames's decision to flee with Aida and consequent (if involuntary) act of treason comprise 'a just and fitting retribution for Egyptian oppression of the vanquished Ethiopian people' (*Verdi*, 304). Casini describes the Triumphal Scene as 'brilliant and noisy kitsch' (*ibid.*, 303–4), implying that it is intentionally and inherently so, not the result of excesses in the *disposizione scenica*. Massimo Mila ('Difficult Opera', 18) simply dislikes the noisier aspects of the work, calls them 'dead' and proposes separating them out from what is still 'alive' in the work (the quieter, human drama).

[22] Here I can happily echo a general observation of Rosselli's: critics sometimes make the 'curious assumption . . . that if you show something, you approve of it' ('Trust the Tale', 40).

[23] Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago, 1998), 100–5, 348. See also Della Seta, ' "O cieli azzurri" ', 62, and Gilles de Van, *Verdi's Theater: Creating Drama through Music*, trans. Gilda Roberts (Chicago, 1998), 107–8, 185, 190, 193. On Edgardo in *Lucia*, see my 'What Are These Women Doing in Opera?', in *En travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York, 1995), 59–98, here 69–74.

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result from questionable assumptions: in this case, the assumption that people back then were naïve and uncritical about the workings of imperial power, even when the empire portrayed was known to have crumbled to dust.

To gauge the amount of irony and cultural critique we might read into *Aida* without straining historical accuracy and integrity, we first need to describe accurately the ceremonial scenes, those involving the priests and other government officials. Critics have tended to lump all the priestly music in *Aida* together as based in canonic writing (the unstated assumption being that Verdi was here relying on the long-standing association of counterpoint and liturgy).[24] In fact, only two passages involving the priests are set in canon: the minor-mode entrance in the middle of the Triumphal Scene and the opera's opening scene. The three hymns from Act I share a very different texture: utterly homophonic block chords.[25] The first of these hymns is frankly march-like. Paul Robinson describes this particular passage as being 'four-square, closed and classical, its harmonies familiar and its accompaniment emphatic'.[26] But he overreaches when he goes on to claim that all the exotic passages in the opera are associated with femininity to the extent that it 'comes to seem a code . . . for gender difference', and that the Egyptian authorities, by contrast, express themselves throughout the opera in 'regular, diatonic, and brassy [music] . . . of impeccably occidental credentials' resulting in an 'association of Egypt with an aggressively traditional European idiom'.[27]

There is greater stylistic variety than this in the opera, more points along the continuum between Western/up-to-date/familiar/emphatic/march-like and Oriental/ancient/'quaint'/gentle.[28] In the review I quoted earlier, Filippo Filippi described the now-famous tune for long trumpets (in the middle of the 'Gloria all'Egitto' chorus) as 'bizzarro', clearly perceiving it as march-like but in an unfamiliar way.[29] As for the great Trial Scene, the priests' threefold accompanied chant there (again, no canonic writing!) is redolent of, at the latest, the Middle Ages; Jürgen Maehder labels it 'Pseudo-Gregorianik', noting the shifting implied tonal centre and the habit of beginning each new phrase on the final pitch of the previous phrase, as if the ritual could circle on forever.[30] Still, I might argue that the melismatic phrases mark these prayers as Eastern in some sense. I would argue

[24] Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, III: 201 ('Counterpoint is associated in this opera with priestly power'); Jean de Solliers, 'Commentaire littéraire et musical', in *L'Avant-Scène*, 28 (25–90): canon is 'symbole de la science scolastique du Prêtre' (also 50, 52); Robinson, 'Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?', 136.

[25] Aside from a five-bar modulating pseudo-canonic episode in 'Numi' before the *ff* return of the theme; I say 'pseudo-canon' because each new entry begins over a single repeated pitch in the previous voice, thus creating no real polyphonic interest.

[26] Robinson, 'Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?', 136.

[27] Robinson, 'Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?', 138, 136. The priests' response to the priestess's chant at the beginning of the Consecration Scene is 'composed in the deeply ingratiating harmonies of the high European idiom' and 'the familiar diatonic harmonies of the high European style' (139, 138).

[28] 'The music, all on its own, would have conveyed the colour and shade of the rites and quaint [singolari] dances of the Orient'; from a review of the 1877 Bologna performances, in Luigi Verdi, ed., *Le opere di Giuseppe Verdi a Bologna (1843–1901)* (Lucca, 2001), 223.

[29] Review by Filippi, 14 January 1872, in Jürgensen, *Verdi Ballets*, 302.

[30] Maehder, 'Die musikalische Realisation', 59.

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gently also with Uwe Schweikert when he writes with a touch of sarcasm about the priests' prayer in the Consecration Scene, 'The prayers themselves [after each statement by the High Priestess] are nicely European [gut europäisch] and follow the practice of responsorial singing typical of the Catholic rite'.[31] But surely the use of chordal harmony here makes a world of difference from Gregorian chant, while the distinctly modal touches in those harmonies (e.g., vi–V progression) would be quite alien to the various kinds of 'gut europäisch' church music composed in Verdi's day. Finally, in the closing phrase ('noi t'invochiam'), we seem to have an instance of 'Eastern'/primitive harmonic 'oscillation' of root-position chords (in this case I–V–I–V) that is found elsewhere in *Aida* and in other Oriental operas as a kind of symbol – using a simplified and static version of Western harmony – of the perceived timelessness of 'the Orient'.

Nor can the third of the choruses in Act I, 'Nume, custode e vindice', be called a march. Robinson calls it diatonic and four-square, with striding bass, but the 'pulsating trombones' (his apt phrase) surely make this prayer to protective Fate a marker of ancient, divine authority, in the tradition of using trombones to underpin pronouncements by religious authorities or spirits from the netherworld – Charon, Pluto, the Furies, the vengeful shade of the Commendatore. Even further from march style is the second of the three hymns in Act I (a kind of introduction to 'Nume, custode e vindice'): 'Mortal, diletto ai Numi . . . Il sacro brando'. Writing to librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni, Verdi described the words he needed here as 'a short recitative, vigorous and solemn as a biblical psalm'.[32] The text Ghislanzoni supplied consists entirely of unrhymed eleven syllable lines, as is typical of Italian recitative. Yet Verdi set only the first line and a half as recitative, in a slowish arpeggiated style over tremolos that bears some resemblance to pronouncements by Ramfis or the King elsewhere in the opera. He treated the remaining three lines as something between a recitative and a hymn, and more oracular than either, thanks to the wide-swinging intervals in the vocal line (see Ex. 1).

Mortal, diletto ai Numi,
A te fidate
Son d'Egitto le sorti.
Il sacro brando dal Dio temprato
Per tua man diventi ai nemici
Terror, folgore, morte!

[Oh, mortal, you whom the fates hold dear, the future of Egypt is entrusted unto you. May the holy sword, tempered by the god, in your hand become to our enemies terror, lightning, death!]

Crucial details in this music make it more than just ceremonious and solemn, make it tell us something about the society we see on stage. The harmonies are almost entirely in root position, and the resulting angular leaps in the bass line suggest a civilisation that has not yet figured out how to make voice-leading smooth,

[31] Uwe Schweikert, 'Aida', in *Verdi Handbuch*, ed. Anselm Gerhard and Uwe Schweikert, with Caroline Fischer (Stuttgart and Kassel, 2001), 461–74, here 469.
[32] Letter to Ghislanzoni, 22 August 1870; Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 55.

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Ex. 1: 'Il sacro brando', over a striding bass, as echoed by the Chorus of Priests (Act I).

and that thus audibly precedes – because it sounds less sophisticated, polished, refined than Europe in the Renaissance and Baroque (never mind in Verdi's day).[33] In that sense, 'Il sacro brando' is analogous to the pre-Gregorian chanting of the Trial Scene, although it sits further from the 'exotic' end of the continuum, since the one thing that was widely understood about all ancient and non-Western musics was that they 'lacked' harmonisation and chords. Both passages characterise Egypt as

[33] Earlier in the nineteenth century, composers had sometimes used root-position harmonies to indicate not foreign but Christian sacred music of an early date. Two clear cases appear in Halévy's *La Juive*: the *Te Deum* in Act I and the (dramatically ironic) prayer for God's 'justice' before the Cardinal has Rachel thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil (in Act V). But those two passages are sung quietly, *a cappella*, and use a kind of 'floating' psalmodic rhythm determined by the prose liturgical texts and thus relatively free of accent or regularity. In contrast, Verdi's more sharply rhythmicised 'Il sacro brando' comes across as less spiritual, more power-laden, rigid, menacing.

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primitive (authoritarian, inflexible, repressive, inhumane) through musical devices that derive not so much from the East as from the West at an earlier stage of its development.[34]

Clothing the savages

The visual portrayal of imperial Egypt and its denizens was a straightforward, if expensive, exercise. Representing the Ethiopians, by contrast, presented certain challenges. The biggest problem is that we never see any Ethiopian location: at most we hear Aida's homeland described, verbally and musically. In addition, Aida is hard to make visibly readable as an Ethiopian and a princess because she needs to be dressed in the robe of an Egyptian slave, making her less distinct visually from the other women on stage than might be desirable, especially in a large theatre. As for Amonasro, he does wear Ethiopian clothing at his first entrance (Act II), but his words and the stage directions tell the designer that this must not be a king's robe but the uniform of an 'Ethiopian official' (rank unspecified: an army captain? a war minister?).

Figure 2 shows the solution that the Paris Opéra concocted for baritone Victor Maurel in 1880: an impressive coat of colours emphasising the character's dignity and former high position (though carefully not quite suggesting his kingship).[35] The costume's bare arms reveal Amonasro's dark skin tone and the manacles on his wrists. His hair is in dreadlocks, but this plan was apparently soon abandoned (these are, in the end, only sketches for costumes). By performance time, both Radames and Amneris had been given long, tight, dark braids, and the Egyptian royal archers had shorter but likewise densely plaited dark hair, all of which freed, nay almost required, Amonasro and Aida to wear a looser load of dark hair as contrast.[36] As for the crown in Figure 2, I presume that Amonasro donned it only in the privacy of Act III.[37] Figure 3, a caricature of this same Paris production, emphasises

[34] A parallel instance was the *alla turca* style of a century earlier; see Mary Hunter, 'The *alla turca* Style in the Late Eighteenth Century: Race and Gender in the Symphony and Seraglio', *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston, 1998), 43–73.

[35] *Aida in Cairo*, plate 3, [103]. To judge by an 1871 costume sketch for Amonasro made by Auguste Mariette, the Ethiopian king was dressed plainly in Act III, more like a self-abnegating biblical prophet than the radiantly bedecked young Joseph, but perhaps this is meant simply to be a realistic slave's robe (*Aida in Cairo*, plate 15, [33]).

[36] See Nicole Wild, 'Les Traditions scéniques à l'Opéra de Paris au temps de Verdi', *La realizzazione scenica dello spettacolo verdiano*, ed. Pierluigi Petrobelli and Fabrizio Della Seta (Parma, 1996), plates 18–20, pp. 164–6 (135–66). Already in the 1871 Cairo première (according to Ernest Reyer), two ranks of archers and other soldiers were 'Negroes, . . . true and superb specimens of their race'; Reyer, *Notes de musique* (Paris, 1875), 197. Presumably they were understood as Ethiopians captured prior to the current campaign (or, as Reyer prefers, 'Schardanas' who had attacked Egypt from Libya, unsuccessfully).

[37] Or, more likely, the crown never got used in the production. I suspect that the costume designer had not read the opera's plot synopsis carefully, if at all. A plot summary published in the newspaper *Il trovatore* several months before the opera's première (8 September 1870) describes Amonasro in Act III as 'vestito da schiavo'. *Genesi dell'Aida, con documentazione inedita*, ed. Saleh Abdoun, Quaderni dell'Istituto di Studi Verdiani 4 (1971), facsimile facing 144; see also Bush, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 444.

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Fig. 2: Amonasro, costume drawing by Eugène Lacoste for the 1880 production at the Paris Opéra. Reproduced by kind permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Amonasro's and Aida's long, vigorously unstraight hair and dark skin, hinting at the public fascination with these physical features of sub-Saharan Africans.[38] Amonasro's unruly hair spreads out like that of a caricatured savage or (considering also his bulging eyes) a madman. Further, either the costume designer or the cartoonist decided to give him what looks like a necklace made of bones, perhaps suggesting cannibalism. Except for the bones, these traditions seem to have

[38] *Aida in Cairo*, plate 12, [111].

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Fig. 3: A caricatural tableau of *Aida*, featuring a wild-man Amonasro (the baritone Victor Maurel) and a crocodile conducting the combined forces; from the *Chronique théâtrale*, *c.* 1880 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

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remained strong: the loose and voluminous black hair in Figure 4 (Teresa Stolz, the Aida of the opera's European première, at La Scala) has comprised that character's most distinctive visual marker ever since, and Anselmo Colzani's unruly hair and wide eyes (Fig. 5, *c.* 1960) seem almost comically faithful to the parodistic Figure 3 (1880).[39]

Only two of the principal characters are Ethiopian, but the plot requires that many nameless Ethiopian prisoners be led in during the Triumphal Scene. The costume designer must outfit these 'infelici' (as the chorus of Egyptian common people describes them) in simple garments, which during the 1870s and 1880s included animal skins, as shown in Figure 6.[40] And though the prisoners have been disarmed, their clubs and spears, as well as glittering implements and idols from their 'templi d'or' must be among the 'trophies' or 'spoils' put on display during the ballet in that scene.[41] I would argue that Aida and Amonasro, by association with these rudely clad compatriots, come to be perceived as more plainly Ethiopian – and, potentially, more primitive, backward or instinctual – than they would on their own, and also as representing a region with rich natural resources (e.g., wood and gold) coveted by the rulers of arid Egypt.[42]

Who is exotic in *Aida*?

We have seen that individual Egyptian characters in *Aida* can be cruel and that the society in general is portrayed as rigid, authoritarian and, if we understand limited mastery of harmonic progression and voice-leading metaphorically, also unsophisticated. (The urbane Amneris, obviously, is quite an exception.) And costuming conventions have cast the Ethiopians as primitive and uncivilised. But to what extent do various of the individual characters, whether Egyptian or Ethiopian, come across as 'exotic' outside of the scenes that are self-consciously designed to showcase Otherness? I briefly discussed the scenes of Egyptian ceremony and worship above, but many other passages in the opera convey a sense of cultural difference and distance *without* engaging in conventional exotic topoi.

Let me begin with Amneris's swooning line in the boudoir scene (Ex. 2). Although Amneris's melodic arabesque is not overtly exotic, I would not follow Paul Robinson in characterising it as 'music of the . . . conventional West'.[43] In the context of the costumes, sets and choral numbers discussed above, its serpentine chromaticism would be heard as a distinctly exotic component, if not a geographically specific one. The setting in which Amneris voices this long sigh further colours

[39] See oft-reproduced photos of, for example, Emilie Ambre, Wanda Borisoff, Dusolina Giannini or a Mlle Demougeot in the role; also Mariette's sketch in Corteggiani, 'Mariette', 243.

[40] *Aida in Cairo*, plates 17 and 26, pp. [35], [39]. The latter is in *Immagini*, 21.

[41] Stage direction to the ballet, plus indications in the *disposizione scenica*, in Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 586 and 595.

[42] On Egypt's taste for Nubian gold, see, for example, David O'Connor, *Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa* (Philadelphia, 1993), 63.

[43] Robinson, 'Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?', 139. Robinson puzzlingly calls the phrase 'sumptuously diatonic'.

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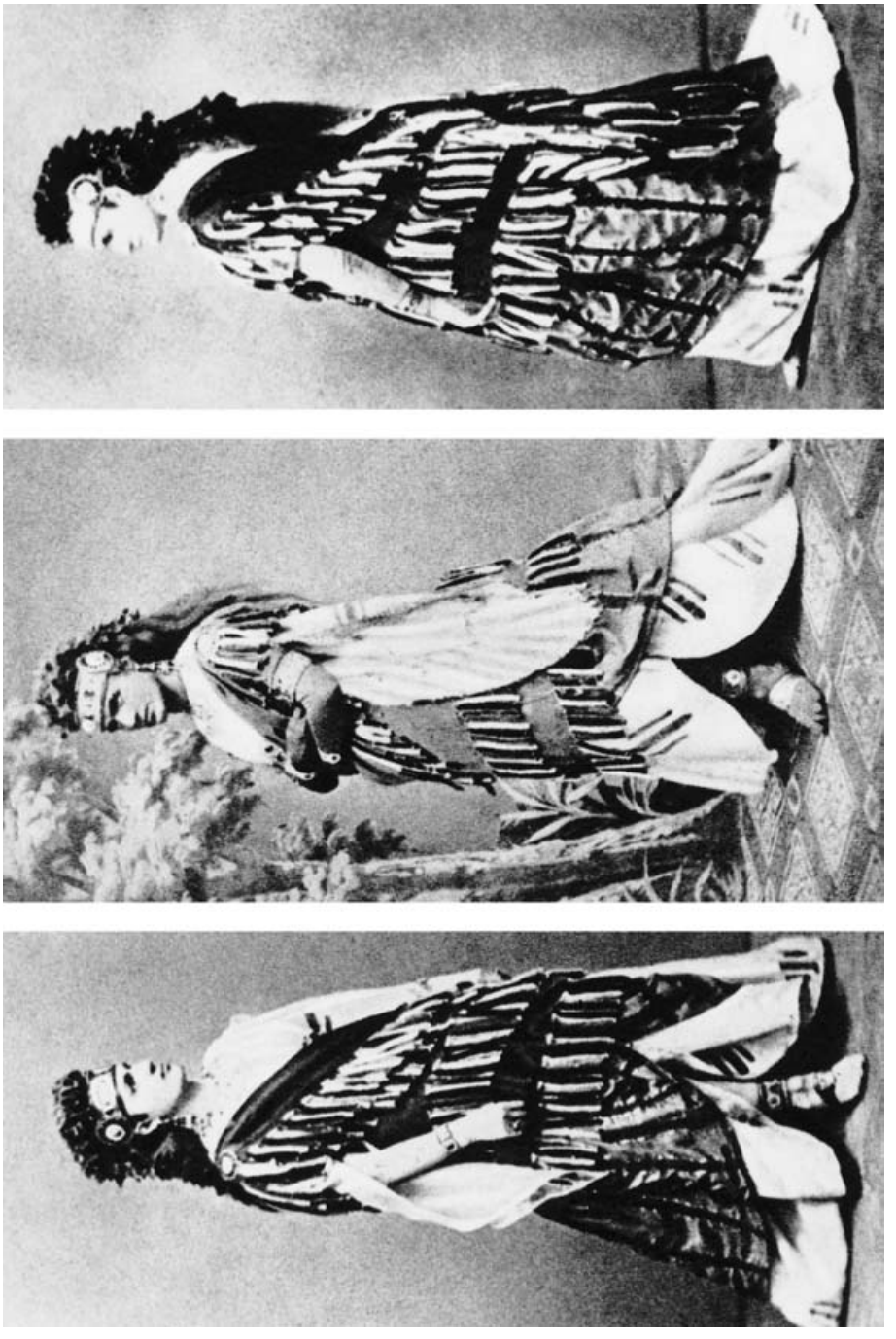


Fig. 4: Teresa Stolz in the original costume and wig of the title role: studio photographs from three angles. As reproduced in Carlo Gatti, *Verdi nelle immagini* (Milan, 1941). The current location of the original three photographs – if they survive at all – is unknown.

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Fig. 5: Anselmo Colzani as Amonasro. Louis Melançon photo, *c.* 1960 (Metropolitan Opera Archives).

it as sensual in a way not available to that for Western characters in Verdi operas. The decision to show her relaxing in her armchair (which became, in most subsequent productions, an even more explicit couch), as 'young Moorish slaves wave fans made of plumes', effectively makes her, though a princess, a kind of 'female in heat', to be ogled by the audience. Amneris sings this phrase three times, in alternation with a chorus of her female slaves and the dance of the Moorish boys,

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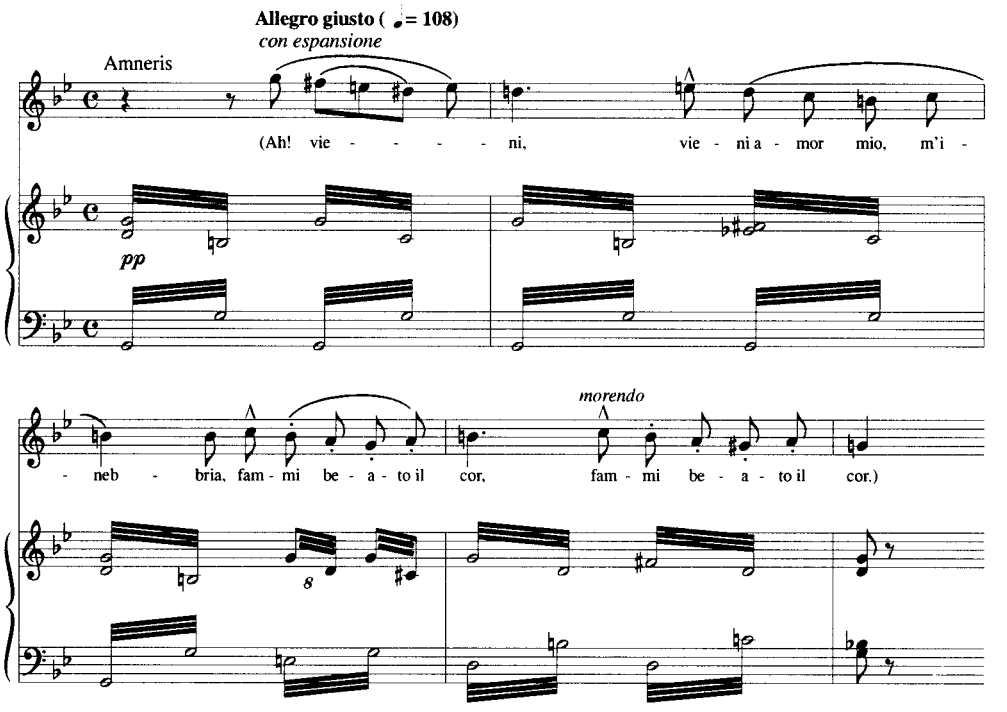


Fig. 6: Ethiopian prisoner, costume sketch by Auguste Mariette, 1871 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

so that her vocal 'swoon' is framed as an expression of longing, stirred by the slave entertainments.

As is standard in nineteenth-century art, the exotic realm in *Aida* is marked off as feminine, and the leading male characters are largely 'protected' from the softness

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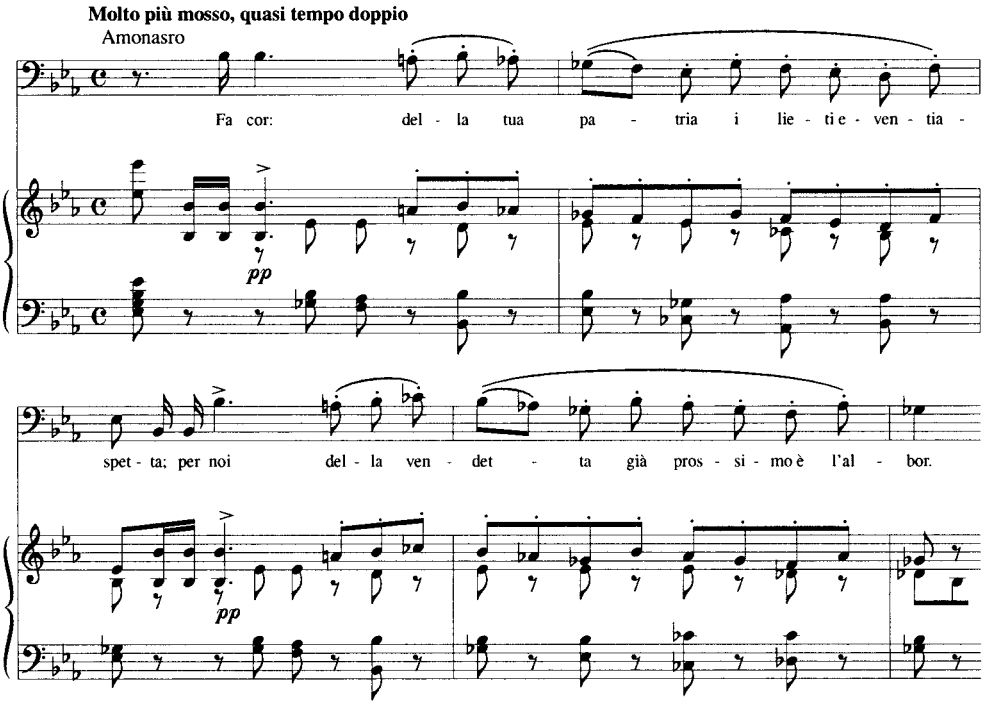


Ex. 2: Amneris's chromatic swooning in the scene in her chamber (Act II).

and decorativeness associated with exoticism.[44] Nonetheless, Amonasro engages in musical behaviours that make him seem subtly conniving, in contrast to his public presentation of himself as noble, principled freedom fighter. Granted, he is in disguise, cannot risk being revealed as king of Ethiopia, and is sometimes under intense time pressure, as in his furtive aside to Aida in their minuscule reunion scene in Act II (a hasty 'Non mi tradir!' / 'Don't reveal who I am!'). Still, his rapid, secretive whispering in relatively strict rhythm in their subsequent exchange in the Finale of Act II (Ex. 3) and recurrently in Act III (with the vocal directions to sing

[44] The surrounding slave dances place this scene in the long tradition of diegetic performances by exotic females in opera and ballet, in works as diverse as Boieldieu's *Le Calife de Bagdad* and Burgmüller's ballet *La Péri* (with its famous dance in which the heroine gradually disrobes to release a bee trapped in her clothing) and, continuing after *Aida*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, Augusta Holmès's *La Montagne noire*, Léhar's *Die lustige Witwe* (with Hungarians as the exotics), and Bernstein's *West Side Story* (Puerto Ricans, especially female). On the performance-aria in *Calife*, see Miriam K. Whaples, 'Early Exoticism Revisited', *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Bellman, 3–25, 307–13, here 19; on *Carmen* and *La Montagne noire*, see James Parakilas, 'The Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter', *Opera Quarterly*, 10/2 (1994), 33–56, and 10/3: 43–69; and on *West Side Story*, see Elizabeth Wells, '*West Side Story* and the Hispanic', *ECHO*: *http://www.echo.ucla.edu*, 2/1 (Spring 2000), and Ralph P. Locke, 'The Border Territory between Classical and Broadway: A Voyage around and about *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *West Side Story*', *Liber Amicorum Isabelle Cazeaux: Symbols, Parallels and Discoveries in her Honor*, ed. Paul-André Bempéchat (Hillsdale, NY, 2005), 179–226.

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Ex. 3: Amonasro's furtive mutterings (Act II, Triumphal Scene).

declamato, *cupo*, etc.) make him a close cousin of the conspirators in *Macbeth*, *Un Ballo in maschera* or *Simon Boccanegra*, the courtiers who abduct Gilda in *Rigoletto* and the ambitious upstart Iago (in *Otello*), with his 'sottovoce machinations'.[45] The Doge Simon does not express himself in agitated whispers, nor does King Philip (in *Don Carlos*). Nor, for that matter, do either Ramfis or the Egyptian King.

The unstable, rising harmonies and concomitant rising sequence in the melodic line in Example 3 sound particularly kinetic in the midst of the long stretches of tonally static, four-square music in E flat major ('Gloria all'Egitto', followed by contrasting melodies for various characters using the same harmonies as the 'Gloria' tune), as does Amonasro's tempo acceleration ('Molto più mosso, quasi tempo doppio'). All of this adds further energy to the portrait of surreptitious scheming. This is not regal behaviour but more like that of a scurrilous courtier/wannabe, and, as we have seen, stagings (including the 1880 Paris production) often underline this momentary lapse of nobility with details of costume, hair and make-up. Amonasro's stature is reduced at these junctures in the drama, perhaps in order to make clear what tactics the leader of a subject people and underdeveloped nation needs to engage in but perhaps also in order to make us feel less regret for Amonasro and his cause, and to make Radames's naïve mistake at the end of Act III seem less

[45] Joseph Kerman and Thomas Grey, 'Verdi's Groundswells: Surveying an Operatic Convention', *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner*, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (Berkeley, 1988), 153–79, here 176.

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contemptible, easier to understand.[46] After all, we need to be able to empathise, to some degree, with Radames in the final act: in the duet with Amneris, the Trial Scene and the Tomb Scene with Aida.

Although primitive and crafty, Amonasro is not consistently represented as unsympathetic. As commentators and listeners have long noted, the man the Egyptians refer to as 'barbarous invader' gets two of the memorable tunes in the opera – 'Ma tu Re' in Act II and 'Pensa che un popolo' in Act III. True, both of these could be described as 'hypocritical', but Amonasro's hypocrisy here is in the service of a sincere devotion to the freedom of his beleaguered backwoods kingdom.[47] All in all, recent complaints that Amonasro is 'monotonous' and 'dull' seem unfair: there is no lack of variety to this slippery but admirably determined character, who first appears in the middle of Act II, when the rest of the cast is assembled to hail his nation's defeat, and who does not hesitate to manipulate the emotions of everyone on stage, including his own daughter, in the interests of his cause.[48] Amonasro's bid to persuade Aida in Act III ('Su, dunque, sorgete, egizie coorti') is accompanied by one of the edgiest, most insistent fanfares in any of Verdi's operas, suggesting at once the imagined attack of the Egyptian army and, perhaps, Amonasro's own aggression against his daughter – at the climax he 'pushes her away' and his vocal line is marked 'with savage vehemence'. Amonasro is at once a hero and a villain – sharp in profile, no generic leader or father.

The portrayal is given one last complication at the end of Act III, when Amonasro pauses to absolve Radames for his treason, in a gorgeous legato melody over throbbing strings ('No, tu non sei colpevole') with an eloquent leap to a high F ('*era* voler') followed by a pang of empathy, a flatted sixth-degree appoggiatura ('era vol*er* del fato'). A bit reductively, Budden sees Amonasro here as acting inconsistently with all we know of him up to this point. This 'one moment of humanity', he writes, creates a delay that, arguably, costs the Ethiopian king his life.[49] Was Amonasro's sudden lingering with Radames built in to show fatherly concern for his daughter's connubial happiness? or to suggest the warrior's sudden awareness of affinity with heroic Captain Radames? or to enrich a portrayal otherwise confined to what Budden calls 'primitive patriotism'?[50] or to make the audience feel that Radames was no condemnable traitor but rather an unconscious supporter of national self-determination for a conquered people and/or merely a besotted romantic? Perhaps all of these.

[46] See Verdi's letter to Ghislanzoni about reworking the libretto to make Radames's 'betrayal' less 'odious'; Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 32.

[47] Petrobelli, *Music in the Theater*, 122 (referring to the later of the two instances: 'Amonasro's hypocritical 'consoling' intervention'). Budden (*Verdi* (London, 1985), 275) considers 'Ma tu Re' 'falsely placatory' but terms 'Pensa che un popolo' 'idealistic'.

[48] Respectively: Arblaster, *Viva la libertà!*, 141; and Christopher Cook (*BBC Music Magazine* (November 2002), 120), praising Simon Estes's performance in the 1981 San Francisco production as redeeming what is 'surely the dullest bass [*sic*] role in all Verdi' (Warner/NVC Arts 3984-22366-2; with Estes, Margaret Price, Stefania Toczyska, Luciano Pavarotti, cond. Garcia Navarro).

[49] Budden, *Verdi*, 277; and his *Operas of Verdi*, III: 244.

[50] Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, III: 244.

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But the main reason appears in what happens next. Amonasro moves into his trademark quick whispering: his troops are waiting beyond the Nile, where 'love will fulfil the desires of your heart'. Thus, Amonasro's initial reassuring words and melody prove to have been merely the opening salvo, the softening up, in a multi-stage attempt to trap Radames into joining the Ethiopians' side as accomplice, ally, or broken-willed hostage. 'Vieni, vieni, vieni', Amonasro concludes, dragging Radames away ('trascinando Radames'). Presumably he fears that the distressed Egyptian hero, with eyes now open, might run back to camp, cancel the compromised battle plan for the next day, and send troops to arrest Amonasro and Aida. In other words, that repeated 'Non sei colpevole' can be plausibly read as manipulative rather than as an exceptional and un-Amonasran outburst of empathy for another's suffering. Thus, paradoxical as it may sound, this typically Verdian-heroic, caressing cantabile phrase of an utterly non-exotic cut serves to portray the ultimate act of cunning of a king who, more fully than in any previous Verdian opera, is also something more: he is a savage king, or a royal savage.

Aida the angry, Aida the Ethiopian

If Amonasro is portrayed as a cunning, powerful savage, what of Aida? Here performance traditions can give food for thought. Anyone who listens to early recordings of the complete opera (notably the first two, both from 1928, with Giannina Arangi-Lombardi and Dusolina Giannini, respectively) or of excerpts for the title character cannot help noticing that Aida's impulsiveness and quick anger are conveyed as vividly as her gentleness and suffering. More generally, the sopranos in question, many of them native Italian-speakers, tend to make sharp, intelligent distinction between recitative and aria and to show a keen and varied response to individual phrases of text. Take, for example, the 1911 performance of 'Ritorna vincitor' by Carmen Melis.[51] The opening moments may strike the listener today as simply fast, leading one to suspect that Melis and the conductor were trying to fit the music into the limited recording time available. But on closer listening Melis's reading emerges as varied and rhetorical, with carefully placed dramatic pauses and sharply chiselled declamation (bitten consonants on 'reggia', a hold on 'cel*ar* m'è forza'). Melis starts at a true Allegro agitato (as marked), in the neighbourhood of Verdi's suggested ♩=138, but slows down whenever the music gets at all lyrical ('Vincitor del padre mio'). All this fluctuation (over *pianissimo* tremolos, which invite the singer to declaim freely) is set in relief and further energised by the two *forte* incursions from the orchestra alone (bb. 5–6 and 13–14), at which the conductor drastically overleaps the opening tempo to something like ♩=206. Furthermore, each of the two incursions speeds up within its brief span of five

[51] Carmen Melis, recording from 30 March 1911 (probably conducted by Frederick W. Ecke), unreleased until 1956, on a relatively rare 'Edison's Original' ten-inch LP: FS889 Edison (copy in Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music).

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beats, like a blow to the gut.[52] At the first big dramatic and musical caesura, as Aida envisions the possibility of her father's being taken captive and 'bound in chains' ('di catene avvinto'), Melis lets the voice shriek upwards in horror.[53] We don't let Aida shriek today. Maybe we've lost something – something that Verdi might have liked in this very spot, to judge by a remark he made about a similar moment for the soprano heroine in *Don Carlos*.[54]

Well into the 1930s and 1940s, singers commonly emphasised Aida's power, intensity, volatility. Although Zinka Milanov is now remembered most for her floated *pianissimos*, a live recording of Act III from 1938 shows her conveying Aida's anger at and manipulation of Radames with remarkable thespian skill and commanding vocal production.[55] As recently as 1961, Leyla Gencer (likewise legendary for exquisite high notes) greeted Carlo Bergonzi's 'arrival at the river with a volley of chest tones worthy of [Cherubini's] Medea'.[56] In those indelible moments in Milanov's and Gencer's performances, Aida comes very close to Amneris, reminding us that Verdi's preferred Aida, Teresa Stolz, was in fact originally intended by him for the role of Amneris. These early and mid-twentieth-century performances of the role of Aida reveal signs of a quick temper and strategic mind that emphasise that the character is the daughter of the Ethiopian guerrilla warrior Amonasro. Their readings are typical of a tradition that in recent decades has, to some extent, given way to portraying Aida as a near-Puccinian *piccola donna*, resigned and passive, overwhelmed by events (when not simply overtaxed by the demands of the role).[57] One wonders if critics would be so quick to denigrate Verdi's and his librettists' portrayal of the opera's heroine as 'thoroughly confused' (Kerman's

[52] Lorenzo Molajoli (in his complete recording, 1928: VAI CD, VAIA 1083–2) likewise takes the incursions as brisk commentary. The tendency since the mid-twentieth century has been, instead, for the orchestra to adjust the tempo of those two incursions so that they are only a bit faster than whatever tempo the soprano has been hovering around in her recitatives (which is usually, from the outset, much slower than marked). Some conductors even downshift a bit (or a lot) and make the accented notes very *pesante*.

[53] Dusolina Giannini achieves a similar effect with more restraint in the 1928 complete recording conducted by Carlo Sabajno: Pearl GEMM CDS 9402.

[54] '[With the words I propose,] the actress would have the chance of a good yell [una strillacciata] which would not be beautiful poetically or musically, but it would be theatrical'; letter to Charles Nuitter, 15 December 1882 (trans. in Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, III: 36).

[55] Excerpts released by Celebrity Record Co. on the LP disc EJS 485. We might recall that Verdi urged Ghislanzoni not to hesitate to make Aida a bit 'repulsive' in this scene: her actions, he argued, are 'justified by the duet with her father [i.e., his guilt-inducing accusation that she is a traitor] and . . . by the presence of her father himself, whom the audience knows to be in hiding and listening' (letter of 30 September 1870, trans. in Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 71). I would further argue that Aida's manipulation of Radames is justified, within the terms of the opera and the value system of the day, by her love for him and her hope that the two of them might manage to make a safe getaway to her own country and there live and love in peace; on this question, see Huebner, ' "O patria mia" ', 168 and 173.

[56] Review by Ira Siff (*Opera News*, November 2003, 68) of Hardy Classic DVD HCD 4010, cond. Franco Capuana.

[57] Among recent sopranos who have recorded the role but were plainly stretched by its more dramatic passages (or had to be boosted by artful microphone placement) are Mirella Freni, Katia Ricciarelli and (on Harnoncourt's recent recording) Cristina Gallardo-Domâs. Herva Nelli had already demonstrated the problem in Toscanini's famous recording.

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words, quoted approvingly by Said)[58] if they were to listen closely to Melis, Arangi-Lombardi, Giannini, the youngish Milanov or Gencer. The determination and spontaneity of those sometimes dimly recorded performances remains immensely communicative across the chasms of time and space.

One other related 'time capsule'. I have long been troubled by a description of Act III by Massimo Mila that struck me as idiosyncratic – even, by today's standards, racist – in its obsession with Aida's darkness, animality and primitive ferocity:

> Aida reveals herself fully in Act III, immersed in the magic of her Orient, which is both mysterious and burning with desires, insinuating like a subtle perfume. Her instinctive animal sensuality is present in the persuasive and penetrating chromaticism of the opening [phrase], 'Là tra foreste vergini', with which she presses herself upon her beloved and circles him with deceitful and mincing art – [this] little black savage with her nostrils that flare and pulse at the sweet, violent scent of her [native] land. . . . The atavistic instinct of warlike guile and the voices of the land overtake [feelings of] love.[59]

Though reprinted verbatim as late as 1980, these words were first published in 1933, when a casual, perhaps even affectionate use of racial characterisation was more accepted in public discourse than it is now.[60] But, read in conjunction with recordings of the era, it also becomes clear that Mila's emphasis on Aida's energy and fighting instinct – if not on her nostrils – may be an alert critical reaction to one of the many strong Aidas of the day.

Metaphors of the universal: Caution now, boldness then

As I hope I have established, the opera's portrayal of ancient Egypt as an oppressive society that deprives people of will, spontaneity and humanity, and its contrasting vision of a primitive but vital Ethiopia are not confined to a few decorative and ritualistic numbers that employ obvious orientalist or archaic touches. Rather, they are manifest in characterisations, confrontations and musical effects spread throughout the work, their effect heightened by juxtaposition with the more overtly exotic numbers. I have also suggested that this Otherness may be pressed into metaphorical service to limn or criticise people and social practices (imperialistic crusaders and snobbish aristocrats) closer to Verdi's own day. At the same time, many aspects of *Aida* can be read as commenting on what were thought in the 1870s to be eternal or 'universal' issues. This third option raises a basic question that is too rarely broached: how do we, as audience members or scholar-critics, know whether a character represents universal human traits or qualities meant to be attributed to a given nation, gender or race?

Many of us, surely, have cherished the hope that, in real life, this whole problem of 'Who represents the universal?' would vanish in our lifetime. Alas, the world has

[58] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 113, quoting Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York, 1956), 160.

[59] 'piccola selvaggia negra, dalle narici aperte e palpitanti': Massimo Mila, *L'Arte di Verdi* (Turin, 1980), 54–5.

[60] In Massimo Mila, *Il melodramma di Verdi* (Bari, 1933), 98; also in Mila's *Giuseppe Verdi* (1958), 87, and in the 1980 reprint of the 1933 volume as *L'arte di Verdi*, 96.

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Fig. 7: Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, *Earth Elegies* (1999) (By kind permission of Bonnie Benrubi Gallery, New York.)

not changed so completely. One side effect of this is that the time is still not yet upon us when a foreign character in a foreign setting, or a member of an ethnic minority within a European milieu, is likely to be taken by audiences as a universal figure. We may gain some clarity about how the complex of race, ethnicity and foreignness functions in opera by paying brief attention to a related category – gender – in another art form: photography. Since the mid-1990s, the husband-and-wife team of Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison (they prefer no hyphen between the conjoined family names) have been making photos in which Robert poses before the camera as a lone heroic figure in a business suit or work clothes, repairing gashes in the earth with a giant darning needle, hanging clouds back up in the damaged sky, or rolling a giant IBM Selectric font-ball across an endless plain (Fig. 7). Critics and others willingly, automatically, take the man in the photo as standing for the human race as a whole.[61] But when Shana and Robert tried to shoot the same kinds of scenes but using Shana as the Sisyphus-like ecological crusader, the pair were

[61] See Robert ParkeHarrison, *The Architect's Brother*, with an essay by W. S. Merwin (Santa Fe, 2000), also http://www.bonnibenrubi.com/Parkeharrison/parkeharrison.html.

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displeased with the result. They themselves couldn't help seeing her as a *woman* carrying out various gender-appropriate or -inappropriate actions:

> 'We put them [the photos of Shana] up on the wall and we both looked at each other and said ''yuck'' ', says Shana. 'It totally changed everything. It was terrible. I had the right outfit and I was doing the right jobs but suddenly it became, ''am I doing the female job?'' It didn't matter if I was holding an axe or holding a pail of water. All of a sudden you read it as this whole gender thing. We worked for four months on them. We had every intention of going forward with them, but it didn't work.'[62]

Verdi and his collaborators, over a century ago, were bolder than this. Their *Aida* frankly refuses to consider white urban males in Western business (or military) clothes as normative or universal. Instead, it engages a variety of conventionalised representations: of males and females, of imperial expansionists and local guerrilla fighters, of 'civilised' peoples in the 'metropolis' and peoples from territory considered 'marginal' (open to exploitation, its resources untapped), which is to say, in some sense, West and East, or Northern hemisphere and Southern, the developed and non-developed worlds, the metropolis and the (so-called) periphery, light-skinned and dark, haves and have-nots, the (seemingly) invulnerable and the (seemingly) powerless. These dichotomies and their attendant stereotypes have not entirely lost their currency in our world today, nor their basis in cold realities.

Aida is not unique in taking the risk of displaying cultural dichotomies of this sort on the opera stage – laying them out for inspection and contemplation, whether painful, amusing, or both. *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *L'italiana in Algeri* and *Il turco in Italia*, *Il trovatore*, *Carmen*, *Prince Igor*, *Lakmé*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Lost in the Stars*, *South Pacific*, *West Side Story*, Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*, Adams's *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Paul Simon's *The Capeman* and Steve Reich's *The Cave* likewise take risks in their portrayals of different or 'marginal' cultures or ethnic groups – different risks, approached differently in each case. And these works remain challenging and uncomfortable, in part because they tend to resist being contained by simple formulations and judgements but in part also because they seem to be addressing issues more general (more metaphorical, we might say) than 'just' the concrete situation that they are outwardly portraying.

If *Aida* is not unique, it is astonishingly rich in its exploitation of these multiple levels. In the foregoing, I have sometimes argued that a character or people is portrayed as 'primitive' and conniving, ancient/rigid, submissive/put-upon (in a way typical of 'exotic' females, generally) or as conforming to certain specifically Middle Eastern stereotypes. Yet I have also sometimes argued that the same character or group might plausibly be read as a transparent fiction, embodying (despite the outward appearance of ancientness or geographical-cultural distance) behaviours and character traits typical of Verdi's contemporaries within the West: Amonasro echoes anti-establishment political leaders such as Garibaldi; Ramfis and the Egyptian hierarchy echo the thuggish European conquerors of other countries and the religious officials who justified and supported their actions; Aida and the

[62] Ron Netsky, 'The World on His Shoulders', *City Newspaper* (Rochester, NY), 9–15 January 2002, 8–9, here 9.

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other slaves echo the oppressed masses in Europe or anywhere else; and Amneris echoes the spoiled aristocrat (female or even male). Or, to take up the third interpretative possibility mentioned above, the character or group could be read as an embodiment of traits deemed to be 'universal'; thus, Amneris and Ramfis might represent the smug heartlessness of people in entrenched power, wherever they may hold sway.

This may sound contradictory or wishy-washy, but my point is that we are dealing here with powerful musical and theatrical metaphors that can cut several ways at once, inflected by the production, the performance and the perspective of the observer. When read metaphorically, *Aida* invokes stark stereotypes partly in order to engage them one more time. The opera gives these types vivid, seductive embodiment, putting them back into circulation to do their possibly noxious cultural work, but it also engages *with* them, renders the conventional types transparent, allows audience members to make implicit connections to social structures and traits of character of their own time and place, or of any time and place. In the remainder of this article, I would like to have us re-encounter several of the opera's main characters, in order to probe how they may embody or subvert stereotypes and images of empire.

Engaging (with) stereotypes

It makes sense to begin by returning to the supposedly 'dull' Amonasro. The guerrilla leader comes across, I suggested above, as a relatively complex dramatic figure – neither hero nor demon. The *disposizione scenica* describes him as an 'unconquerable warrior' who is 'full of love of fatherland', a phrase that must have carried largely positive connotations in the late nineteenth century, especially in the wake of Italy's decades-long fight for independence and national unity (see Fig. 8). At the same time, the *disposizione scenica* describes him as 'impetuous' and 'violent', traits that sound disturbing, typical of a primitive creature. If Amonasro is a primitive, he is (as guerrilla leader) a wily and principled one, in lifelong (centuries-long, for his people) battle with so-called civilisation, which, in his experience, amounts to a centralised, oppressive empire. The portrayal thus reverses the usual vector of disapproval of (or disgust for, or contemptuous 'admiration' of) males in loincloth, animal skins, unruly hair. Arguably, it thus serves to expand the audience's tolerance for ethnic and cultural difference.

Females from such 'undeveloped' regions, by contrast, tended to be presented more as welcome accoutrements to civilised life; that is, as potential possessions of the civilised/metropolitan male or as erotic threats to his mission, career or family. Aida both is and isn't one such accoutrement. The *disposizione scenica* emphasises that 'her chief qualities are a loving nature, meekness and gentleness'.[63] But she is also a river of (royal) pride and (primitive) rage: during her Act II interrogation by Amneris, she momentarily loses self-control and perhaps endangers her life. She is

[63] Budden, *Operas of Verdi*, III: 192; or, in Busch's more literal translation: 'love, submission, sweetness are her principal qualities' (*Verdi's 'Aida'*, 558).

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Fig. 8: Descriptions of the opera's characters in the *disposizione scenica* published by Ricordi.

IL RE – circa 45 anni: portamento maestoso, imponente.
AMNERIS, sua figlia – 20 anni : molta vivacità, carattere impetuoso, impressionabile.
AIDA, schiava etiope: pelle olivastra, rossiccio-oscuro – 20 anni: amore, sommissione, dolcezza sono le qualità principali di questo personaggio.
RADAMÈS, capitano delle guardie – 24 anni: carattere entusiasta.
RAMFIS, capo dei sacerdoti – 50 anni: animo fermo, autocrata, crudele: portamento maestoso.
AMONASRO, re d'Etiopia e padre d'Aida: pelle olivastra rossiccio-oscuro – 40 anni: guerriero indomabile, pieno d'amore patrio: carattere impetuoso, violento.

THE KING. Around 45 years old. Carries himself majestically and imposingly.
AMNERIS. His daughter, 20 years old. Very lively. Impetuous in character, and emotionally susceptible.
AIDA. Ethiopian slave, with olive skin and dusky-reddish complexion. 20 years old. Her chief qualities are a loving nature, meekness and gentleness.
RADAMES. Captain of the guards. 24 years old. Full of enthusiasm.
RAMFIS. Head of the priests. 50 years old. His spirit is unyielding, autocratic and cruel. Carries himself majestically.
AMONASRO. King of Ethiopia and father of Aida, with olive skin and dusky red complexion. 40 years old. Unconquerable warrior, full of love for his fatherland. Violent and impetuous in character.

also shown to be capable of manipulating Radames (in Act III) in order to placate the ghost of her mother and other near-mythical spectres of national defeat and victimisation whose memory her father so demagogically re-enacts for her. Radames seems not to recognise Aida's fighting spirit until he has become its victim. We, the audience, know better, for, in addition to seeing Aida lash out briefly at Amneris, we hear her express horror in 'Ritorna vincitor' at the thought of her father in chains, a moment that helps explain her decision to co-operate in his scheme two acts later.

Amneris is so many things, successively or all at once, that one can see why commentators often prefer her to all the other characters. She is a pampered princess but also a stereotypically lustful, man-hungry Middle-Eastern woman; a control freak, furious when she doesn't get her way; a seductive schemer; a gloating sadist; and – yes – a tender heart that has come to know love, however unrequited.[64] Her arioso in the beginning of the Nile Scene touchingly reveals what we might call her 'Aida' side. Amneris is also described in the *disposizione scenica* as 'impetuous', an adjective that perhaps prompts a comparison with Amonasro. Certainly both are ruthless in pursuit of their agendas. But while Amneris employs ruses to wring secrets out of Aida and Radames, but fails utterly when she tries to blackmail Radames in Act IV, Amonasro is more truly 'cunning' (Verdi's word was 'furbo'),

[64] On Middle-Eastern stereotypes, see my 'Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers, Muezzins and Timeless Sands: Musical Images of the Middle East', *The Exotic in Western Music*, Bellman, 104–36, 326–33.

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as he needs to be, given his struggles with an imperial power.[65] His instrumentarium of deception is varied and specific, yet even he fails in the end, perhaps because he was unable to imagine that another male – an Egyptian, no less! – might be 'full of love for his fatherland' and thus cannot be threatened or bought, even with visions of 'love crown[ing] the desires of your heart' in an Ethiopian paradise. Verdi and his team seem to have wanted to keep the drama's two opposing forces in balance, which meant seeing Amonasro's single-mindedness as a form of blindness: not the blindness of Radames as a leader undone by love and by a system undeserving of his devotion, but the blindness of the political fanatic (a characterisation that, of course, fits well with the madman's hair and eyes in Figs. 3 and 5).

As the *disposizione*'s character sketches suggest, each of the principals projects some sense of universality, partly through his or her very specificity or gender and nationality. In other words, we know enough about Radames to understand his motivations, sympathise with his dreams, regret his naïve trust in the governing stratum and admire his dogged honesty and his willingness to face the consequences of betraying the country that he had so courageously led in battle just days before.[66] The character needn't be a soldier, really. He could be a businessman, Secretary of State or Prime Minister, a college president, a country's leading nuclear-energy expert: anyone (male or female) who had believed too much in a corrupt organisation, repressive regime, or manipulative, even demagogic administration and had persisted too long in thinking that s/he could 'improve the system by working from within' only to find his or her dreams and earnestly proposed reforms crushed by harsh realities. True, the character needed to be defined as male when this opera was written, and the governmental monolith he serves and betrays could only have been shown as ancient and Eastern, even though more recent models lurk behind it. But Radames is surely more than just a male today, as he was always more than just an ancient Egyptian.[67]

The same can be true of a female character. It is easy to find examples in the real world of individuals who are trapped, forced to hide their desires and swallow their pride. In 1871 this sensitive, suffering, resilient character needed to be female: no leading male character could have been portrayed as a positive embodiment of (in the words of the *disposizione scenica*) 'meekness' and 'gentleness'. It also helped that she was made Ethiopian and so allowed to dream in a curling oboe melody about a kingdom where life can be imagined as free and simple, and that she was allowed to enchant her resistant lover with visions of that same peaceable kingdom, through three low flutes in smooth parallel motion. The Ethiopia of her musicalised imagination is certainly freer and simpler than any that can be found in modern-day urban society. An escape route is being sketched here not just for Aida and her

[65] Letter to Ghislanzoni, 7 October [1870], in *I Copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio (Milan, 1913), 650; and Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 75. 'Furbo' can also mean 'shrewd', 'clever', even 'malicious'.

[66] On Radames as 'political opportunist and self-absorbed dreamer', see Huebner, ' "O patria mia" ', 173–5.

[67] For more on the possibility of operatic characters transcending the seemingly defining category of gender, see my 'What Are These Women Doing in Opera?'

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conflicted lover but for all who feel the crushing weight of societal norms and restrictions. One can well imagine that in 'O patria mia' Aida is envisioning not a kingdom but a queendom, since there are suggestions early in the opera that she will herself be monarch, rather than merely a king's wife. Radames, soliloquising, sees himself crowning her as she sits upon a high throne, and Aida sings to herself of his giving her back 'una reggia': meaning a palace, but also a larger realm.

Meanwhile, the opera's Ethiopia is in chains: how to read this country and the Egypt that has enchained it? One fraught possibility is that the opera's Egypt might refer to, or be 'read' as, Europe in its aspect as imperialist coloniser, a reading that would, presumably, identify darker-skinned Ethiopia with European-conquered territories in, say, North Africa, India or Indo-China. Aida's frank castigation (in her Act I aria) of Egypt as her country's 'oppressor' resonates through the opera. So do the recurrent, poignant descriptions of the Ethiopian landscape and villages: by Radames in Act I ('lovely sky', 'gentle breezes') and by Aida in Act III ('blue skies' and 'gentle native breezes' – one sees where Radames was getting his information from – 'green hills', 'perfumed shores') and by Amonasro soon after. Much of this is echoed by music of sweet-sad temper, often consisting of little more than a pedal-supported melody.[68]

Particularly worth noting are Amonasro's words describing the remembered homeland to Aida (and the audience), words that find a musical correlative in the seductive melody 'Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate'. The Ethiopian leader speaks, for example, of 'templi d'or' whose altars had been desecrated by the Egyptian invaders. Though we don't hear another word about these sacred sites, this simple but luminous description, in the context of Amonasro's travel-brochure rhetoric about other aspects of Ethiopia – 'aromatic forests', 'cool valleys' and modest 'houses' (whose quasi-sacred domesticity the Egyptians have recently 'profaned' by 'drag[ging] away in chains the captured/raped young women' [le vergini rapite]) – resonates as a contrast to the dark and cavernous Egyptian temple of Vulcan (Phthà), which we visit twice in the opera and whose giant statues overwhelm the characters. Ethiopia's 'templi d'or' seem to involve no oppressive priestly hierarchy, perhaps no priests or statues at all, and their gold decorations seem no product of Egyptian-style foreign plunder but, rather, a simple beauty drawn from local soil or river beds, smelted, hammered and shaped by patient, loving hands.[69]

The libretto gives us many cues, then, to perceive Ethiopians as the beleaguered and somewhat idealised primitives in a heavily imperialist scenario largely consistent

[68] Sometimes the melody is shadowed by a lower voice in such a way as to suggest quasi-pastoral 'horn fifths' (or fourths), as in the central section and final bars of 'Celeste Aida'. For a detailed discussion of the musical language of 'Celeste Aida', see Huebner, ' "O patria mia" ', 167.

[69] The libretto hints, similarly, that Ethiopia's army consists of a mass of undifferentiated 'prodi' (brave warriors/faithful followers) unlike the hierarchically organised Egyptian one, with its 'falangi' (phalanxes) and 'condottier supremo' (a phrase implying various levels of 'condottieri').

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with long-standing scholarly views of a backward, put-upon Nubia.[70] And perhaps we can even sense something of the music of those golden temples in the hymn-cum-lullaby of 'Ma tu Re' with which Amonasro – and Aida and the slave-prisoners, who immediately repeat it – persuade the *popolo egiziano* on stage that his people mean no harm and deserve to be treated with the same mercy that the king might want for his own people some time in the future. Surely the Golden Rule of Judeo-Christian tradition has never been more cynically invoked. Yet such is the innocence and integrity of the tune and the reassuring rightness of its harmony that even the audience may feel that Amonasro is sincere at this moment: that they are hearing aesthetic, hence political, Truth.

Imperialist parallels

As we have seen, the metaphors of empire and conquest can resonate in many ways at once. One can accept a 'colonialist' interpretation of the opera's Egypt without denying that it might also refer to oppressive European militarism more generally. Verdi himself linked the imperial Egyptians to the smugness of Bismarck's Prussia in a letter to Ghislanzoni: 'Eight more [lines] must be added for priests. ''We have triumphed with the help of divine providence . . .''. Look at King Wilhelm's telegrams [after the Germans defeated the French at Sedan on 1 September 1870]'.[71] Once one admits that ancient Egyptians can be stand-ins for German troops with rifles and steel helmets, one is moving swiftly back in the direction of admitting that the opera is aiming at, or at least allows, a kind of 'universalising' reading about the abuses and corruptions endemic to any system of absolute power, especially when that system involves a supposedly holy alliance of religious authority with the state. Ramfis, though nominally head priest, seems to function throughout the opera almost as foreign minister or even defence minister.

Or maybe that castigation of a theocracy is coloured also by specific images of religion and power in the Middle East: as Said points out without elaborating, the portrait of Ramfis seems 'informed . . . by [Verdi's] ideas about the despotic Oriental potentate, a man who will exact vengeance out of sheer blood-thirst masked in legalism and scriptural precedent'.[72] This image of the Middle East as characterised by an almost uniquely arbitrary legal system seemed authorised, at the time, by the many tales of summary executions in the *Thousand and One Nights*, tales often taken for simple fact.[73] It was also widely known that over the course of

[70] Long-standing but now challenged: see O'Connor, *Ancient Nubia*, 6. Della Seta (' ''O cieli azzurri'' ', 62) claims something of the opposite of what I have been arguing, namely that Egypt and Ethiopia are equal powers and thus that neither is the oppressor.

[71] 8 September 1870, in Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 61. The verses that Ghislanzoni then crafted invoke the gods – 'supreme arbiters' – in just this way.

[72] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 121.

[73] On the origin of the *Nights* and the unshakeable assumption (e.g., by translator and scholar Edward William Lane) that it provides reliable social description of a largely unchanging society, see Robert Irwin, *Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London, 1994), 23–4, 43–102, 144–58. On images (verbal, visual) of summary executions in the Middle East, see my 'Constructing the Musical ''Other'' ', 280–1.

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recent decades much of Arabia had come under the command of followers of the Wahhabist sect of Islam, which rejected – indeed waged *jihad* against – not only civil government but all other sects of Islam.[74] The Wahhabi version of *shari'a* (Muslim law) was, and remains, particularly austere and, to most Western eyes, confining and unforgivably cruel.[75] Western intolerance for Islam in general increased throughout the later nineteenth century (and into the twentieth), as local resistance to the process of Western colonialisation in North Africa (including Italian-controlled Libya) was 'mobilised by use of Islamic symbols'.[76]

It may seem strange to argue that the portrayal of ancient Egyptians in *Aida* is coloured by images of various entities that, in the real world, were often set against each other in various struggles for power. Among many potentially relevant clashes of the contemporary moment and immediate past, one might want to place *Aida* in dialogue especially with events concerning the tension between church and state within Europe and Europe's encounters with the Islamic Middle East:

Napoleon conquering and occupying Italy (and imprisoning the Pope);

Austro-Hungary (and Britain) bringing Napoleon to his knees, then taking France's place as landlord to Italy and restoring the Papal States;

Pius IX denouncing the (often secular-leaning) proponents of an independent Italy (1861) and promulgating the doctrine of Papal infallibility (1870);

the Prussians taking their turn at humiliating the French (1870–71);

Britain, France and other European nations conquering portions of the Islamic world (and beyond) in the course of the nineteenth century, in the face of growing native opposition;[77]

a native Islamic empire – Ottoman – facing its own nascent (Islamicist) opposition: Wahhabism;

those same Wahhabists, increasing in power in their spread across the peninsula and attacking Shi'ite locals.

Other roughly contemporaneous equivalents elsewhere in the world come readily to mind and did at the time. In an 1896 interview the composer expressed disgust at English rule in India and at Italy's then-recent attempts at subduing Ethiopia. Indeed, if the stated month of the interview (September) is correct, Verdi is here welcoming Italy's resounding defeat, earlier that year, at the battle of Adwa (at the hands of 100,000 soldiers from all parts of Ethiopia).

Here you have a great and ancient people [in India] who have now fallen prey to the English. But the English will be sorry! A people might suffer tyranny, oppression, maltreatment – and the English are sons of bitches. Then comes the moment when national sentiment,

[74] Wahhabism was driven back several times by a coalition of Egypt and the Ottoman Empire but regained its territory beginning with the capture of Riyadh in 1902; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, 1991), 257–8, 274, 348–9, 446, 457.

[75] Today Saudi Arabia remains its stronghold and (as has become clearer since 11 September 2001) its active proponent throughout the world, including, famously at the moment, in Nigeria but also in Indonesia and other far-flung places.

[76] Hourani, *History*, 312, 348.

[77] This reading has the immediate oddity – though one that does not necessarily render it invalid – of making the opera's Ethiopia stand for (among other lands of Verdi's day) Egypt.

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which no one can withstand, reawakens. That's how we treated the Austrians. Alas, we [Italians] are playing the tyrant now in Africa – inopportunely, and we shall pay for it. It is said that we are going there to bring those people our own [Western] civilization. A fine civilization we have, with all its miseries! Those people will not know what to make of it, and in many respects they are much more civilized than we![78]

Europeans were not alone in drawing parallels between different situations of imperial domination. An anonymous Egyptian journalist and opera-goer, in an extended obituary for Verdi in *al-Muqtataf* (The Harvest), a journal heavy with technological and scientific articles but also cultural ones, explicitly praised his own country's growing resistance to the British by equating it with the Risorgimento of Verdi's younger days:

Just as orators are not successful unless they have a disposition toward revolution and revolt against the prevailing situation in their land, so masters of the art of singing do not tug on [their listeners'] hearts unless they have this [same] disposition . . . Abdu Efendi al-Hamuli . . . incited feelings of hatred [towards the British] in the hearts [of his listeners], and thus [their] souls were in complete agreement with him. . . . So it was with Verdi. . . . He incorporated revolutionary tendencies in his operas. Through him the souls [of the Italians] came back to life.[79]

The writer expresses himself with surprising directness, no doubt because the journal was published in Beirut rather than under the censorship regime of Egypt. Elsewhere in the obituary, he is a little less direct. He recalls that he and his friends, by attending performances of *Aida* in Cairo, finally understood how the ancient, 'pagan' Egyptian religious system – which they had previously rejected as a low-level 'humbug' involving little 'intelligence' – had actually been quite sophisticated. Through 'the mastery of music over the rational powers of men' (and through 'the humility of [the religion's] priests and priestesses'), 'the worship of [many] gods' had 'captivated [the ancient Egyptians'] minds' (mind and rationality are near-mantras for this Westernising, though anti-British, author) and 'turned their souls [instead] towards religiosity and piety'; that is, towards passivity.[80] The parallel here to modern times – to Egypt's supine position under the control of more such organised 'humbug', this time coming from abroad – is implicit but clear.

Similarly, the noted classicist poet and Islamic spokesman Ahmad Sauqi wrote an elegy (likewise in 1901) on Verdi's life and death, in which he emphasised that *Aida*, by re-enacting the glory of ancient days, gave promise of a future greatness for Egypt.

[78] Italo Pizzi, 'Unpublished Verdi Memoirs', in *Encounters with Verdi*, ed. Marcello Conati, trans. Richard Stokes (Ithaca, 1984), 337–57, here 351, here incorporating some details of wording from George Martin, *Verdi: His Music, Life and Times* (London, 1965), 466–8; discussed in Budden, *Verdi*, 150. See also John MacKenzie's 'Occidentalism', 342, 344 n. 10, and *Orientalism*, 173 n. 38; on the battle of Adwa, see Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1974* (London, 1991), 72–9.

[79] *al-Muqtataf*, vol. 26, March 1901, part 3, as quoted in Peter Bachmann, 'Zwei arabische Verdi-Würdigungen aus dem Jahre 1901', in *Musikalische Quellen – Quellen zur Musikgeschichte: Festschrift für Martin Staehelin zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ulrich Konrad, with Jürgen Heidrich and Hans Joachim Marx (Göttingen, 2002), 439–47, here 443–4.

[80] The same obituary, in Bachmann, 'Zwei arabische Verdi-Würdigungen', 442.

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> [*Aida*] represents Egypt, for this [our present] era,
> As it was in the ages gone by.
> On the basis of [*Aida*] we recall those [long-ago] nights
> And seek [in the Egyptian reality of the present] those visions
> that go out from it.[81]

Reading *Aida* whole

I would like to end by keeping this fluid equation of various imperialisms and supremacies in mind as I return to the opera's two female characters. All the care that the librettist, costumers and set designers took to portray Amneris as a distinctively Middle Eastern creature of privilege and power helps us to perceive her selfishness as the natural manner of an aristocrat from that corner of the world. Thus we accept as believable her vicious verbal mistreatment of Aida and her gloating aside in the Triumphal Scene when she learns that she is to wed Radames ('[Now] let the slave come steal my beloved, if she dare!'). As I suggested earlier, this Oriental 'surface' may sugarcoat a portrayal of the privileged classes in Verdi's Europe. But below the oriental layer lies the possibility of a universalised characterisation: Amneris representing the abuses to which near-absolute power tends. At the same time, it is widely accepted that Amneris is the character in the opera who undergoes the biggest transformation. In this sense, she may enact for us all a process of purgation that we would prefer to be spared in our own lives – or perhaps a purgation that we might hope to be granted. That such catharsis can come in the shape of a spoiled Egyptian princess yet be felt as 'true' by Westerners and other inhabitants of the industrialised world is part of the wonder of operatic metaphor.

This process is at work more subtly in relation to Aida. Too often described as 'lack[ing] individuality'[82], Aida is – or can, and should be – a complex character. We have seen that performances in the opera's first six or seven decades seem to have given more play to her anger and intensity than one might expect of the 'meek' creature described in the *disposizione scenica*. A quote from Verdi supports this emphasis on her grit: 'The third act of *Aida* . . . can be a success, but only if there is a strong Aida, one with great vocal and dramatic ability', and the point can be extended beyond Act III: circumstances dictate that Aida rarely has the freedom to speak her mind, but a fine singing actress can convey her inner struggle even in scenes in which she is forced to look on in silence.[83]

Even in her more static or repressed aspects, the figure of Aida represents something so central to the values of civil society that it deserves to be made explicit: tolerance and respect for the sanctity of an individual's human rights and

[81] Ahmad Sauqi, (untitled) elegy for Verdi, in Bachmann, 'Zwei arabische Verdi-Würdigungen', 446–7. My translation is based on Bachmann's German rendering as well as on Antoine Boudot-Lamotte's French one in the latter's *Ahmad Sawqi: L'homme et l'œuvre* (Damascus, 1977), 176–7.

[82] Arblaster, *Viva la libertà!*, 141.

[83] Letter of 22 November 1871, in Busch, *Verdi's 'Aida'*, 254.

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dignity. After all, if a reticent or seemingly submissive person wearing a slave's garment can turn out to be a princess – and, more basically, a person (of whatever social class or caste) seething with justifiable longings and anger – then perhaps we may feel ourselves invited, after we have left the theatre, to consider the merit of someone whose clothing or physical features or behaviour would tend to relegate her or him automatically to a feared or despised underclass. We may even recognise some kinship with such a person across the barriers of difference, determined as they tend to be by accidents of birth and history.

Gender, time, place, social arrangements: all are set in motion, all matter, and all can be transcended to some degree, while one watches, listens or, afterwards, reflects. Aida the character sinks/sings into unconsciousness and into the arms of the 'radiant angel of death' in the underground vault. *Aida*, the opera, remains vibratingly, sometimes disturbingly, alive. Ahmad Sauqi might not have disagreed:

> When those [musicians] who know [the divine marvels in
> Verdi's songs] come together [and perform them],
> Then one must say, 'Lightning and thunder that shoot forth
> from a morning storm cloud'.
> But when they [suddenly] whisper them, after having
> thundered aloud,
> Then it is [like] the rustling of jewellery on a beautiful woman.
> Verdi's hair turned grey – yea, he lived past the [usual] age of
> grey hair;
> But the youthfulness of *Aida* gleams in beauty.[84]

[84] Ahmad Sauqi, elegy (untitled) for Verdi, translation based on those in Bachmann, 'Zwei arabische Verdi-Würdigungen', 448, and in Boudot-Lamotte's *Ahmad Sawqi*, 176–7.

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