

Aida

Opera in 4 acts by Giuseppe Verdi

libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni

First performance: Cairo, Khedivial Opera House, 24 December 1871

First performance in Europe: Milan, La Scala, 8 February 1872

Characters:

Aïda, an Ethiopian princess captured and enslaved to Amneris, in love with Radamès - Soprano

Radamès, an Egyptian captain of the guard, in love with Aïda - Tenor

Amneris, daughter of the King of Egypt, in love with Radamès – Mezzo-soprano

The King of Egypt, father of Aïda - Bass

Amonasro, King of Ethiopia - Baritone

Ramfis, a high priest - Bass

A messenger - Tenor

Voice of the high priestess - Soprano

Priests, priestesses, ministers of state, captains, soldiers, court officials, Ethiopian slaves and prisoners, ordinary Egyptians

Setting – according to the original librettos published for the first performances in Cairo and Milan, the opera is set in ancient Egypt in the cities of Memphis and Thebes during the era of the pharaohs; references in the first librettos to Memphis as the location of the palace of the King of Egypt narrow down the time frame to the Old Kingdom of Egypt (ca. 2200-2700 BC), which included the establishment of the first six pharaonic dynasties and was an active period of pyramid building; Memphis was the capital of the Egyptian monarchy until the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2055 – 1650 BC), when the capital was moved to Thebes, much farther to the south; no genuine historical names or historical events are mentioned in the libretto to assist in refining the historical framework; the references to warfare with Ethiopia are completely fictitious; neither a Kingdom of Ethiopia nor a well-defined Ethiopian ethnic identity existed during the period of the Old Kingdom, and the traditional homelands of the Ethiopians never bordered on Egypt; the references to conflicts with a kingdom on the southern borders of Egypt could properly refer only to one of the various Nubian kingdoms with which Egypt was at war intermittently throughout the periods of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms

Synopsis

Act I

Scene 1 – a hall in the royal palace at Memphis

The high priest Ramfis tells Radamès that he will be selected as the commander of the forces that will need to be sent to fight against the Ethiopians who are expected to make war with Egypt. Left alone to his own thoughts, Radamès hopes to achieve victory in battle and win the hand of Aïda, an Ethiopian slave captured in battle with whom he has secretly fallen in love. Aïda is also secretly in love with Radamès, and she harbors another secret: nobody at the court of

Egypt knows that she is actually the daughter of Amonasro, the King of Ethiopia, who has planned to invade Egypt in order to free her.

Amneris, daughter of the King of Egypt, enters the hall with Radamès still present. She is also in love with him, but senses that he loves someone else. When her slave Aïda appears, Amneris notices that Radamès looks unsettled. She suspects that Aïda might be the one he loves and tries to hide her jealousy.

The King of Egypt enters along with Ramfis and the entire royal court. A messenger announces that the Ethiopians, led by King Amonasro, are marching towards Thebes. The king declares war and proclaims Radamès as the choice of the goddess Isis to command the army needed to repulse the Ethiopians. Radamès then proceeds to the temple of the god Ptah to confirm his appointment as leader of the Egyptian army.

Left alone in the hall, Aïda expresses her agony at having to balance competing loyalties toward her father, her native country of Ethiopia, and Radamès..

Scene 2 – interior of the temple of Ptah in Memphis

Sacred ceremonies and dances are performed by the priestesses in honor of Ptah, after which Radamès is ratified as leader of the Egyptian army. Everyone in the temple offers prayers to Ptah for the victory of Egypt against Ethiopia.

Act II

Scene 1 – a hall in the apartments of Amneris

Radamès wins the battle against the Ethiopians and has driven them from Thebes. Amneris ordered her slaves to dance and make music to celebrate the victory, always doubting that Radamès loves her instead of Aïda.

When Aïda enters the chamber, Amneris asks everyone to leave. Alone with Aïda, she tells her falsely that Radamès has died in the battle. She does this to test Aïda's reaction to the news. Shocked to hear that her beloved Radamès has died and believing that she now has nothing to lose by telling the truth, Aïda openly declares her eternal love for Radamès. This confession enrages Amneris. She vows to take revenge on Aïda and leaves her alone in the chamber to sort out her feelings.

Scene 2 – at one of the entrances into the city of Thebes

Radamès returns from battle and his troops march into Thebes. He is greeted as a hero. The residents of Thebes are shown a procession of booty and captives. In recognition of his triumph, the King of Egypt decrees that Radamès may request any reward he may think of, and it will be granted to. Among the Ethiopian captives paraded before the jeering crowds in chains is Amonasro, the father of Aïda. She instinctively rushes to her father, who warns her to conceal his identity as King of Ethiopia. Amonasro deceptively proclaims to the Egyptians that the Ethiopian king has been slain in battle. Aïda, Amonasro, and the captured Ethiopians beg the King of Egypt for mercy, but Ramfis and the Egyptian priests call for their death, lest they one day will fight again.

As his reward for winning such a great victory over the Ethiopians, Radamès requests the release of the captives. The king of Egypt feels that he must grant the request. He also declares that Radamès will be his successor and will marry his daughter Amneris. At the suggestion of

Ramfis, the king orders Aïda and Amonasro to remain as hostages to ensure that the Ethiopians will not try to avenge their defeat.

Act III

On the banks of the Nile

Prayers are offered on the eve of the wedding of Amneris and Radamès in the Temple of Isis. Outside, Aïda waits to meet with Radamès as planned with him earlier. Amonasro suddenly appears and orders Aïda to learn the location of the Egyptian army from Radamès. Aïda is torn in her loyalties, but she reluctantly agrees to her father's wishes.

When Radamès arrives, Amonasro hides behind a rock and listens to what Aïda and Radamès say to each other. Radamès reassures Aïda that he will marry her, while Aïda convinces him to flee to the desert with her. In order to facilitate their escape, Radamès proposes a safe route that will not lead to their discovery, and he does reveal the location of the Egyptian army and its plan of attack. Amonasro clearly hears what Radamès has revealed about the positions of the Egyptian armies and comes out of hiding. Radamès immediately realizes the enormity of his error in confiding this information to Aïda.

As Amneris and Ramfis leave the temple, they see Radamès speaking with the Amonasro and call the royal guards. Amonasro intends to kill Amneris and Ramfis before the guards can hear them, but Radamès does not permit it. Instead, he disarms Amonasro and orders him to flee into the desert with Aïda. When the guards arrive, Radamès is arrested as a traitor.

Act IV

Scene 1 – a hall in the royal palace of Memphis

Amneris is still in love with Radamès and is anxious to save him. Wracked with guilt, she realizes the enormous error she made in having Radamès arrested for treason. She calls for a guard to bring him to her, then asks Radamès to deny the accusations made against him. He refuses to consider it. Radamès is relieved to know that Aïda is still alive and hopes that she has reached her own country.

Offstage, Ramfis recites the charges against Radamès and calls on him to defend himself. All he does is remain silent. Without any answer to the charges, he is condemned to death as a traitor. Amneris, who remains visible onstage, protests that Radamès is innocent, and she pleads with the priests to let him go free. The priests pay no attention to her. They sentence Radamès to be buried alive. Amneris weeps as he is taken away.

Scene 2 – the stage is divided into two floors, the upper one the Temple of Ptah, the lower one a vault in which Radamès has been sealed

Radamès thinks that he is alone in the vault in which he is entombed, but Aïda hid herself there in order to die with him. Once she appears to Radamès, the lovers agree to accept their fate. In the temple of Ptah above, Amneris prays to the goddess Isis to grant her peace after what she has done. As priests pray to Ptah, Aïda gently dies in the arms of Radamès.