

Week 4

Verdi's *Aida* and Orientalism

Origins and Premiere

- Based on a fictional story from Egyptian antiquity by French Egyptologist August Mariette
- Commissioned for the opening of the Cairo Opera House—premiered December 24, 1871
- Verdi attended EU premiere at La Scala in February 1872 (Tereza Stolz=Aida)
- How does it reflect social and political aspects of European society in the late nineteenth century?

Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?

- Paul Robinson's article from 1993
- Nineteenth-Century Egypt=French semi-colony (the EU controls Suez Canal from 1869; Napoleonic invasions; large EU population in Cairo—main patrons of the opera house)
- ORIENTALIST CONVENTIONS SUBVERTED: instead of West vs. Orient—Egypt vs. Ethiopia
- Egypt is aggressive + oppressive; Ethiopia is presented with sympathy—ANTI-IMPERIALIST WORK
- Ralph Locke's article from 2005
- Stereotypes both subverted AND embodied

Egypt's Music: Ambiguous (European + Exotic)

- Act 1, Scene 1: 19:50 (“Su! Del Nilo!”=“Arise! Haste to the Nile!”)
- Act 1, Scene 2: 36:50 (“Nume, custode e vindice”=“O god, guardian and avenger”)—Egyptian prayer
- Act 2, Scene 2: 59:30 (“Gloria all’Egitto”=“Glory to Egypt”)
- Act 4, Scene 1: 2:13:10 (the priests’ chant)
- Exotic Egyptian Music (according to Robinson purely color, not associated with the Egyptians’ identity)
- Act 1, Scene 2: 30:30 (“Possente Fthà”=“Mighty Fthà”)
- Dances: e.g. Act 2, Scene 1, the dance of the little Moorish slaves in Amneris’s boudoir: 45:15

Ethiopia's Music: Ambiguous (sympathetic "Self" or threatening "Other")?

- Aida's reminiscent motive (opening of overture, 01:30) + Act 1, Scene 1, cavatina "Ritorna vincitor" (opening 22:50; motive 24:30)
- Act 3, Scene 1: Aida's romanza "Oh, patria mia" (1:31:30)—exotic or pastoral?
- Act 3, Scene 1: Aida-Radamès Duet (opening: 1:45:45—Radamès music; seductive Aida 1:48:50=cantabile "Fuggiam gli ardori inospiti"="Let's flee from the harsh passions"—FEMME FATALE; 1:53:40, cabaletta "Si, fuggiam di questa mura"="Yes, let us flee from these walls")
- Act 3, Scene 1: Aida-Amonasro Duet: savage brutality? (opening: 1:37:50; 1:38:50, cantabile "Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate"="You shall see once more the perfumed forests"; 1:41:20 quarrel—reconciliation 1:44:30)