

Critical Race and Whiteness Studies



www.acrawsa.org.au/ejournal

Volume , 10, Number 1, 2014

SPECIAL ISSUE: EDWARD SAID—INTELLECTUAL, CULTURAL CRITIC, ACTIVIST

Said and Aida: Culture, Imperialism, Egypt and Opera

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In Culture and Imperialism (1993) Edward Said argues that Verdi's 1871 opera Aida is a prime example of "a cultural discourse relegating and confining the non-European to a secondary racial, cultural and ontological status" (1993, p. 70). But is Aida as Orientalist a work as Said maintains? Building on earlier articles challenging Said's thesis by Robinson (1993), Bergeron (2002) and Guarracino (2010), and with particular reference to Osborne's 1969 book on Verdi's operas, this article explores three aspects of Said's analysis of Aida: the genesis of the work, the work as a symbol of European political aspirations in the Middle East, and the work as a contribution to the Europeanisation of Egypt. The article continues with a discussion of the music in the opera, a matter scarcely mentioned by Said. Again three aspects are explored: the so-called 'exotic' music, the triumphal music, and the intimate music for the three central characters. The author concludes that the opera is far more complex than Said indicates, and that a thorough investigation of the work yields more challenges to Said's thesis than evidence to support it.

Keywords: Aida, Egypt, imperialism, music, opera, Verdi

Verdi's Grand Opera *Aida* was first performed in the Opera House in Cairo, Egypt, on Christmas Eve 1871. It was Verdi's 26th opera, the work of an experienced composer who knew his trade, and it has become a favourite in the operatic repertoire. Its story, of love across the divide of social and political difference, and its spectacular setting, in the Egypt of the Pharaohs, makes *Aida* a quintessentially Romantic nineteenth-century work. But to Edward Said, the opera was a hallmark of a different kind: he regarded it as a representation of Europe's distorted view of the Middle East.

Let us remind ourselves what the opera is about. The Egyptians, under their army commander Radames, are engaged in a war of conquest against the Ethiopians ruled by King Amonasro. The king's daughter, Aida, has been

captured, and she is now a slave girl serving the Pharaoh's daughter, Amneris. Within this political context a love triangle has emerged: Amneris is in love with Radames, but he is not interested. He secretly loves Aida and his feelings are reciprocated. A new battle is fought between Egyptians and Ethiopians, during which King Amonasro is captured. The celebrations in Egypt are considerable, with a triumphal march displaying booty and captives including a disguised King Amonasro. The Pharaoh announces that his daughter and Radames are to be married, to Amneris's delight and Radames' alarm. Amonasro meets Aida and calls on his daughter's patriotic duty to lure Radames into revealing his further military plans against the Ethiopians. Radames and Aida, meet, exchange vows, and agree to run away together. But during the course of their conversation Radames lets slip where the Egyptian army will attack the Ethiopians. Alas, Amneris has overheard. She denounces Radames as a traitor, and the High Priest Ramfis sentences him to death. Amneris, realising she is losing the man she loves, tries to persuade Radames to defend himself, but he will not. The sentence is to be buried alive in a tomb, but when Radames has been escorted there, and the door has been shut, he discovers he is not alone. Aida has chosen to die with him.

During his career as a cultural historian and a music critic, Edward Said wrote several times about *Aida*, but most fully in *Culture and Imperialism*, where it is included as an example of "The Empire at Work". His perspective on the opera can be summed up in the following.

Aida embodies, as it was intended to do, the authority of Europe's version of Egypt at a moment in its nineteenth-century history ... A full contrapuntal appreciation of *Aida* reveals a structure of reference and attitude, a web of affiliations, connections, decisions, and collaborations, which can be read as leaving a set of ghostly notations in the opera's visual and musical text. (1993, p. 151)

The "ghostly notations", once deciphered, expose the "sordid imperial exploitation" in the work (1993, p. 133). Two years earlier, in *Musical Elaborations*, Said had described *Aida* as "saturated ... in the European domination of the Middle East" (1991, p. 65); now he confirms that view. "As a visual, musical and theatrical spectacle", he writes, "*Aida* does a great many things for and in European culture, one of which is to confirm the Orient as an essentially exotic, distant and antique place in which Europeans can mount certain shows of force" (1993, p. 134).

These assertions are fully compatible with Said's wider thesis about European literature, and, given his own involvement with Western Classical Music as well as his years of education in Egypt, it would perhaps have been odd if he had not succumbed to the temptation to include *Aida* as an example of European imperialist culture. His views on the opera have been challenged by several other writers, however, and it is appropriate to ask whether he has dealt fairly with the opera. Is *Aida* as Orientalist a work as Said maintains?

Said begins with the genesis of the work. Verdi was tempted to compose the piece, he suggests, by the large fee offered by Khedive Ismail, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, and by the opportunity to create a totally unified work of art, "informed only by the aesthetic intention of a single creator. Thus an imperial

notion of the artist dovetailed conveniently with an imperial notion of a non-European world whose claims on the European composer were either minimal or non-existent" (1993, p. 140). The evidence of exploitation is clear, in Said's eyes, and it is supported by the involvement in the creation of the opera of the renowned French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, who in a letter in 1871 claimed that "*Aida* ... is in effect a product of my work. I am the one who convinced the viceroy to order its presentation; *Aida*, in a word, is a creation of my brain" (as cited in Said, 1993, p. 147). Mariette had designed the Egyptian pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1867, and Said points out that this pavilion was a European version of Egypt, not a historical representation of it. Verdi was to create the same thing in his opera, "ancient Egypt as reflected through the imperial eye" (1993, p. 142). The opera therefore modifies historical fact to present an 'Orientalised' Egypt, with inauthentic touches such as priestesses, conveniently added to display the exotically erotic, and a High Priest presented as a "despotic Oriental potentate" (1993, p. 146).

It is certainly true that Mariette played a role in the creation of *Aida*. Said is remiss, however, in omitting the contributions of others. In particular, he slides over the fact that it was Khedive Ismail's idea to have an 'Egyptian opera' composed for performance at the Cairo Opera House to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. No one from Europe foisted this idea on him, so far as we know—and if they did Said would presumably have mentioned this, since it would be splendid evidence to support his thesis. The Khedive's timing was not good, however, and he probably did not realise the time required to write and compose an opera. In any event, the opera house opened in 1869 without its 'Egyptian opera'. Certainly, once the Khedive expresses his intention, he turned to Mariette for assistance, and Mariette certainly wrote and printed a story which he suggested to the Khedive would fit the bill. The story then passed into the hands of Camille du Locle, a librettist who had provided the text for Verdi's opera *Don Carlos* in 1867. Du Locle sent Verdi a four-page synopsis of the *Aida* story, which interested him. This was but one of several proposals that Verdi was considering in 1870, but it quickly became his first choice (Osborne, 1969, p. 372). Du Locle drafted a libretto in French, which was then translated into Italian by Antonio Ghislanzoni. Verdi too had a hand in the libretto, proposing alterations and amendments to the text. Given these circumstances, Mariette's claims begin to seem a little extravagant. Osborne undermines them further, pointing out that Auguste Mariette seems to have stolen his story from a novel written by his brother Edouard (1969, p. 378). At the same time, he cites Joseph Kerman's 1957 claim in *Opera and Drama* of a close similarity between the *Aida* story and that of *[La] Nitteti*, an opera libretto written by Pietro Metastasio in 1756 and set to music by at least fifteen composers during the eighteenth century. Metastasio in turn claimed the story came from Herodotus. Osborne writes "though the plot of *Nitteti* is not that of *Aida*, they are close enough to each other in several places for one reasonably to suspect that *Nitteti* was known to one of the authors of *Aida*" (1969, p. 380). Osborne further remarks on similarities between *Aida* and Racine's play *Bajazet* as well as Beaumarchais's play *Tarare*, set to music by Mozart's contemporary Salieri in 1787 (1969, pp. 381-382). Mariette's claim looks even more shaky. The fact that there may have been direct or indirect contributions to the opera libretto by other European writers does not of itself negate Said's thesis, for they may well have had the same Orientalist view of Egypt as Mariette, even if not in quite so extreme a form. However, for Said to have ignored or excluded the information provided in an easily available book by

Osborne, an authoritative opera scholar and one surely known to as well-schooled a music critic as Said, opens him to the accusation of selectivity in presenting supporting evidence for his argument.

Said's second claim is a political one: that *Aida* supports European political agendas in Egypt in the early 1870s. Khedive Ismail was keen to expand southwards, towards Ethiopia. According to Said, "the British regarded Egyptian objectives there ... as a threat to their Red Sea hegemony, and the safety of their route to India; nevertheless, prudently shifting policy, the British encouraged Ismail's moves in East Africa as a way of blocking French and Italian ambitions in Somalia and Ethiopia" (1993, p. 151). However, "from the French point of view, incorporated by Mariette, *Aida* dramatised the dangers of a successful Egyptian policy of force in Ethiopia, especially since Ismail himself—as Ottoman viceroy—was interested in such ventures as a way of achieving more independence from Istanbul" (Said, 1993, p. 151). Presumably, the argument is that Radames' attack on Ethiopia is an allegory of British support for Ismail, while Radames' betrayal and death represents a successful French opposition to this. This is a very ingenious plot by the French, so ingenious, indeed, that it not only fooled the Khedive and his advisors (who, presumably, would not have permitted the opera to proceed if they had perceived this message in it) but has also been missed by opera audiences, critics and musicologists ever since. Further, it is not altogether clear why the French would believe they could successfully influence Egyptian policy by going through the process of getting Mariette to persuade the Khedive to commission an opera from Verdi. Finally, it is difficult to imagine that Khedive Ismael would change his policy because the opera suggested he might lose his leading military commander as the result of a foolish infatuation with a slave girl, especially since the Egyptians are clearly victorious in any case. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is one of the silliest ideas Said ever came up with.

Paul Robinson presents a simpler perspective on the political content of the opera. He calls it "an immediate embarrassment" to Said's theory that in the opera the imperialist aggressor is Egypt, and the marginalised, victimised culture is the Ethiopian one (1993, p. 135). "Furthermore" he goes on,

Verdi's sympathies in the opera are wholeheartedly on the Ethiopian side. Egypt is represented as an authoritarian theocracy, tyrannised by its intolerant priesthood, while Ethiopia ... is repeatedly celebrated as a country of vernal beauty and heroic rectitude ... A more natural reading would be to see the opera as an anti-imperialist work, in which the exploitative relation between Europe and its empire has been translated into one between expansionist Egyptians and colonised Ethiopians. (Robinson, 1993, p. 135)

For Robinson, this is not at all unexpected.

In writing *Aida*, I would contend, [Verdi] identified Ethiopia with Italy, just as he associated Egypt with Habsburg Austria ... Ramfis and the Egyptian priesthood are products of Verdi's Risorgimento anti-clericalism; they are equated in his mind with the Habsburg Catholic hierarchy and the reactionary politics of the Roman papacy. (1993, p. 140)

Robinson's arguments have merit. If Said is correct in proposing that the discourse of *Aida* embodies nineteenth-century European imperialism, then

Robinson is surely no less plausible in proposing that it embodies the political aspirations of the Italian Risorgimento, in which Verdi and his operas played a significant and deliberate part. Indeed, this, rather than the Egyptian setting, may well have been what made the *Aida* story so appealing to Verdi.

Serena Guarracino picks up on this as she explores what Italian audiences at the time would have made of Verdi's opera. She suggests they would have viewed *Aida* with mixed feelings, identifying both with Ethiopia as an oppressed people, and with Egypt's nationalism. "At the time of *Aida's* conception", she writes, "Italy was working hard to transform itself from Ethiopia to Egypt, from being an oppressed, colonized, and fragmented peninsula to slowly and painfully becoming a European, modern political reality" (2010, p. 9). She points out that *Aida* herself, the Ethiopian slave-princess, is described in Radames' first act aria as "celeste *Aida*", invoking that most European of images, "the stereotype of the Catholic virgin martyr" (2010, p. 11).

One further aspect of this could perhaps be touched upon. Said's thesis in *Culture and Imperialism* is concerned with exposing "a cultural discourse relegating and confining the non-European to a secondary racial, cultural, ontological status" (1993, p. 70). The victims of this discourse are, for Said, the Arab nations of the Middle East, and the dominating race and culture is the European one. What *Aida* exposes, however, is a historical discourse in which Arab culture relegated and confined sub-Saharan Africans, like the inhabitants of Ethiopia, to a secondary racial, cultural and ontological status, particularly through slave-trade conducted by Arabs from the seventh century through the nineteenth. If we view Egypt in *Aida* through the lens of European imperialism, perhaps we could equally view Ethiopia in the opera through the lens of Arab imperial practices.

More persuasive in *Culture and Imperialism* is Said's connection of the opera to the economic situation in Egypt in the 1860s (1993, pp. 152-155). The country was being opened up more and more to European commerce and European entrepreneurs. Egypt's finances were directed to providing cheap loans to Europeans who would develop the city along European lines. The Suez Canal was a joint venture between French and English companies. Cairo was becoming a city of two communities, one wealthy and European and the other poor and Egyptian. The European community was to the west, a city of broad well-lit streets laid out in grids, with formal gardens, a railroad station, wheeled coaches, and running water. The native city was to the east, with narrow muddy streets, no street lights, and water delivered by pedlars. Said describes the location of the Opera House, for which *Aida* was composed, "at the centre of the north-south axis, in the middle of a spacious square, facing the European city" (1993, p. 155) and therefore with its back to the native quarter. He concludes that

Aida's Egyptian identity was part of the city's European facade ... for most of Egypt, *Aida* was an imperial *article de luxe* purchased by credit for a tiny clientele whose entertainment was incidental to their real purposes ... [it was] an imperial spectacle designed to alienate and impress an almost exclusively European audience. (1993, p. 156)

The first part of this argument focuses on the venue and the art-form. The Cairo Opera House had been opened on November 1 1869, two years before *Aida*, with a performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Certainly the building in the nineteenth century of European opera houses in other parts of the world, and the performance of European operas in them, were expressions of an imposed settler culture. Like education and legal systems imported from Europe, they were part of what Europeans considered a 'civilising mission', as well as being an opportunity for settlers to maintain their own traditions in a foreign land. Opera in Egypt, or in Manaus on the Amazon, or in Macao in China, was always part of a city's 'European facade'—the same facade that offered Said's parents educational opportunities for their son at Victoria College in Cairo in the late 1940s. In the context of Khedive Ismail's deliberate encouragement of European entrepreneurs, his 'Europeanisation' of Cairo, the opera house (and its offerings) can certainly be viewed as 'an imperial *article de luxe* purchased by credit,' but this is a generic comment and not one specific to *Aida*.

The contribution of *Aida* to this process lies in the way it provides a particular gloss on the culture of Ancient Egypt, via 'imperial spectacle'. Like Said, Katherine Bergeron argues that this spectacle had a more than operatic purpose: the opera "reproduced inside the theatre a vision of the new order that increasingly defined the state of things outside" (2002, p. 151). The scenes in which the Egyptian army prepares for war, and returns victorious from it, create an image of military discipline, one in which "the boundary between theatre and politics was conveniently blurred" (2002, p. 152). She draws attention to two categories in the new order: the leading of groups and self-discipline. Radames is an example of this, "less a clueless tenor than a kind of model citizen, a true Egyptian subject" (2002, p. 152). Radames' crisis occurs in Act 3 when he confronts his 'foil', Amonasro,

a totally unreconstructed monarch belonging to the 'old' order ... It is finally in this scene that we see Radames shouldering the full extent of his modern 'political' responsibility, forced to enact, so to speak, the 'private *siyasa*' through which he is no longer a leader of armies, but a leader of himself. (2002, p. 152-3)

But then he turns from 'victor' to 'traitor', from victor to traitor. His succumbing to the blandishments of Aida is a loss of discipline, for which he is suitably punished. Finally he yields to Ramfis and accepts the moral consequence of his actions. According to Bergeron, the opera should be viewed not as the imposition of European culture on Egypt from outside but as a representation of the Khedive's desire to create a 'modern' Egypt which puts together traditional and European elements. It may be that the Khedive could not have formulated such a policy without the influence of Europe, but it does suggest that Europe was less directly imposing its culture on Egypt via *Aida*. Indeed, Bergeron argues that Verdi should be freed from responsibility in this respect: "armed with little or no knowledge of modern Egypt, Verdi is unlikely to have formulated any such view of the opera's leading Egyptian male" (2002, p. 153).

These challenges to Said's view of the opera do not gainsay it. Rather, they suggest that a more nuanced view needs to be taken. Various agendas seem to be present: Khedive Ismail's, Mariette's, and Verdi's. While there is no need to question Said's fundamental view that works of art inevitably embody ideologies, there may be more than one ideology present in *Aida*. If they are not all

compatible, or even contiguous, that should not necessarily be cause for alarm. We are, after all, dealing with a work of art, one in a genre that includes multiple modes of expression.

By its very nature, an opera is more than a story and a verbal text. The discourse of a literary text, such as the novels of Conrad, Jane Austen and Albert Camus that Said discusses in *Culture and Imperialism*, is straightforward as a subject for analysis; however, in the form of a playscript the discourse becomes more complex, since the text is mediated by performers. In the case of an opera, an even more powerful mediation occurs: the text is now words plus actions plus music. Not only do performers and stage director mediate the text, but, at a more fundamental level, the music mediates the verbal text of stage action and dialogue, often significantly reinterpreting them as a musical text is created. It becomes difficult, and is in the end unsatisfactory if not negligent, to analyse only the scenario and text of an opera, and not to take into account the contribution of the music to the work as a whole.

This is not to suggest that Said completely ignores the music of *Aida*. After all, his knowledge of Western Classical Music was considerable: he was an accomplished pianist and for many years he wrote music reviews for the journal *The Nation*. In his section on *Aida* in *Culture and Imperialism* Said mentions Verdi's use of a flattened supertonic, the cliché invented in the nineteenth century to create what purported to be Arab harmony, as well as Verdi's use of contrapuntal techniques to create a monumental effect (1993, p. 151). Counterpoint was a term dear to Said's heart; he described his own relationship with traditional critical theory as contrapuntal. He states that the ballets and parades in the opera "are undermined in some some way" (1993, p. 149) without specifying in what way, except to cite a production of *Aida* in Cincinnati in which the Triumphal March of Act II included eleven different zoo animals and a "body count for the production of 261" (1993, p. 149). Such production excesses are not, of course, Verdi's responsibility, any more than including prostitutes practicing their profession in a production of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* in Berlin in 2004 is Mozart's responsibility.

Said has very little to say about the rest of the music, in particular, the music for the central human relationships in the opera. This is a pity, since the opera is, like all operas, essentially about human beings in crisis. *Pace* Said, the Egyptian setting could be regarded as incidental, like the setting in Ancient Gaul of Bellini's *Norma*, or the settings in Venice and Cyprus of Shakespeare's *Othello*. In none of these cases is the locale of the story crucial to the central interaction of the main characters. Indeed, contemporary productions of nineteenth-century operas often transpose the plot to quite different settings. A 1977 production of Weber's *Der Freischütz* at Covent Garden shifted the action from rural Germany to a defoliated Vietnam, a more recent production of Bizet's *Carmen* took the action from Spain to a car demolition yard in Latin America, and one of Wagner's *Die Walküre* translated the action from German forests and mountains to a public library (Pleasants, 1989, pp. 30-32). Peter Sellars' productions of Mozart's operas are famous if not notorious: *Le nozze di Figaro* located on the 52nd floor of Manhattan's Trump Tower, *Don Giovanni* in Harlem, and *Così fan tutte* in a New York diner. The implication of these productions is that the original setting of an opera is less important than the situations, dilemmas and emotional relationships of the characters. This is not to dismiss Said's notion that *Aida* may have been

conceived as an expression of Europe's distortions of the Middle East, but it does weaken the suggestion that this is a particularly significant aspect of the opera. It is not necessary to go as far as Joseph Kerman does in *Opera as Drama*, where he dismisses the Egyptian setting of *Aida* as a "careless application of local colour", (1988, p. 207) but we do need to beware of allowing the tail to wag the dog. As Paul Robinson suggests, "if *Aida* is an orientalist opera, then, it will have to be because of its music" (1993, p. 135).

Verdi's music falls into two broad categories: the public music for the spectacular scenes, and the private music for the intimate scenes. The first sign of Verdi's priorities comes in the Prelude, the first music heard in the opera. It opens with a simple and quiet statement by muted strings of a theme "later associated with Aida's love for Radames" (Osborne 1992, p. 384). This is followed by a theme used later to portray the implacable priests, before Aida's love theme returns, leading to music of conflict and eventually to a quiet, intimate ending. It is hard to construe this as a European 'show of force'; while the music is of course European, our sympathies are engaged right from the start with the victims of the Egyptian 'show of force' and in particular with the Ethiopian victim.

Said described the score of *Aida* as "overdeveloped" (2008, p. 40) but this adjective is scarcely applicable to the simple music which opens the opera. It could more convincingly be applied to the spectacular scenes, which include the second scene of Act 1 ("Grand Scene of the Consecration"), the Triumphal March in Act 2 Scene 2, and the Judgment Scene of the priests in Act 4. Two kinds of music can be discerned in these scenes.

Firstly, there is the music that purports to provide 'local colour', that is, music that to European ears sounds exotic, indeed, oriental. Said draws attention to this, describing "the harmonic clichés, much used in carnival hoochy-kooch, [which] are based on a flattening of the hypertonic" (1993, p. 146-7).¹ An example of this phenomenon is the opening melody of the Grand Scene of Consecration, sung to the text 'Possente Fthà' (O powerful Phtha), and repeated at the end of the opera. Osborne confirms that it "sounds decidedly exotic". He continues "it is not, however, in the slightest degree Egyptian, and, if it sounds so to us today, this is because Verdi has persuaded us that it does" (1992, p. 387). This remark certainly supports Said's thesis that Verdi, the European composer, has imposed on audiences a particular view of what 'Egyptian' music means, in 'a show of force'. Robinson does not demur from this view, but suggests that the 'exotic' music in *Aida* is used only "for liturgical exercises and ballets. None of the principal Egyptian characters expresses him or herself, as it were, orientally" (1993, p.137). This may be true, but the choruses of Egyptian priests and priestesses are nonetheless an important part of the opera. Robinson further seeks to divert our attention from this.

Furthermore, one should note that all of the opera's exotic music, in both its liturgical episodes and its ballets, is associated with women—to the point that the antithesis between exotic and non-exotic music in *Aida* comes to seem a code as much for gender difference as for ethnic difference. (1993, p. 138)

¹ Said is presumably referring to the hoochie coochie, a suggestive belly dance popular in America in the period 1880 to 1945. The term 'hypertonic' is incorrect; the note above the tonic is called the supertonic. Further, he probably means not 'harmonic' but 'melodic.' These errors are unexpected in a writer with Said's level of musical knowledge.

Unfortunately for Robinson, this statement is incorrect. The priests are as actively involved in presenting the 'exotic music' as are the priestesses, and there is no evidence that Aida and Amneris, the two central female characters, have more exotic musical lines than Radames. What we can safely conclude is that the priests and priestesses, and to an extent the slavegirls of Amneris in Act 2, have music that Verdi has calculated will sound 'foreign' and 'different' to European audiences (whether they are in Europe or in Cairo), and that, in serving that end, Verdi uses melodic shapes and intervals that have become clichés.

The second kind of spectacular music is that epitomised in the Triumphal March in Act 2. It includes some passages of 'Oriental music', including the 'implacable priests' theme, but the musical 'show of force' as the army marches past is resolutely Western in style—it could be used for a march-past of the Italian, German, French army, or even (if the tempo were faster) the American army. Robinson correctly describes this as "regular, diatonic and brassy ... Verdi relying on the most traditional harmonic, melodic and rhythmic means to conjure up an impression of power, authority and military might" (1993, p. 136). As Robinson points out, this associates the Egyptian army with European imperialist armies, and its conquest of the Ethiopians with the European subjugation of other conquered peoples. It does so automatically, if the view is taken that European music always represents European imperialism. It can be argued, then, that Said has put Verdi in a no-win situation: if he composes traditional European music for the Triumphal March he is practicing imperialism directly, and if he composes music which modifies traditional European music through the importation of exotic elements he is practicing imperialism indirectly. It is hard to see what else Verdi could do. That, of course, may be Said's perspective: that Verdi was damned as soon as he accepted the offer to compose an 'Egyptian' opera.

The situation is made more complex, however, through the music Verdi composed not for the spectacular scenes but for the more intimate ones. Robinson points out that when Aida sings of her native Ethiopia "Verdi sets her utterances at the polar opposite of the sort of music he writes for the massed Egyptians. Instead of four-square diatonic marching tunes, he writes music distinguished by its sinuous irregularity, its long legato lines, its close intervals, its chromatic harmonies and its subdued woodwind orchestration" (1993, p. 136). Radames' aria describing 'Celeste Aida' in the opening scene of Act 1 is written in the same kind of musical idiom Verdi had used in previous operas like *La traviata* (set in nineteenth-century France) and would use again in *Otello* (set in Shakespeare's Cyprus). It is the music he provides for the expression of the emotions of human beings, of whatever race, gender, or cultural background. Bergeron's comment that Radames is "less a clueless tenor than a kind of model citizen" (2002, p. 152) is irrelevant in the opera house: what the audience experiences is a young man in love.

As the opera proceeds, so we get to know the major characters: they begin to stand out more and more from the background of Egyptian history. In Act 1 we discover Aida in a dilemma: the man she loves is setting out to defeat her father. The love theme that opened the opera returns here in all its poignancy and leads to her prayer to the Gods ('Numi, pietà'), one of Verdi's most powerful moments, a simple diatonic Western tonal melody with tremolo string accompaniment that

draws us into Aida's personal situation in a powerful and convincing way. In the final Act, when Amneris discovers Radames will not give up his love for Aida, the music Verdi provides for the heartbroken daughter of the Pharaoh powerfully conveys her tragic situation. The orchestra plays the 'implacable priests' theme, while, against it, Amneris sings disjointed musical phrases in a thoroughly Western idiom. The priests may well be 'Egyptian' in their music, but Amneris is merely a woman rejected by the man she loves.

The end of the opera may make the point clearer. While the priests menacingly chant their implacable theme, with its exotic turns of phrase, Radames and Aida, the doomed pair in the underground tomb, sing a duet whose melodic line is a profound expression of optimistic yearning. The text simply says "farewell earth, farewell vale of tears". It is, perhaps, clichéd, and if we were to look at it just as words, we might find it a banal anti-climax. But in Verdi's hands it becomes something else: a soaring melody—one of Verdi's most inspired tunes—which carves out a meaning that Aida and Radames can rise above the pain and despair of their situation. In *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann described Verdi's melody here as "the triumphant idealism of music, of art, of the human spirit" (1928, p. 645). The text, and the scene, may well suggest, as Said proposes, "hopeless deadlock and literal entombment" (1993, p. 148), but the music says something else—it is an expression, in the midst of a doomed situation, of hope and aspiration. In the end, the music will carry the day, for this is, after all, an opera.

Is *Aida* as Orientalist an opera as Edward Said suggested? Investigating Said's ideas, and placing them in context, indicates that his views are certainly worth our attention, and that they reveal a good deal about the opera and its circumstances. But ultimately what they leave out and ignore overcomes what they include. Composed during a period of the Europeanisation of Egypt under Khedive Ismail, it perhaps inevitably reflects some political and social aspects of that environment. It may (if Bergeron is right) reflect Khedive Ismail's aspirations for a new political order in Egypt. If Robinson is right, Verdi may have found in the story of Ethiopia's struggles against a colonising Egypt a reflection of Italy's struggles against an Austrian hegemony. Guarracino argues that Italian audiences at the time would have sympathised both with the nationalism of the Egyptians and with the Ethiopians as oppressed people. Guarracino further contends that "the landing of *Aida* on Egyptian soil may be considered less as the enforcement of a foreign, colonial culture on the 'non-European' and more as one step of a tight cultural exchange between the two sides of the Mediterranean" (2010, p. 7). This is certainly a more complex, and possibly more convincing interpretation of the work than Said's arguments about French and English political aspirations for Egypt.

It is certainly true that the genre of opera in the nineteenth century included works whose stories were set in exotic locations, often the sites of European imperial enterprise. Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles* (1863) is set on the island of Ceylon; Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865) concerns a tragic confrontation between European and indigenous culture in Madagascar; Delibes's *Lakmé* (1883) is a similar confrontation in British India. Even Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* of 1781 could be read as a European hero outwitting an Oriental potentate and making his henchman look silly, if it weren't for the final scene in which Pasha Selim displays the most enlightened European values of anyone in the

cast. It may well be that these works are part of a European desire to marginalise the Orient, but the argument needs to be made more persuasively, and more comprehensively, than Said has managed to do in his discussion of *Aida* in *Culture and Imperialism*.

Even if Said is correct in seeing Verdi as a tool of European imperialism, this begs the question of what options the composer might have had. Like Said, Verdi was a man of his time. Many of his operas include large-scale chorus scenes like the Triumphal March in Act 2, based around memorable tunes, of which the chorus of Hebrew slaves "Va pensiero" in *Nabucco* is merely the most famous example: it quickly became a street-song of the Risorgimento. Nowhere does Said discuss *Nabucco*, which tells the Biblical story of the Jewish exile in Babylon, so we do not know whether he would have regarded it as a European show of force about Babylon (assuming the Bible to be a piece of European literature) or a European show of force about the Middle Eastern Jews. Neither argument seems particularly plausible, and it may well seem equally implausible to see the *Aida* March as an Orientalist presentation of ancient Egypt.²

The deliberately exotic music created by Verdi to provide an 'Egyptian flavour' can certainly be seen as an attempt to include Egypt in a generic 'Middle Eastern music' package, or, vice versa, to tar Egypt with the generic musical characterisation. In a similar way, many Hollywood movies instantly characterise the wealthy villain's pretentious parties through including a string quartet playing Classical Music in the background. It isn't fair, but that kind of instant cultural connotation is ubiquitous, and may not be confined only to European cultures. Similar practices may be found elsewhere in the world. The white-faced, top-hatted caricature of the European is a significant feature of many African and Caribbean cultural celebrations. Robinson concludes that "the ideological import of Verdi's exotic musical gestures in the opera is more complicated than Said allows, and in some respects at least it seems to be exactly opposite from the construction he insists on" (1993, p. 139).

What undermines Said's view of the opera more than anything is his neglect of the intimate music. It can of course be argued that all Western opera, which by definition in the nineteenth century at least was written in a Western musical idiom, is inevitably a sign of Western domination, and that every character of every race who shares his or her feelings within that idiom is being exploited by the art-form and its owners, but Said's argument about *Aida* is not made for Western opera as a whole. Given, then, that he allows Western music its expressive power, and his own successful involvement in it as a practitioner and critic would give credibility to the view that its meanings can be acquired through enculturation, it is disappointing that he neglects to take more into account the way Verdi focuses on communicating through music the individual dilemmas of the main characters.

Is *Aida* an Orientalist work? Said's claim is not as strong as its author would like. While he makes a cogent case, it is one which in some respects misses the bus

² But Said does claim, in *Musical Elaborations*, (1991, p. 65) that Berlioz's operatic trilogy *Les Troyens* is 'saturated' with the politics of the French conquest of North Africa, a claim which seems not to fit well with Jacques Barzun's comment that "Paris under the Second Empire virtually forbade the kind of enterprise he had in hand" (1956, p. 326).

and in others catches the wrong one. This is a little strange, since it comes from a man whose historical and musical perceptions were not lacking in knowledge or understanding, and we might have expected a more subtle exploration of the opera. Is it possible that Said's attitude to Verdi's work was coloured by his own experiences of Egypt? He had been educated in the European half of Cairo, in 'the west', and later came to identify with the aspirations of the so-called native quarter 'in the east'. *Aida* was performed in the opera house which turned its back on the natives, and faced the Europeans. Did he resent the fact that it hadn't, unlike himself, turned itself around to face the other way?

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18 Said, , Culture and Imperialism, 111, 130 . References to this book in the next few paragraphs will be given in the main text. The Aida essay was first published (with slight differences) as "The Imperial Spectacle"™, Grand Street 6/2 (winter 1987): 82-104 .Â 26 One might also view it as a subset of Reading 8 (Egypt as European overseas imperialism, to be discussed a bit later), given that the Khedive's forces were, in those years, closely allied to, almost puppets of, the British.Â 30 Robinson, , "Is Aida an Orientalist Opera?"™, 140 (with references to Said's essay in its initial publication of 1987). 31 Ibid., 134. Robinson, quotes the first phrase from Said (now in Culture and Imperialism, 129). 32 Robinson, , "Is Aida an Orientalist Opera?"™, 135 .