

An Ethiopian Princess' Journey: Verdi's *Aida* across the Mediterranean (and beyond)

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“Aida was a natural for me because my skin was my costume.”
– Leontyne Price

Aida has come home. This thought crosses my mind as I listen to Gabriella Ghermandi, Ethiopian-Italian woman writer and performer, in a reading of her novel *Regina di fiori e di perle*.¹ She closes her performance with a song, ceremonially wrapping an Ethiopian *gabi* over her hitherto “Western” jeans and shirt. It is this wide, colorful shawl, more than the song, that reminds me of Aida – not of the hundreds of invisible “Aidas,” Ethiopian and Somali migrant women who have moved to the heart of the Italian empire from its short-lived colonies. She rather evokes the conspicuous, vocal Aida performed by African-American soprano Adina Aaron, striding barefoot in a red garb on the stage of the Teatro Verdi in Busseto.² The unthinking superimposition between these two performers plays an unwelcome trick on Franco Zeffirelli’s production, where the effort for an “authentic” representation of the Ethiopian princess becomes an unwilling commentary of the unnamed relationship between this most national of operas and the silenced history of Italian colonialism.



Fig. 1: Gabriella Ghermandi in a lecture
at the University of Catania
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Fig. 2: Adina Aaron as Aida in Zeffirelli’s
production at the Teatro Verdi in Busseto
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Yet, Ghermandi’s voice breaks the thread of memory, as her song does not in the least resemble *Aida*’s searing “Oriental” melodies. *Aida*, as Edward Said has famously argued, is an Orientalist opera, representing the appropriation of the colonial Other by the hegemonic West. As a consequence, Aida/Adina’s voice, with all its power, can share no musical

¹ “L’esilio della parola. Scrivere, narrare, ricordare,” reading by Cristina Ali Farah and Gabriella Ghermandi at the Fondazione Premio Napoli (Naples, March 17, 2008).

² I am referring here to Zeffirelli’s production of *Aida* for the Teatro Verdi in Busseto, Verdi’s birthplace, in 2001.

language with the lullaby Ghermandi offers us as the voice of the mother (country) she has been deprived of by colonial violence. On the contrary, Verdi's (and Zeffirelli's) *grand opéra* celebrates the very imperial enterprise Ghermandi denounces, literally putting exotic Others on show as "creatures of European will" (Said 1993, 132).³ Yet, other scholars have recently argued for a more nuanced reading of the opera's involvement with imperial narratives; Ralph P. Locke writes that "*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)" (2005, 106).

Could then Ghermandi's voice find an unexpected echo in the voice of the oppressed Ethiopian princess Verdi portrays? Does *Aida* only bear witness to European cultural colonialism, or does it open Europe itself up to echoes from the other side of the Mediterranean? *Aida*'s own ethnic characterization as black and/or African, often marked by blackface makeup on the white singer's performing body, has rarely been an issue for commentators and performers alike (at least in Italy); its relevance for the elaboration of a "racial" imaginary in Italian society has to my knowledge never been investigated. This silence reverberates in archives as well as in performance, allowing for the issue to be dealt with only by way of tours and detours; this essay will then inevitably take the shape not of a linear narrative, but of notes from a journey following the Ethiopian princess' adventures across seas, theatres, ages, and performers. The account will necessarily be partial and incomplete in its attempt at weaving together *Aida*'s threads across the Mediterranean and beyond.⁴

Our journey in the footsteps of the Ethiopian princess starts from Verdi's opera and the context of its production and reception on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea. It takes into consideration *Aida*'s role as a product of Western culture both inside and outside Europe, as opera was "exported" to the colonies allowing colonial elites to recreate a European cultural life in the heart of such burgeoning colonial metropolises as Cairo or New York. In this context, the representation of ethnic difference by the Western theatrical and musical genre known as 'opera' represents a contested space that questions its own practices of representation: on the one hand it supports the appropriation of the ethnic (and often gendered) Other through its orientalist narratives and settings; on the other, though, the voice at the center of operatic representations requires a confrontation with the West's representation of itself – in this case, Italian national discourses articulated through the operatic representation of its colonial Other.

This representation requires an ethical response that goes beyond the mere condemnation of the genre as a tool of Western imperialist policy; as Wayne Koestenbaum writes, "I am unhappy about opera's circumscribed audience, its association with white privilege, but I do not feel that the only ethical response is to renounce my love of opera" (1994, 48). On the contrary, as the recent work of musicologists such as Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, and others have shown, to confront opera's orientalist (and often also misogynistic) language means to question the representation of alterity that constitutes the signifying core of Western modernity (see Kramer 1995 and McClary 2000). Opera is a genre of migration, always in-between countries, languages, and peoples; its international dimension is the consequence of

³ This is true for the Ethiopian princess as well as for the Egyptian setting, both subjected to what Ralph P. Locke defines "a sense of cultural difference" face to face with the opera's ideal European audience (2005, 119). Nonetheless, this essay will not be concerned with *Aida*'s orientalist representation of Egypt, which is the core of Said's essay, but on the way the opera constructs Egypt as a cultural and political actor on the Mediterranean scene of the time.

⁴ Here I follow Said's remark on the need to "maintain [. . .] and yet also interpret [. . .] the silence" (Said 2000, 525) when faced with the erasure of the subaltern's history from the archives of the empire.

colonial practices, and operatic representation may hence become a site of struggle for the power to represent.

Aida's very existence has been guaranteed by its power to give an authoritative, "authentic" representation of its exotic objects, both in the context of Western *grand opéra* and of Egypt's own "national opera." A similar effort at authenticity lies behind the trick of memory opening these pages, as Zeffirelli laid aside the traditional, generically "African" *Aida* outfits (see Leontyne Price's picture later in this essay) to opt for a more "authentic" Ethiopian garb for his African-American soprano. Yet, this effort toward authenticity presupposes an original object that has to be authentically reproduced – an object that, as Jacques Derrida writes (1998), is nothing but a prosthetic object.⁵ From this perspective, authenticity does not engage with a more or less accurate notion about what Ancient Egyptians or Ethiopians really looked like; it becomes a discourse of power, "a contest in the present over a construction of the past" (Barenboim and Said 2004, 126).

In this context a musical politics emerges, that puts not "authentic" representation, but the performer's interpretation of the operatic text at the center of its diverse and ever-changing discourses. The multifarious incarnations of *Aida* featured in the following pages will pursue this course, opening operatic representation to the contested space of the Mediterranean and, more widely, to voices from the margins of European modernity. First, it confronts with the recent literature on *Aida* that exposes its relationships with imperial narratives, yet without (or just in passing) referring to the Italian context, either past or contemporary; second, it sounds the similarities between the national narratives brought forth through *Aida* both in Italy and Egypt, showing an osmosis between European and Egyptian cultural productions; and third, it will come face to face with the heroine's black skin as what troubles the representation of the Other in an opera that is *not* ostensibly about the protagonist's race, an issue that becomes both relevant and problematic only in the moment of performance. Following these apparently diverging aural routes, this essay focuses on *Aida* as a multivocal access point to a shared history and culture of the Mediterranean. It also identifies the opera as one of the master narratives for the elaboration of racial issues, both in Italy and beyond, and explores its potential to subvert given representations of ethnicity and gender through performance.

Listening to Orientalism

Very little attention has generally been devoted to the reception of *Aida* in the land that claimed the opera as its own. *Aida*, as is widely known, was commissioned by the Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, who had first asked Verdi to compose a hymn for the opening of the Suez Canal and then, after his refusal, settled for an opera which would both be national and appeal to a wider European audience. Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, who was hired by the

⁵ References to the "authenticity" of musical language can be found in the literature on *Aida*, even by scholars who criticise the opera's orientalist sound. Paul Robinson is quite explicit on the matter: "[*Aida*'s] oriental music can be characterized in terms of a number of almost clichéd melodic, harmonic, and timbral devices, which [. . .] bear no necessary relation to the actual musical practices of non-European cultures" (2002, 128). This is the whole point of Said's Orientalist argument, where music is made to express an "oriental" identity which is actually the projection of Western fantasies of domination over what is represented as "the Orient." Yet, it must also be noted for this argument that the very idea that musical practices of non-European cultures may be defined by such an oppositional binary logic is one of the very strategies of Western ethnography, according to which the non-European is made the bearer of an "authentic" cultural identity always in danger of disappearing due to its contamination with European modernity – what James Clifford famously defined "pure products always going crazy" (1988, 5). Later in this essay, I will discuss how the contamination among musical practices troubles such a binary interpretation, opening to a different understanding of culture produced in a movement across the Mediterranean.

Khedive to follow the preparation of the opera's scenery and props up to its premiere in Cairo on December 24, 1871, guaranteed the authenticity of *Aida*'s representation of Ancient Egypt.⁶



Fig. 3: The Triumphal Scene (Act II, scene ii) at the Arena di Verona (2004). Courtesy of the author.

The opera was part of an effort by the new Egyptian elite to appeal and conform to European standards of cultural and political life. Verdi explicitly referred to the exotic tradition of French *grand opéra* in his choice of the Ancient Egypt setting, which allowed *Aida* to speak to Europe and to “do [. . .] 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” (Said 1993, 112).⁷ Yet in *Aida* this European cultural industry, part capitalist showoff, part Orientalist appropriation of the cultural Other, was reclaimed by an Egyptian court that wanted to cross the Mediterranean and be considered part of Europe in order to gain independence from the Ottoman empire and be involved in the massive flows of capital that were catalyzed by the opening of the Suez canal. As a consequence, Said convincingly argues, *Aida* may be read as “antinomian symbol [. . .] of the country’s artistic life *and* its imperial subjugation” (129; italics in the text).

To Said, opera works here together with European universal expositions as patent instances of how Western culture appropriated, put on show, and commercialized what it considered secondary “Oriental” cultures (112). It was actually during the Paris *Exposition universelle* in 1867 that Khedive Ismail crossed the Mediterranean to represent his country. The Egyptian pavilion at the exposition was designed by the same Auguste Mariette that was

⁶ For a throughout account of the opera’s conception and early performance history see Busch 1978.

⁷ This show of force must be considered not only in military terms but, as Said writes in *Orientalism*, as a cultural strategy to submit a whole geographical area under the heading “Orient” (including the Middle East as well as India and even the “Far East”), and to guarantee the power of Western discourses of representation: “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony [. . .] The Orient was Orientalized, not only because it was discovered to be “Oriental” in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* – that is, submitted to being – *made* Oriental” (1985, 5-6; italics in the text). The role of *Aida* in maintaining a colonial vision of “the Orient” is supported by the fact that it has become a favourite for opera houses all over the world, allowing for the “outpouring of opulence” (Said 1993, 124) that can be witnessed in the opera’s staging at the New York’s Metropolitan opera, the Terme di Caracalla or the Arena di Verona.

to draw the scenery for *Aida* together with M. Rubé, a renowned opera set designer; and at the center of this display, which put together Ancient and contemporary Egypt, stood the Khedive himself, who “poised on a divan in a bedroom painted to look exactly like the place of his birth, [. . .] smoked a hookah and daily received guests from the best Parisian society” (Bergeron 2002, 149).

Katherine Bergeron convincingly relates this performance to *Aida* as part of the Khedive’s effort at including Egypt in the European cultural and political life of the time. In the Khedive’s intentions, *Aida* may have been considered as a portable, exportable version of that same pavilion, allowing Egypt to speak to Europe as the Khedive himself had been speaking to the “best Parisian society” – no doubt, weaving diplomatic and economic allegiances under the benign shadows of his birthplace. This point clashes with Said’s argument according to which *Aida* portrays Egypt “as if there were no modern Egyptians” (1993, 118). To Said, the power to represent put into operation by the opera belongs exclusively to Verdi and his European collaborators (among them, librettist Ghislanzoni, French producer Camille du Locle, and of course archaeologist Mariette), wiping away contemporary Egypt from the scene.

Yet, although *Aida*’s involvement in Orientalist strategies of representation cannot be denied, this does not necessarily put “Egypt,” at least in the person of its political leader, on the side of the represented, leaving to Verdi (and the European master tradition) the exclusive power to represent. What happens indeed when this power-knowledge (together with the economic power to commission and stage a *grand opéra*) crosses the Mediterranean, and the site of performance becomes not Paris or Milan, but the new metropolis of Cairo? While to Europe *Aida* was the epitome of Egypt’s inclusion into its own imperial imagination, to the Khedive at least it represented autonomy and an empowering self-representation for Egypt itself. The Khedive was actually so enthusiastic that he even took some bars of the “Triumphal March,” that same music that Verdi thought “smacked too much of the Marseillaise” (Robinson 2002, 127) as his national anthem – another gesture to assimilate Egypt to the European nation-states (see also Said 1993, 125).

This episode is mentioned by Robinson to show that much of the music Verdi attributed to the Egyptians (with the notable exception of ceremonial ballets) sounds markedly European, that is, it does not rely on accepted codes for Oriental music. Together with the set piece “Gloria all’Egitto” from Act II, including the renowned “Triumphal March,” Robinson also mentions another four-square hymn, the choir “Su! Del Nilo,” to exemplify “this association of Egypt with an aggressively traditional European idiom” (2002, 127); while the more sinuous, woodwind-accompanied legatos more generally associated with the exotic Orient mark the opera’s “others” – Ethiopians (and) women, first of all *Aida* herself.

Aida’s “European” musical language is also marked as masculine, while “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 nonexotic music in *Aida* comes to seem a code as much for gender difference as for national or ethnic difference” (130). Robinson’s “queer” perspective readdresses Said’s point that *Aida* is in fact an Orientalist opera, showing how the divide between East and West is troubled by its production by and on the (gendered) performing bodies that shape *Aida*. It is this shift, from body to body as well as from place to place, that will guide the rest of this essay across the many and diverse embodiments of the Ethiopian princess, as performance requires *Aida* to be continuously relocated, from place to place as well as from body to body.

These multiple passages not only require the opera to be relocated in different contexts, they also *relocate* opera itself, preventing its exclusive identification with European concerns and practices. Cultural affiliation, in these terms, must be considered as “produced

performatively,” as Homi K. Bhabha argues (1994, 2): every staging, every performance weaves an “incommensurable temporality” (id.) in the texture of the text that goes under the name of *Aida*. Every time *Aida* is restaged a web of relations is activated, which can potentially disrupt the very narratives the opera is supposed to support. Crossing the Mediterranean, *Aida* not only transgresses the border between Europe and its represented Other, it becomes part of it, opening Europe to representations and performances from elsewhere.

Egyptian Aidas

Aida’s journey is haunted by different and often competing national discourses. On the one hand, its Ancient Egypt setting embodies the Khedive’s project to give his dominion a national opera, finding an ancient past that could put into operation what Benedict Anderson famously defined “imagined community” (1991, 5). On the other hand, opera as a genre, Verdi, and *Aida* in particular have been featured prominently in *Italian* national discourses. Egypt and Italy thus share the symbolic and representational space of *Aida* for the creation of a national discourse as they share the geographical space of the Mediterranean and, last but not least, the (both economic and symbolic) investment in Ethiopia as the colonial Other that could guarantee their national identity. As a consequence, Italy’s “Western” national discourse becomes irreparably contaminated by its mirror-image on the other side of the Mediterranean.

Music, and *Aida* in particular, was part of the Khedive’s political and cultural modernization, that is, Westernization of Egypt. The building of the Cairo Opera House and the commissioning of *Aida* must be considered within the wider frame of musical practices in Egypt at the time: Mohammed Ali, who preceded Ismail Pasha as Khedive, financed French troupes performing in Cairo (see Twaij 1973, 28), while Ismail supported the development of Arabic music and theater by sending musicians to Turkey to be educated and by building theaters and financing artists and productions (see Zaki 1978, 20; Badawi 1987, 4). Among the first playwrights to introduce music in theatrical performance was Marun al-Naqqash, a

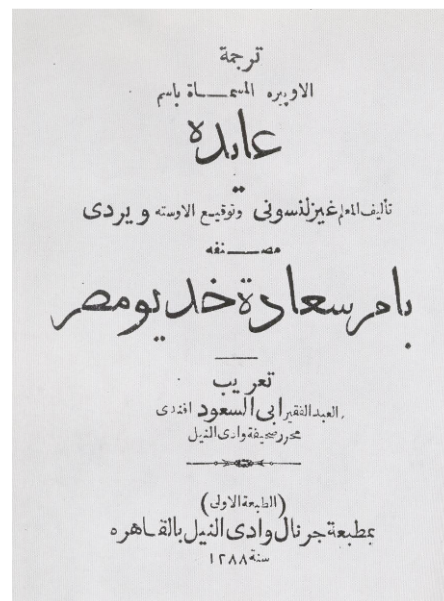
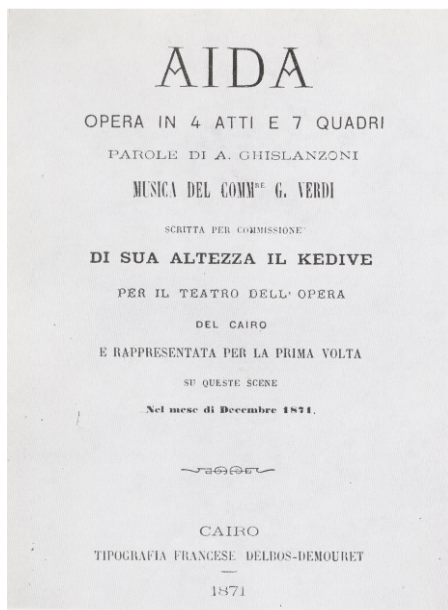


Fig. 4 and 5: The Italian and the Arabic version of the 1871 *Aida* libretto. Courtesy of the Istituto di Studi Verdiani, Parma (see Abdoun 1971).

Lebanon-born merchant and musician who knew French and Italian, and became acquainted with opera during an 1846 trip to Naples (see Twaij 1973, 24; Tounsi 1989, 143).⁸

Opera thus had already crossed the Mediterranean before *Aida*, becoming a shared language between the two Mediterranean cities. From Naples, opera landed in both Cairo and Alexandria, where it found fertile ground. Since the late 18th century, French and Italian troupes had come over “to entertain their own people in this foreign land,” as Mohamed A. Tounsi puts it (42). Yet, Tounsi also underlines how the musical theatre introduced by European troupes soon became successful also among Arab-speaking audiences, “encourag[ing] the local authorities to build larger theatres, first to accommodate the visiting foreign troupes and second to encourage the local troupes to grow and the natives to become theatre-goers” (42-43). Here, the distinction between Arab/Egyptian and European/Italian (or French) slowly starts to dissolve in Tounsi’s account, as the success of European opera companies “explains the Arab willingness to accept this art form as part of their culture” (43).

In this context, 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.⁹ *Aida*’s stage begins to be populated by other, less-known actors. Among them, producer Salīm al-Naqqāsh, also of Lebanese origins, who between 1876 and 1877 produced both Arabic pieces and adaptations of many European plays, “such as Corneille’s *Horace*, Racine’s *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, and *Aida*, which was an adaptation of an Italian play written by Ghislanzoni” (Twaij 1973, 36). All productions included songs; their star was the renowned singer Salamah Hijazi, who also famously played Romeo in *Martyrs of Love or Romeo and Juliet*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play by Najib Haddad. As Jane Wilkinson notes, it was al-Naqqāsh’s version, featuring Hijazi as Radames, that made *Aida*’s success in Egypt, and “productions of the Arab version continued well into the second decade of the twentieth century so that audiences had ample opportunity to see and compare the two works, viewing Romeo and Radames as different versions of a single figure” (Wilkinson 2002, 528).

There is very little left of al-Naqqāsh’s version of *Aida* and probably no way to know whether the music of the play borrowed to some extent from Verdi’s score. As some parts of it had already become part of Egypt’s musical milieu through the adoption of the “Triumphal March” as khedivial national anthem, it may be at least imagined that the Arabic version echoed the most popular tunes from the opera. It is probably beyond scholarly analysis, but certainly not beyond the writer’s and the reader’s imagination, to conjure up how Hijazi, originally trained as a muezzin, would have sounded singing “Celeste Aida.” This *Aida* would sound uncannily estranged from its traditional “Italianness,” appropriated as part of Egyptian national culture.¹⁰

⁸ Although other scholars underline that musical theatre was already part of the tradition in Arabic performing arts (see Zaki 1978, 20), al-Naqqash is generally credited to have introduced opera-like performances in Arabic theatre. Badawi recounts how “in a speech he delivered to introduce the performance of his play [*al Bakhil*, a version of Moliere’s *The Miser*], he made it clear why he chose to write in a form nearer to that of opera than that of drama proper” (1987, 187), as it was felt closer to Arabic theatrical practices.

⁹ Verdi most likely did not know anything about these trends in Arabic theatre, and was not in the least interested in it: yet, it is again the performative dimension of musical practice that emerges here, expropriating as it were the composer of any claim as the only authority involved in the strategies of representation working in *Aida*. As Bergeron points out, “a spectacle as grand as *Aida*, which depended on so many players, from the Egyptian Viceroy down to the last supernumerary, would seem to belie the primacy of a single authorial intention” (2002, 150).

¹⁰ The opera’s plot was also later appropriated by Tawfiq al-Hakim, the first playwright to give literary authority to Arabic theatre: his work *Ahl al-Kahf* [*The Sleepers in a Cave*, 1933] ends with the main character, Prisca, “being left alone with the dead, walled up in the cave in a rather melodramatic fashion reminiscent of the conclusion of Verdi’s *Aida*” (Twaij 1973, 34).

Colonizing Aida

Another element shared between Egyptian and Italian national narratives of the time was a strong investment in Ethiopia as feasible colonial territory. Both Said and Milton Brener mention how in the years just before *Aida* was staged the Khedive had tried a strong expansionist policy in East Africa, supported by the British who wanted to counter French and Italian ambitions in Sudan and Ethiopia (see Said 1993, 125 and Brener 2003, 123-24).¹¹ The political context influenced the opera so much that, according to Brener, “it is, of course, the Ethiopians who are the invaders of Egypt in Mariette’s sketch and in the opera” (2003, 124-5). Brener’s point, indeed, is that in *Aida* it is the Ethiopians who threaten Egyptian soil, a topical reference to the contemporary, stormy relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, Brener does not take into account that, according to most commentators, Mariette’s “invaders” become the oppressed ones in Verdi’s opera as it crosses the Mediterranean.

The Khedive’s political model was patently that of colonialist Europe and *Aida* operates accordingly, elaborating the opera’s colonial narrative in terms of “East” versus “West,” with Egypt in the role of the European colonizer. Hence, as Robinson argues, “white Egypt ought properly to be equated with imperial Europe, while black Ethiopia stands unambiguously in the role of the imperialized, non-European Other” (2002, 126). I will return to the Egyptians’ “whiteness” and the Ethiopians’ “blackness” later in this essay, as the performance of race is deeply related to the discourses of power articulated in and through *Aida*; the Egyptians’ alleged “whiteness” works together with the European musical language the Khedive appropriated for his national project as marks of “Europeanness,” including “power, authority, and military might” (127). Yet, as much as these values may have been considered positive in the Khedive’s new political vision for a modernized Egypt, to Verdi’s eyes these would-be imperialist Egyptians looked too much like the Austro-Hungary empire from which Italy had too recently acquired independence.¹²

Italy was actually quite late in entering the circle of European nations: attempts at building Italy as a “modern” European country were almost contemporary to the Khedive’s own efforts at “modernizing” Egypt, and Verdi, life-long supporter of the independence movement and member of the first Italian parliament, was part of it. Nonetheless, the difference between the national appeals of the celebrated “Và pensiero” choir from *Nabucco* (1842) and “Su! Del Nilo” could not be deeper: the choir of the exiled Jews, who melancholically evoke the “patria sì bella e perduta” is definitely closer, in its atmosphere if

¹¹ No direct animosity between Egypt and either Italy or France emerges in the long epistolary exchanges necessary for the organization of the opera’s premiere; on the other hand, Said argues that Egypt first pursued its expansionist policy in East Africa *against* the British, who consequently thought it better to support Egypt in its colonial ambitions before conquering it altogether. Although Said does not offer this interpretation, it may be argued here that *Aida*’s narrative, moving the war against Ethiopia to ancient times and thus effacing British involvement almost literally embodies the Khedive’s dream of autonomy for his reign.

¹² This parallel emerges in the composer’s request to librettist Ghislanzoni to add eight lines for the high priest Ramfis at the beginning of “Gloria all’Egitto”: “‘We have triumphed with the help of divine providence. The enemy has surrendered. May God help us in the future.’ Look at King William’s telegrams” (Busch 1978, 61). The reference here is to the telegrams by King William of Prussia announcing his victory in Sedan during the Franco-Prussian war that was holding back *Aida*’s premiere, keeping Mariette’s scenery stuck in Paris. The fact that these words are attributed not to the King of Egypt but to Ramfis rearticulates the representation of power in the opera in what Said identifies as two distinct but interlacing tracks: “Ramfis the High Priest is, I think, informed both by Verdi’s Risorgimento anti-clericalism and by his ideas about the despotic Oriental potentate, a man who will exact vengeance out of sheer bloodthirst masked in legalism and scriptural precedent” (Said 1993, 121).

not strictly for its musical idiom, to *Aida*'s aria on her own lost "patria" at the opening of Act III – not powerful Egypt, but downtrodden Ethiopia.

A schism, almost a schizophrenia in musical representations of the "patria" emerges here, one of those "slippage of categories" Homi K. Bhabha mentions as inherent to modern national discourses (1994, 140). Here, the slippage is represented by the diverging strategies of identifications offered by *Aida*. On the one hand, Ethiopia represents the oppressed nation around which the Italian audience's sympathies would have conventionally converged, following the typical narrative that Verdi had faithfully followed throughout his career. On the other, though, newly united Italy was looking for other strategies of representation, to which new narratives were necessary; as Michael Rose puts it, "from one point of view, it is easy enough to see the tremendous parade of ancient Egyptian nationalism which runs through the earlier scenes of the opera as a very thinly disguised celebration of the spirit of the new Italy" (1980, 13).

Aida occupies a special place in Italian national discourse. Giovanni Morelli significantly devotes to its first staging at the Arena di Verona in 1913 his entry on "Opera" in a miscellany on the main mythologies of "new Italy." Morelli identifies this event, organized to celebrate the centenary of Verdi's birth, as the moment where the Italian nation found in *Aida* (the spectacular, "over-decorated" *Aida* that has since become staple in the Arena repertoire) a "ritual of proud and self-conscious reappropriation" of national identity (1996, 49; here and ff., my translation). Appropriating Verdi's opera as part of a "collective national memory" (50), the Arena staging became a flaunting of the economic power of young Italy, featuring not only tickets available at one lira to allow the lower classes access to the theatre, but installing a full-fledged telegraph office inside the theatre itself, so that those who had not been able to attend could read the reports and experience "live" the ten evenings on which the opera was performed (see Polo 2004, 11 and ff.).¹³

The aim of the production, as Morelli underlines, was to uniform the taste of the masses to that of Italian intellectual elites and, consequently, consecrate opera as a "monument" of authentic Italianness. *Aida* lived up to the expectations, becoming one of the favorite operas of the young Italy. At the time of *Aida*'s conception, 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, including the enforcement of an imperialist policy on the other side of the Mediterranean: while the British were finally taking over Egypt (all the Khedive's efforts toward autonomy notwithstanding), and the French were moving into Morocco, in the 1890s Italian prime minister Francesco Crispi launched an aggressive campaign in what was collectively called Eritrea but was actually the Ethiopia the Khedive had tried to colonize some twenty years before. Crispi's efforts were not any more successful than Egypt's, and the Italian enterprise ended up in the disastrous defeat of Adowa in 1896.

Aida hence offered to Italian opera audiences the possibility to identify with a successful imperial nation, whose place among the mighty and powerful could not be questioned. This is the concept behind Hans Neuenfels' staging of the opera in 1981 at the Oper Frankfurt – remarkably one of the few to eschew the parades of sphinxes and pyramids to use the performative space offered by *Aida* to elaborate on its strategies of representation. For the Triumphal scene in Act II scene ii, Neuenfels had the chorus dressed up in 19th century clothes and appearing in a structure looking like the interior of the La Scala opera house. In this way, "the rising curtain reveals or, rather, confronts the audience with something like its

¹³ Morelli actually criticizes the Arena production and the tradition ensuing from it where, according to him, the intimate drama the composer had elaborated answering to the needs of popular and "inter-class" culture had been submerged by the need for spectacle and grandeur (1996, 51).

mirror image: the original first-night audience of the opera's European première at La Scala in 1872" (Weber 1994, 107).

It is significant that Neuenfels chose the opera's Italian premiere and not its Egyptian one for this moment, as his staging mainly comments on the dynamics of identification of the opera audience with the imperial narrative offered by *Aida*. Indeed, the Triumphal Scene was turned into what Clemens Risi has described "the mirror image of our own feeling of superiority and our own arrogance towards the 'Other'" (2002, 202). Risi gives a thorough and detailed account of the scene:

The Ethiopian prisoners were led to a laid table and forced to use knives and forks in order to eat roasted chicken. The experiment in civilization failed, the prisoners revolted, the chickens were thrown through the air, and the Egyptian military reacted with even harsher suppression of the uncivilized "savages." During every pause in the music the uproar caused by the audience almost necessitated the suspension of the performance (202).

According to Erika Ficher-Lichte, Neuenfels' production has "deconstructed Orientalism on stage" (2008) – not the opera's, but that of endless productions featuring golden pyramids and colossal Egyptian idols. Yet, it is not (or at least not only) pyramids and idols that mark *Aida*'s complicity with imperial discourses; a notorious yet notably under-researched Fascist staging of the opera actually eschewed the Ancient Egypt setting altogether, presenting "a blackshirted Radames subduing Amonasro's Ethiopian hordes, and Amonasro himself became an obvious stand-in for Emperor Haile Selassie, engaged in a bloody anticolonialist war against contemporary Italy" (Robinson 2002, 127).¹⁴ Fascist Italy apparently did not recoil from endorsing *Aida*'s imperial narrative; on the contrary, the opera was shaped to be appropriated by Italy's own self-representation as a "modern," imperialist nation. Surprisingly, "democratic" and Fascist appropriations of *Aida* actually echo each other, and where rigorous Orientalist staging fails, the opera's power narrative still serves at representing Italy's national project in the triumphalism of its public dimension.

The scope of *Aida*'s involvement in the elaboration of imperial narratives hence broadens considerably, as Orientalism emerges as just one of the devices through which the opera engages with dynamics of hegemony and subalternity, as Ralph P. Locke comments:

the opera's exotic characters, groups and settings [. . .] 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 (2005, 107).

¹⁴ This "fascist" *Aida* is also mentioned by Budden and Smith, who also wonders "how such an audience would reconcile a "Blackshirt Radames" with his love for a woman who is the princess of these "barbarous Africans" or his subsequent planned desertion and divulging of military secrets" (111, n. 12). This production has assumed a sort of legendary status in the literature on the subject, as well as in my research, as I have so far found no records of it. Yet, given the aforementioned investment of Italian national narratives on opera, and on this opera in particular, it sounds plausible to me that the Fascist regime may have capitalized on it. Indeed, adaptations of *Aida* to include topical references to Italian expeditions to Ethiopia find evidence already in 1897, when a parody of the opera staged in Bibbiano (a little town in Emilia Romagna) included comic sketches featuring soldiers back from the Ethiopian campaign (see Polo 2004, 12).

Aida's political stance becomes more nuanced: Gabriele Erasmi, answering to Julian Budden, who also mentions this production as a celebration of Fascist nationalist rhetoric, flinches at the idea that Verdi's opera may have actually mirrored Italian civil society during fascism. On the contrary, he underlines the implied criticism of "oceanic" crowds of the Triumphal March, defined as a "*kermesse* without meaning," and draws the conclusion that Verdi anticipated "the deformations of the modern totalitarian state" (1994, 108 n. 48; my trans. See also Budden 1981).

Erasmi goes back to the usual argument of Verdi's own undying affiliation with the underdogs of history, mirrored in the opera's explicit sympathy for Ethiopia, which "is repeatedly celebrated as a country of vernal beauty and natural rectitude" (Robinson 2002, 126). Here, the opera taps back into Verdi's early involvement in the Italian Risorgimento and his refusal of imperialistic policies, a position deeply inconsistent with the Italian national rhetoric *Aida* was used to exemplify. Remarkably, on the occasion of the defeat at Adowa, Verdi was reported to have commented to his friend Italo Pizzi: "Alas, we are now in Africa in the role of tyrant – inopportuno, and we shall pay for it. A fine civilization we have, with all its unhappiness! Those people will not know what to do with it, and in many respects they are much more civilized than we!" (Pizzi 1984, 351). Verdi, in his life and operas, kept supporting the right of oppressed peoples to rebel against their oppressors, and these ideals made their way even in his most "imperial" of operas. The Ethiopians here are not, as in Mariette's originary sketch, Egypt's aggressors, but an oppressed people whose leader, Amonasro, is "patriotism incarnate" (Rose 1980, 11).¹⁵

Singing in Aida's skin

What really troubles this more reassuring, "politically correct" interpretation of *Aida* as just another celebration of revolutionary passion by an old maestro still moved by the ideals that had inspired his youth is the opera's most celebrated item, the Ethiopian princess, who stands at the narrative and symbolic center of the opera, object of the hero's and the audience's committed and undying love. In this, *Aida* is not "black" in anything but stage conventions:¹⁶ she is indeed "celeste," heavenly, evoking the stereotype of the Catholic virgin martyr (see Smith 1997, 105) more than the sexually "stimulating" African women portrayed by imperial imagery. Moreover, her racial categorization is stated nowhere in the opera; it is traditional stagings, starting from 1871 (see fig. 6 and 7), that have established the representation of the Ethiopians as black, generally marked by conventional blackface, and of the Egyptians as unmarked, and hence "white."

In the face of the blackfaced Ethiopians, the Egyptians occupy what Ross Chambers defines the symbolic place of the "blank category":

¹⁵ Hence one can read an obituary for the composer, published in *al-Muqtataf* by an anonymous Egyptian journalist, where Verdi could be compared to local political leaders in his ability to voice revolutionary ideals: "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" (quot. in Locke 2005, 137).

¹⁶ In this, *Aida* heavily differs from Verdi's next opera, *Otello* (1887), where the "blackness" of the main character, although not specified in ethnic terms (differently from *Aida*'s, *Otello*'s birthplace is stated nowhere), is at the very center of the plot and of the characterization of the "selvaggio dalle gonfie labbra," as he is defined by Jago in the libretto (Act I, scene i). In this, the opera may be indebted to Shakespeare's play, where the "race issue" is also central.

There are plenty of unmarked categories (maleness, heterosexuality, and middle classness being obvious ones), but whiteness is perhaps the primary unmarked and so unexamined – let’s say “blank” – category. Like other unmarked categories, it has a touchstone quality of the normal, against which the members of marked categories are measured and, of course, found deviant, that is, wanting. It is thus (unlike linguistic unmarkedness) situated outside the paradigm that it defines (Chambers 1997, 189).



Fig. 6 and 7: Building the color line. Sketches for Aida (left) and for an Egyptian extra (right) for the 1871 premiere. Courtesy of the Istituto di Studi Verdiani, Parma (see Abdoun 1971).

Racial categorization here plainly comes to be not about ethnic lineage or geographical location, but about narratives of power and empire. Here Aida’s journey gets entangled in the construction of racial identity in public discourse, especially if the role of Ethiopia as a colony in the construction of Italy’s “white” identity is taken into consideration. It must be remembered that Italian enterprises abroad have always been characterized by the need to negotiate racial alterity, as emerges by the rather double-edged attitude toward miscegenation and in particular toward the union between Italian soldiers and African women. This practice was initially supported by the eroticization of the colonies, and the production and sale of postcards portraying naked or half-naked African women was a florid business already in the early years of Italian colonialism.¹⁷

In her overview of sexual crimes during Italian colonialism in Africa, Nicoletta Poidimani points at this visual imagery as the main vehicle through which an appealing image of the African colonies was constructed to create popular support of the colonial enterprise in an Italy where most of the population could still not read and write: “The

¹⁷ These postcards, often produced by specialized firms such as the Edizioni Artistiche Fotocine located in Massawa, were justified by an ethnographic interest in portraying African ethnic groups, or “tipi,” putting into operation an “erotografia delle razze,” an eroto-graphy of races (Ando Gilardi, quot. in Poidimani 2006, 38).

expectations of Italian men embarking for this ‘virgin land of virgins’ were supported by the certainty that overseas women were going to be the legitimate reward for their colonial enterprise” (2005, 6; my trans.). Maybe the virginal, blackface Aida of the Fascist staging would have reminded the people in the audience of this far less culturally prestigious production; paired with a non-blackfaced Radames, she may have even looked like a “*madama*,” as the “African wives” that Italian officers kept during their permanence in the colonies were called. The “*madamato*” (from the Italian “*madama*”, originally defining the keeper of a brothel) was an institution regulating the relationship between Italian men and native women in Italian colonies. Only in 1937, one year before the promulgation of Italy’s “racial law,” did Mussolini start a campaign to effectively ban these unions, even creating a dedicated “sexual police” (see Poidimani 2005, 16). The law considered *affectio maritalis*, conjugal love expressed by the Italian man for his African concubine, an aggravating circumstance — a striking paradox in a nation that celebrated his hero, either in blackshirt or in an Orientalized “Egyptian” armor, singing “Celeste Aida” to a black(faced) princess.

Aida’s blackness and the interracial union at the center of the plot probably offered one of the repressed appeals of the opera for the Italian audience; yet, the opera had to cross another, wider sea, in order for the protagonist’s black skin to become suddenly conspicuous. Beyond the Atlantic sea, a no less exotic Radames than the Egyptian Hijazi brought *Aida* to the attention of the US public; in 1903, Enrico Caruso won the sympathies of the Metropolitan Opera House audience for the opera that was to become “for many years after that [. . .] the most performed opera in the Met’s repertory” (Bleiler 1983, v).

Here, opera was already the bearer of a double reference. On the one hand, it was identified as a specifically European genre;¹⁸ on the other, it was quickly associated with European, especially Italian and German, migrant communities. This marginality was articulated along ethnic lines that marked Italy as a country on the border between East and West, a European country sometimes too close to Africa, too deeply immersed in the dark waters of the Mediterranean.¹⁹ This difference was often articulated on the bodies of performing women, especially singers: “while the opera diva can be read as a figure of white privilege, she is also consistently othered [. . .] She is most often constructed, especially in the masculinist tradition, as Italian, as, in other words, a dark Caucasian, who is excessive, transgressive, stupid, loud-mouthed” (Leonardi and Pope 1996, 17).²⁰

In Italy, opera was a national signifier, the occasion for the creation of a collective memory. In the United States, it was an exotic art that shared its performative space with minority cultural practices, so much so that Dizikes includes the end of segregation among

¹⁸ This, according to John Dizikes accounts for the difficulties it met when it first landed on US territory in 1825: “if opera as the most aristocratic of the arts, then its success or failure in America would depend on whether American society developed in a more or less democratic way” (1993, 11).

¹⁹ This is especially, but not exclusively, true of Italian immigrants abroad, whose national identity was often negotiated on the borderline between black and white, European and African (see especially Guglielmo and Salerno 2003).

²⁰ The first singer to make opera popular on American soil was Spanish diva Maria Malibran, who toured the country with her family in 1825. Her Mediterranean origin was part of the imaginary around her extraordinary voice, and contributed to her construction as “exotic.” This imaginary she shared with other opera divas including her own sister, Pauline Viardot-Garcia: as Koestenbaum notes, “listeners have used metaphors of darkness and of racial essence to describe the appeal of certain female operatic voices even when the singer was white. Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot were frequently described as having non-European features” (1994, 106). The racial categorization of opera as an exotic genre may explain the otherwise unexpected association Dizikes draws between opera and the minstrel shows that were becoming popular a few years after Malibran’s first tour: “The idea that African American music might be a generative influence in the evolution of American opera would have seemed fantastic to contemporaries; and yet it was so, as was suggested by the appearance of a kind of popular opera, minstrel shows, and by the songs of Stephen Foster” (1993, 105).

the reasons for the popularity opera reached in the United States during the 1950s: “Opera was domesticated as an American form of entertainment. The end of legislated social segregation directed against African Americans reduced another barrier to joining the operatic audience” (1993, 486). Yet, as opera took hold in U.S. cities (New York in particular), its association with white privilege became again predominant, and the relation Dizikes draws between opera and the African-American community finds little evidence elsewhere. On the contrary, although singing divas often feature in African-American narratives (as Shug Avery from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*), opera is virtually non-existent in this imaginary: black opera singers were constantly marginalized, and the “opera diva” started to be “consistently constructed as white” (Leonardi and Pope 1996, 17).

This “white diva” still mainly performed roles bearing the marks of ethnic difference: whether African, gypsy, Japanese, or Indian, the white diva’s body was “made up” to put ethnic difference on show for the pleasure of the Western eye. Yet, this body also performs a paradigmatic shift that welcomes on *Aida*’s scene of power the ever-changing voice of the many performers who have interpreted and embodied her over the centuries, what Carolyn Abbate defines as “the transgressive acoustics of authority that operate during performance” (1993, 235).²¹ The gendered, racialized body of the singer playing *Aida* becomes the performative *locus* where the opera’s strategies of representation come undone, showing – beyond the pretence to an authentic and authoritative representation of Otherness – the seams of costumes and the cracks in the blackface makeup.



Fig. 8: Leontyne Price as Aida, 1964
Courtesy of Getty Images, www.gettyimages.com

This power was exploited and embodied by Leontyne Price, “the” Aida of the twentieth century. “[Aida] was my best friend operatically and was a natural for me because my skin was my costume” (Price 1990): these words open Price’s “Storyteller’s note” to her

²¹ Here Abbate echoes Said, who in *Musical Elaborations* argues that “the trasgressive element in music is its nomadic ability to attach itself to, and become a part of, social formations, to vary its articulations and rhetoric depending on the occasion as well as the audience, plus the power and the gender situation in which it takes place” (1991, 70).

children's version of the *Aida* story, *Aida told by Leontyne Price* (1990, n. p.). Probably the first singer not needing blackface to play the Ethiopian princess, Price is Adina Aaron's precursor, making Aida's black skin both visible and relevant. During her long career, she appropriated what became her signature role, and it is probably due to her if *Aida* became, as mentioned above, the most performed opera at the Met. Dianne Brooks acknowledges the importance of her icon for young African-American women growing up in the 1960s: "the black female operatic persona, constructed via television, opened an alternative narrative space for black women. In this space, black women were allowed to be something other than poor, pathological members of the underclass, even allowed to represent people who were not necessarily black" (2002, 300-01).

Significantly, Price chose unmarked, "white" roles for the most important moments of her career: she made her debut at the Met as Leonora in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, while Puccini's *Tosca* marked her first main role, in 1955 at the NBC-TV Opera, the first opera performed exclusively for television. This impersonation of the white character by the black singer marks Price's performance as a landmark for the construction of racial difference in and beyond operatic staging; yet, it is her shifting between the African Aidas and the Italian (white, but not quite) Toscas, the Chinese Turandots and the un-marked, "white" Violettas that Price troubles given discourses on racial categorization, exposing skin color as yet another performance. In this context, her appropriation of Aida as an essential aspect of her public persona after her career becomes an empowering gesture:²² her use of the *Aida* story in her children's books does support an alternative way of listening to this story through the postcolonial tools of writing back – or singing back.²³ Significantly, in the illustrations that accompany her telling of Aida's story, all characters including the usually "white" Egyptians are dark-skinned, effacing the color binary that has marked *Aida*'s belonging to Western imperial narratives on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Conclusion: In the footsteps of the Ethiopian princess

Ghermandi, Caruso, Hijazi, Price, Aaron: following this trail of voices we are back on the Mediterranean, following Adina Aaron's voice as it soars the dazzling heights of her duet with Kate Aldrich/Amneris in Act II, scene i of Zeffirelli's staging. The black skin that is her costume remarks the contrast between the Ethiopian and the blatantly white (maybe whitened-up) Egyptian princess, showing the seams of the power relationships articulated in the scene. Yet Aaron also refutes the subdued attitude performers generally attributed to Aida; and her "ebben, anch'io son tale" that almost gives away her secret – the fact that she is the Ethiopian princess – gleams with the pride and nobleness Price attributed to the character: "Aida [. . .] is not a slave at all. She is a captive princess. She is of noble blood" (quot. in Bernheimer 1985). In her red and white *gabi*, she indeed embodies, to my eyes if not to my ears, the "Ethiopian princess" whose black skin cannot be disposed of with a little makeup remover.

An "Ethiopian princess" is also the author of the memoirs *Memorie di una principessa etiopica*. The very title of this autobiography by Martha Nasibù (2005), daughter of degiac Nasibù Zamanuel, who served under Haile Selassie during the Ethiopian resistance, shows

²² On a different note, Brooks comments that later in her career Price "had become locked into the role of Aida, the Ethiopian princess, and by the late 1960s, she was also of diminishing symbolic significance" (2002, 313); yet musical critic Martin Bernheimer interprets her choice of the role for her farewell performance at the Met in 1985 as empowering: "The point, she seemed to say, had been made. As long as she could enter the Met doors as a white character, there was no reason why she should not walk out, head high, as a black one" (1985).

²³ The expression "writing back" has been coined by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their *The Empire Writes Back* (1989).

the indebtedness of Italian imagery to *Aida*, on which it patently capitalizes. In one of the photographs included in the book, young Martha Nasibù, with her siblings Amarech and Brahanou, appears on a tiny balcony on via Caracciolo in Naples. The picture was taken as the Nasibù family, after the death of the degiac, was deported to Italy in order to be kept under control by the Fascist government. This image tells me about another Ethiopia, superimposed on Verdi's "foreste imbalsamate" – "producing healing balms, perfumed" in the archaic Italian of opera librettos, but also "embalmed," stuffed like Egyptian mummies, dead among the fumes of sulphur mustard the Italian army used to finally win Ethiopian resistance.

Through Aaron's performance, a long history starting in 1871 Cairo *via* Naples, Milan, Frankfurt, and New York seems to come home in Verdi's birthplace. It comes to a close, but without the comfort of any closure. On the contrary, Aaron's presence makes the many absences that speak through the Ethiopian princess' voice more conspicuous. She sings of a lost, downtrodden "patria mia" that cannot be identified with Italy anymore and yet violently silences, to the ears of her Italian audience, the Ethiopia it is supposed to represent. *Aida's* Ethiopia does not look on the Mediterranean Sea, yet it shares its colonial history; from there, the Ethiopian princess embarked for a long journey, away from Verdi, along the paths opened by the black skin that is her costume.

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