

Aida and Nine Readings of Empire

Ralph P. Locke
Eastman School of Music

Empire in Opera vs. Purely Instrumental Genres

What influence did contemporary attitudes towards empire and towards 'Other' peoples exert on musical works, especially when those peoples were perceived as being of a different race?

The answer surely varies with the genre and also with the complexity of the given work. The late Edward Said – the most prominent and controversial figure in cultural critique of this sort – put it well: a work that is 'rich in ... aesthetic intellectual complexity' must not be treated as if it were a crudely 'jingoistic ditty' – or, for the present context, a racist one. Said's specific example of a complex literary work, in that passage from his important book *Culture and Imperialism*, is Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, with its occasional, resonant references to a sugar plantation in the Caribbean and thus also to the British slave trade.¹ The problem becomes even more intense in music (of equivalent aesthetic complexity). Instrumental works are particularly difficult to interrogate on any 'extra-musical' basis, for an obvious and much-discussed reason: the relative inability of music, without verbal or visual anchors, to denotate and to narrate.²

This is not to say that the workings of empire and attitudes towards 'race' leave no impress on purely instrumental works. But such an impress is normally found

This paper was first presented, in a much shorter version, at the Biennial Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music, Durham, 6–9 July 2004. I am grateful for reactions before, during and after, from Jonathan Bellman, Stuart Campbell, Fabrizio Della Seta, Andreas Giger, Helen Greenwald, Henry Hardy, Karen Henson, Steven Huebner, Francesco Izzo, Shay Loya, James Parakilas, Pierpaolo Polzonetti, Emanuele Senici, Mary Ann Smart, William Weber, Michael Wood and Jessica Woodhouse, as well as from the other members of the 'race' panel at the conference.

¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), 96. (The British edition is differently paginated.)

² Among recent writings debating the inherent (in)ability of music to denotate, bear meaning, and/or tell a story, I might mention Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley, 2002); Derek B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford, 2003); Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton, 2004); Byron Almen, 'Narrative Archetypes: A Critique, Theory, and Method of Narrative Analysis', *Journal of Music Theory* 47 (2003): 1–39; Andrew Dell'Antonio, *Beyond Structural Listening: Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley, 2004); and two studies focusing on whether music can 'have a past tense', in the particular case of Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*: Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991), 30–60; and Carlo Caballero, 'Silence, Echo: A Response to "What the Sorcerer Said"', *Nineteenth-Century Music* 28 (2004–05): 160–82.

Nineteenth-Century Music Review, 3/1(2006): 45–72. Copyright © Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

and sensed only through the composer's use of specific styles and other musical materials that carry concrete associations with this or that group or nation. Such styles and materials most often fall into one of two categories:

- Recognizable *borrowings* – free quotations, mostly rather mangled ones – from the musical practices of the people in that locale; or
- Styles and materials that have been invented more or less from whole cloth yet have nonetheless come to be *coded as representing* the music of that people or as representing, metonymically, the people themselves and their (purported) collective personality or ethnic/racial profile.

Often the two categories overlap (as my word 'mangled' less than gently suggests). Mozart-era 'alla turca' style was a *remembered/transcribed* version of a foreign music that some Europeans had once heard, but many of its aspects were *altered, invented* and *constructed* in such a way as to convey certain attitudes about the distant place in question (the Ottoman Empire) and its people.³

With vocal and stage works, by contrast, the range of options for representing or reflecting imperial processes and concerns – including the struggles between empires, and the attempted domination of one 'racial' group over another – is vastly wider, thanks to the defining elements of plot and sung words, characters' names, costumes, stage design, sets, dances, and so on. Oddly, many critics and scholars seem not to appreciate this since they often focus their attention on whether a given opera uses those aforementioned borrowed (mangled, invented) style codes. Recent and important contributions by Derek B. Scott and Matthew Head, for example, continue a longstanding pattern of exploring primarily distinctive, non-normative styles and style elements – *alla turca*, pentatonicism, augmented seconds, prominent or peculiar use of woodwinds, and so on – as the locus of ideologically coloured representation of the Other, even in opera.⁴

Scenes of *Couleur Locale* – and the Rest of a Work

Of course, ideologically drenched exotic musical codes *do* crop up in operas. The codes occur particularly in scene-setting moments of *couleur locale*, such as dance numbers, staged rituals, or an opening chorus of local inhabitants. Exquisitely atmospheric instances are found, for example, in Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de perles*. Less often noted is that the remaining scenes in *Les Pêcheurs de perles* and other such operas are often quite free of exotic coloration.

Critics and scholars often bewail this disparity of style, but I would argue that the seeming inconsistency is tempered by two important factors:

³ Recent studies include Mary Hunter, 'The *Alla Turca* Style in the Late Eighteenth Century: Race and Gender in the Symphony and the Seraglio', in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston, 1998), 43–73, 317–23; and Matthew Head, *Orientalism, Masquerade and Mozart's Turkish Music* (London, 2000).

⁴ Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic*, 155–78, 235–39; and Head, *Orientalism*. For an overview of commonly used exotic style elements, see my 'Exoticism and Orientalism in Music: Problems for the Worldly Critic', in *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*, ed. Paul A. Bové (Durham, NC, 2000), 257–81, 306–12.

- First, musical numbers are heard and interpreted not as isolated instances of musical style, but as expressions of the character or group being portrayed in the libretto and in the decisions made by the stage designer and other members of the production team.⁵
- Second, the few scene-setting moments that, as I said, *are* musically coded predispose us to ‘hear’ the remaining musical numbers – arias and duets, say, or choral numbers devoid of local colour – as likewise indicative or revealing of the culture being depicted.⁶

I have examined elsewhere how all this plays out in two famous operas set in the ancient Middle East: *Samson et Dalila* and *Aida*.⁷ In the remainder of the present article, I would like to return to *Aida* and contrast certain standard and newer, challenging ways of thinking about the two racially and ethnically marked peoples and places that it portrays. I shall be focusing often on the libretto, or even the bare bones of the plot, characters and stage directions. But, towards the end, I shall show how Verdi’s music as well – even when not exotic-sounding – works in tandem with those cultural resonances of the plot to characterize the story’s two warring ethnic/racial groups.

Traditional Readings of Empire and Otherness in *Aida*

I find it helpful to start by focusing attention not on the Ethiopians in this opera – the darker-skinned, hence more obviously Other, group – but on the ancient Egyptians. After all, Egypt is the locale that we are viewing onstage; and likewise it is Egypt whose inhabitants form the bulk of the opera’s cast: Captain Radames, Princess Amneris, the High Priest Ramfis, the King, the High Priestess, and various choral bodies consisting of priests, priestesses, ministers and captains, and *il popolo*. Attitudes towards the opera’s Ethiopians (*Aida*, Amonasro, some dancing boys, and female slaves and male prisoners) follow rather logically from whatever position the commentator takes toward the opera’s Egyptians. In Figure 1, I have summarized what seem to me nine particularly distinctive ‘readings’ of the opera’s Egypt – some widespread, others barely mentioned in the critical literature. I have arrayed these readings along a rough continuum, ranging from the most literal (1) to the most metaphorical (9).

To start, I would draw attention particularly to Readings 1, 9 and 6 (in that order), which are the three most standard critical approaches to this opera’s Egypt.

Reading 1 is the extreme literalist view: it holds that what we are seeing on stage is simply an honest attempt at representing the announced place and time: Egypt under the pharaohs. The creative team behind the work – including the two

⁵ I discuss this further in two articles: ‘Reflections on Orientalism in Opera and Musical Theater’, *Opera Quarterly* 10/1 (autumn 1993): 48–64; and ‘Constructing the Oriental “Other”: Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila*’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (1991): 261–302 (especially the passages on Abimelech, the Philistines’ Hymn to Dagon, and Dalila).

⁶ For typical instances of exotically worded choruses, see Hervé Lacombe, ‘The Writing of Exoticism in the Libretti of the Opéra-Comique, 1825–1862’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11 (1999): 135–58.

⁷ Locke, ‘Constructing the Oriental “Other”’, and ‘Beyond the Exotic: How “Eastern” Is *Aida*?’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17 (2005): 105–39.

men who did most to structure the libretto: in Cairo, the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette; and, in Paris, the opera administrator Camille Du Locle – took great care to make the stage picture reliably accurate, within the limits defined by theatrical conventions and (as we now realize) more basic attitudes of the day. Indeed, much of the copious correspondence that survives between Verdi and various other shapers of the work focuses on this very issue of how to, in Mariette's own term, 'unite in proper measure' two frankly disparate considerations: historical accuracy '[as] shown in [the carvings that survive in] temples' and 'the requirements of the modern stage'.⁸

Newspaper and magazine articles duly announced and documented the effort, erudition and expense that went into this massive attempt at portraying a lost civilization. As a result, the opera's earliest and subsequent critics and commentators tended to praise the work as transporting the audience back several thousands of years to witness the 'quaint' and 'hieratic' dances that were done at that time.⁹ Or else they implied the opposite voyage across time, in which the ancient Egyptians are the ones that make the journey to join us:

The new [musical] expression [in this work is] so faithful [*ubbidiente*] to the local colour that the ... pharaohs of the great dynasties seem truly restored to life [*davvero ... paiono risuscitati*].¹⁰

More jaundiced interpreters, too, often worked within this same basic literal reading of the plot and stage show – George Bernard Shaw, for example:

Signor Mancinelli conducted the court and temple scenes barbarically, evidently believing that the ancient Egyptians were a tribe of savages, instead of, as far as one can ascertain, considerably more advanced than the society now nightly contemplating in 'indispensable evening dress' the back of Signor Mancinelli's head.¹¹

Reading 9 is the polar opposite of literalism: it frankly accepts that the locale so copiously displayed on stage is a transparent fiction. *Aida*, it concludes, is a metaphor for any situation, whatever the time or place, in which 'individual aspirations are compelled to succumb' to 'colliding historical forces', as Fabrizio Della Seta puts it.¹² This universalizing approach was hinted at early on by the

⁸ Hans Busch, ed. and trans., *Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents* (Minneapolis, 1978), 33 (quotation), see also 20, 32; beards: 34; priestesses: 32, 38, 475–6, 479. Mariette's letters mostly stressed the visual aspect, over which he was given charge, but some refer glancingly to the need for 'local colour' in the music (of certain scenes?). One of his various statements was clearly unfeasible: 'the Viceroy's desire [is] to see the opera composed [i.e., entirely?] and executed in a strictly Egyptian style' (35).

⁹ 'Quaint' (*singolari*) in a review reprinted in *Le opere di Giuseppe Verdi a Bologna (1843–1901)*, ed. Luigi Verdi (Lucca, 2001), 223; 'hieratic': Filippo Filippi, review in *La perseveranza* (13 Jan. 1872), in Knud Arne Jürgensen, *The Verdi Ballets* (Parma, 1995), 303; also in another Filippi quotation given below on p. 50.

¹⁰ Filippo Filippi, *Musica e musicisti: Critiche[,] biografie ed escursioni* (Milan, 1876), 365–6.

¹¹ George Bernard Shaw, 'Aida Fills the House' (6 Jul. 1888), in *Shaw's Music*, 3 vols, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London, 1981), 1: 519. See also 3: 185.

¹² Fabrizio Della Seta, "'O cieli azzurri': Exoticism and Dramatic Discourse in *Aida*', trans. Arthur Groos, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (1991): 49–62 (62); see also Massimo Mila, 'A

1. 'Ancient Egypt' as just that: Ancient Egypt

The Egypt in *Aida* represents to the audience precisely what it claims to represent: ancient Egypt and its religio-military establishment. And Ethiopia is thus what it seems to be: ancient Nubia, Egypt's longtime rival.

2. 'Ancient Egypt' as Ancient Egypt, but the portrayal is somehow unconvincing or limited

Aida portrays ancient Egypt but in a peculiarly distanced or judgemental manner that results from such things as:

- the Meyerbeerian excesses of its pageantry, the overly generic tenor hero, or the 'confused' title role;
- Verdi's supposed lack of sympathy with ancient or modern Egypt or both; or
- Europeans' (self-flattering) insistence that ancient Egypt was a culture 1) distinctively victimized by a rigid hierarchy and 2) fascinatingly obsessed with death and afterlife.

3. 'Ancient Egypt' as Ancient (and explicitly not recent or modern) Egypt

Aida focuses on ancient Egypt and omits any mention of the later history of the land and its peoples.

4. 'Ancient Egypt' as an instance of the largely unchanging Middle East

Aida expresses or reflects, in a more or less direct manner – or barely camouflaged (through projection back several millennia) – nineteenth-century Westerners' attitudes towards the Middle East and/or Africa of their own day. These attitudes may be of whatever kind: admiring, condescending, and so on.

5. 'Ancient Egypt' as a pageant-like allegory of current-day Khedival Egypt (c. 1870)

The plot of *Aida* relates to Khedive Ismail's military actions in the 1860s (and on into the 1870s) against territories to the south: Sudan (including Nubia), Ethiopia and Eritrea.

6. 'Ancient Egypt' as stand-in for the oppressors of Risorgimento-era Italy

Egypt is analogous to the two successive empires from the north (Napoleonic France and Austro-Hungary) that invaded, occupied and oppressed Italy – equivalent to the opera's beleaguered Ethiopia – until Italy became a unified nation state in the course of the 1860s–70s.

7. 'Ancient Egypt' as symbol of any imperial power acting within Europe

Imperial Egypt can stand for any European power encroaching on some other territory within Europe, such as Prussia humiliating France in 1870–71. (See Appendix.)

8. 'Ancient Egypt' as symbol of any European imperialist ventures outside of Europe

Egypt is imperial Europe. Ethiopia thus represents the strategic outposts and centres of population and raw materials that Europe (most notably England and France, but also Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal and other countries, including – in time – Italy) had recently chosen to master and colonize: for example, India, Indochina, South Africa, Morocco/Algeria/Tunisia, Sudan and also Egypt itself. (See, again, Appendix.)

9. 'Ancient Egypt' as metaphor for any abuse(r)s of power

Aida comments on any situation in which an overwhelming power structure comes into conflict with basic principles of human rights, especially the rights of the individuals who are trapped in subordinate positions.

Fig. 1 Nine Readings of *Aida's* Egyptian Empire, Arranged in a Rough Continuum from Most Literal (1) to Most Metaphorical (9)

noted critic Filippo Filippi, in his review of the Cairo premiere for the influential Milanese newspaper *La perseveranza*:

But where Verdi seems to me most successful [*felicissimo*] is in the hieratic Egyptian chant that he has invented, which resembles plainchant [*canto fermo*, such as the Gregorian chant of the Catholic church], just as priests of all places and all eras resemble each other.¹³

The third standard Reading, 6, is metaphorical, too, but in a more specific way; perhaps we might better term it allegorical.¹⁴ It sees ancient Egypt as substitute for one particular tyrannical regime from the point of view of an Italian patriot such as Verdi: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had occupied Italy for decades. Commentators who adopt Reading 6 tend to stress the ways in which *Aida* resembles the more obviously Risorgimento-inspired Verdi operas, such as *Nabucco* (1842) or *Attila* (1846).¹⁵ They also often link the Ethiopians' desire for national self-determination to the sharply anti-clericalist portrayal of Egypt's oppressive priestly class in the Trial Scene.¹⁶ The connection would have been a natural one for nineteenth-century observers to make, given that the Catholic Church had collaborated for years with the Austrians, openly and vociferously, in putting down any nationalist uprising and delaying the movement towards Italian independence.¹⁷ Filippi's remark about priests all being the same, with its reference to Gregorian chant, was a clear swipe at one religious hierarchy in particular, the one that mattered most to fellow Italians who would be reading his review.

Difficult Opera', in *Aida in Cairo: The Birth of an Opera by a Famous Italian Composer*, ed. Mario Codignola and Riccardo de Sanctis (Rome 1982), 18: 'the difficulties and sufferings of this [earthly] life.' Della Seta's article will appear in the original Italian, with a substantial and thoughtful postscript, in a forthcoming volume on *Aida* and exoticism, to be published by the Teatro Regio (Parma); the volume will contain other previously published essays by Adriana Guarnieri, Marcello Conati and Mercedes Viale Ferrero.

¹³ Filippi, *Musica*, 366.

¹⁴ 'Allegory' is a term used inconsistently within studies of musical genres. Sometimes it refers simply to abstract mythological figures, such as Love, Fate, or War. Other times – as here – it refers more to the contemporary ramifications of a specific singing role (e.g., an ancient emperor or military leader) or, more generally, a foreign or enemy people (e.g., ancient Persians or Canaanites in certain Handel operas and oratorios).

¹⁵ On Verdi and the Risorgimento, see n. 17 below and the Appendix.

¹⁶ Mila, 'A Difficult Opera', 17; Anthony Arblaster, *Viva la libertà!: Politics in Opera* (London, 1992), 143; and – to be discussed further below – Paul Robinson, 'Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?' *Cambridge Opera Journal* 5 (1993): 133–40. Robinson's essay was reprinted in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, ed. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis, 1997), 156–66; and (without footnotes) in Robinson's *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters* (Chicago, 2002), 123–33.

¹⁷ In the 1860s, Verdi grew increasingly furious at the Pope, who had declared his infallibility and had threatened with excommunication anybody who worked to create a secular, unified Italy, the one political cause that Verdi unhesitatingly promoted his whole life long. See George Martin, *Verdi: His Music, Life and Times*, paperback edn (New York, 1983), chaps. 32 and 34 (esp. pp. 418, 448, 458, and 239, 349, 408, 425–39, 550); and Patricia Juliana Smith, "'O patria mia": Female Homosexuality and the Gendered Nation in Bellini's *Norma* and Verdi's *Aida*', in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, ed. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York, 1997), 102. Verdi specifically urged that the flabellum that is carried in the triumphal procession be modelled on the one that 'they carry in Rome at papal ceremonies' (Busch, *Verdi's Aida*, 264).

Said's New Angles

The interpretive field for *Aida* – somewhat static for decades – was vastly expanded by Edward W. Said's essay of 1987, later incorporated into his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said's main point – one clearly, and sagely, intended as enriching other readings, not supplanting them – is that *Aida* 'belongs equally to the history of culture and [to] the historical experience of overseas domination' of the Middle East and Africa by the Western powers. The work, at base and in surface details, suggests 'imperialist structures of attitude and reference'.¹⁸

Said's essay about *Aida* is rich in new and challenging ideas about the work's relationship to empire. His primary point – surprisingly, and I think therefore a bit confusingly – goes back, in some ways, to a literalist interpretation (Reading 1) but from a new angle, consistent with the anti-imperialist principles that drive so much of his copious written output. As Said persuasively argues, *Aida* did not just portray ancient Egypt: it functioned at the Cairo premiere as a plainly legible symbol of Western cultural hegemony upon Egyptian terrain, which is to say a symbol of the West's right to define and re-create imaginatively Egypt's ancient history, for Egypt and the world to see. There was even something symbolic, he notes, in the fact that the monumental, Italianate opera house separated the Western part of the city, with its hotels, trains, broad asphalt boulevards, pavements, electricity, streetlamps, municipally steam-pumped water conduits and other modern conveniences, from the Eastern part, where the winding, unpaved streets were dark at night and water was hand-drawn and hawked by vendors. The building literally turned its back on the Eastern city so as to face the Western part, where its patrons resided.

Whereas Said's primary interpretive move relies on a literal reading of the stage action, several of his other views depart by degrees from literalism. What I call Reading 2 – that *Aida* strives for literalism and fails somehow – has a long history, usually grounded in objections to the opera's reliance on the pageantry of *grand opéra* or to the lack of psychological nuance in the portrayal of Radames. Said gives this a new spin, opining that the opera's most characteristic traits – in his words, its 'airlessness and immobility', its 'affective neutrality', its 'strangely unaffected visual and musical effects' – arise from the fact that it 'was written for and first produced in an African country with which Verdi had no connection' (124, 114, 117). This is perhaps Said's weakest point, based upon his having misread an intriguing comment about Egypt in a Verdi letter of 1868, a year before the renowned master was approached to compose *Aida*.¹⁹

Reading 3 is a total Saidian invention, and a strong one. It stresses that, by drawing upon the best current archeological knowledge, *Aida* reconstructs ancient Egypt ('stages' the most 'prestigious' part of Egyptian history) in a frozen moment of distant time and purges it of all evidence of the subsequent centuries of Muslim habitation and Ottoman rule that had 'screened' it from view until Western archaeology came along (118, 125). Similarly, the opera gives no hint of recent and

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.

¹⁹ Verdi's letter of 19 February 1868 (Busch, *Verdi's Aida*, 3) indicates not an indifference to Egypt, as Said argues, but (as I argue in 'Beyond the Exotic') a combined active distaste for the authoritarian menace conveyed by its ancient monuments and fascination with the country's current condition (its 'beauty and ugliness').

current European ventures in the region. These various silences at the heart of the work may seem striking or puzzling once Said has drawn one's attention to them. After all, the opera was commissioned by the Ottoman- and British-linked Khedive Ismail and shaped heavily by the conventions of *grand opéra* as conveyed and enforced by various Westerners, including Mariette, Du Locle, and prominent French set designers. One might have expected that a work intended to (as Mariette put it) 'augment the renown [that current-day] Egypt has already made for herself' might have dealt somehow with current-day realities and projects, instead of telling the old story of the pharaohs one more time.²⁰ Of course, it did not. For the same reason, in 2004, the Greek hosts at the opening ceremonies of the Summer Olympics re-enacted, to the delight and astonishment of billions of TV watchers around the globe, the achievements of the days when *their* ancestors dominated much of the known world, intellectually, politically and artistically.

But we today are primed by critical theory and by several decades of against-the-grain or 'play-the-subtext' productions. Thus we may be more ready than the earlier critics and opera-goers to see *Aida's* very *absence* of reference to Egypt's post-pharaonic millennia or current-day situation as, instead, a shadowy *presence* deserving notice and comment. Said has done *Aida* criticism a signal service in directing attention to a number of alternative 'signifieds' – related to imperialism and various geopolitical struggles – that leave an 'echo' or 'trace' within the opera by paradoxical virtue of having been carefully excluded (125, 130).

Said sometimes brings several disparate, even seemingly contradictory, readings together. The opera's mood of 'hopeless deadlock', he posits, relates to Verdi's and his contemporaries' not inaccurate but still very one-sided understanding of ancient Egypt as obsessed with death and the afterlife. Here Said seems to be invoking a variant of Reading 2 according to which the opera is attempting to portray ancient Egypt but, in the critic's view, not entirely succeeding. But he also finds what we might call 'endotic', not just 'exotic', roots for this air of deadlock. In a new twist to the aforementioned Italian-nationalist Reading 6, he cites Verdi's 'rather somber, disenchanting, and vestigial attachment' to the politics of the Risorgimento and his increasing sense that military and political success tends to be achieved at the cost of 'personal failure or ... human impasse'.²¹

Said also entertains briefly Reading 4, which finds that the work echoes stereotypes of Middle Easterners and/or African 'blacks', stereotypes that, in some passages, are powerfully reinforced musically by one or more of those 'local colour' traits mentioned earlier. The scene in Amneris's chamber, Said notes, typifies Middle-Eastern female sensuality – one of the primary images thought to be typical of the region in ancient times as well as in Verdi's own day. Similarly, Said proposes (in more novel manner) that the Moorish boys' grotesque, mechanical dancing suggests the dehumanizing cruelty of Egyptian slavery and that the high priest Ramfis embodies the Middle-Eastern despot's vindictiveness and overly rigid application of the law.²² Still, this kind of reading – one that picks

²⁰ Busch, *Verdi's Aida*, 36.

²¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 123, also 121. A third factor that he invokes in this regard is Verdi's decision to use formal counterpoint in certain numbers involving the priests (a style trait that critics have overemphasized, as I have argued in 'Beyond the Exotic').

²² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 121–2. (Indeed, the Moorish boys do another grotesque dance in the Triumphal Scene.) In my 'Beyond the Exotic', I argue that there is more, and more varied, local colour – and 'ancient' colour – in *Aida* than many writers have recognized.

up on evidence of the thoroughgoing Otherness of the place and many of the characters – seems to strike Said as too obvious to need more than relatively brief mention.²³

Indeed, Said urges that *Aida* ‘is not so much *about* but *of* imperial domination’. That is to say, the opera is less a comment on or portrayal of the region and its peoples (in Verdi’s day – in other words, Reading 4) than it is one manifestation or instance of imperialism’s (concrete and conceptual/ideological) network of knowledge-systems. Furthermore, as Said explains, European domination here involved the active participation of Khedive (Viceroy) Ismail himself, who commissioned the opera at an extravagant price, and paid for its first production with the precise aim of increasing his prestige throughout Europe (that is, by funding this arch-Western portrayal of Egypt’s glorious past) and thus of encouraging foreign investment in his country’s efforts at modernization. As Ismail himself soon after the Cairo premiere stated to several Europeans, including the composer and music critic Filippo Filippi: ‘I want to do all I can to align [*rallier*] Egypt with Europe, not just through industry, commerce and practical matters, but especially through the gifts of intellect and the charms of art’.²⁴ *Aida*, in that sense, constituted capital of another kind: cultural capital, to use the helpful phrase developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.²⁵ Ismail, as Said and various historians stress, saw a modernized, Europeanized Cairo and his country’s alliance with Britain as crucial levers in his fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire. In the event, though, these various developments ended up having the opposite effect, draining the Khedival treasury and thereby planting the seed for the conquest of Egypt – including the all-important Suez Canal – in 1882 by the British, who then occupied it, or placed it under protectorate or other treaty obligations, until 1954 (114–15, 126–27).

Furthermore, as Said was perhaps the first to note, the battles in *Aida* parallel the military campaigns in the 1860s and 1870s by Khedive Ismail against the darker-skinned territories to Egypt’s south: Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. These campaigns were carried out with the blessing of the British, who were intent on slowing French and Italian advances on the strategically crucial Horn of Africa (125–6). I call this novel and persuasive allegorical interpretation of the work, founded on the concrete realities of Khedival Egypt policy, Reading 5.²⁶ Said devotes some three pages to it, and it surely deserves to be incorporated into standard discussions of

²³ Mark Everist sensitively notes ‘a certain reluctance’ on Said’s part to relate *Aida* and its commissioning to Orientalist stereotypes: ‘Meyerbeer’s *Il crociato in Egitto*: *Mélodrame*, Opera, Orientalism’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8 (1996): 224 n. 26. A related remark by Everist (250 n. 103) – distinguishing Said’s (in some ways) narrower 1978 book from his broader 1993 one – is taken out of context and mischaracterized in Matthew Head, ‘Musicology on Safari: Orientalism and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory’, *Music Analysis* 22 (2003): 218; Head also inadvertently attributes to Victorian-era novelist H. Rider Haggard a remark that is actually a comment on his work by present-day cultural theorists Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (214, 227 n. 3).

²⁴ Filippi, *Musica*, 379–80.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1984).

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. Somewhat later, the British encouraged the Italians in turn against Ethiopia, as a bar to the French; see Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855–1974* (London, 1991), 50–54, 73.

the opera. It can even be reinforced by a bit of rarely cited documentary evidence: Ernest Reyer, in his review of the Cairo premiere, describes two of the ranks of Egyptian archers and other soldiers who marched in the Triumphal Scene as consisting of, respectively, 'Negroes armed with spears, ... true and superb specimens [*échantillons*] of their race', and 'Schardanans [from the Mediterranean islands, who] in the days of Ramses III [unsuccessfully] invaded Egypt from Cyrenaica [that is, Northern Libya]; defeated in the end, they entered the Egyptian army and formed the king's honor guards'.²⁷ The parallels here to Ismail's military struggles with and conquest of neighbouring countries, especially Sudan, would have been obvious. Yet this entire link between the opera and Egypt's own imperialist ventures has gone almost systematically unnoticed by the many commentators who have presented themselves as responding to Said's essay.

In support of various of these points (especially his versions of Readings 1–3), the opera lover Said semi-heretically declares that *Aida* as a whole lacks the direct vitality found in early and middle-period Verdi operas, with their 'incorrigibly red-blooded heroes and heroines in the full splendor of contests (often incestuous) over power, fame, and honor' (113). *Aida* is 'self-limiting, atypically held in' (114), even – as we saw in an earlier quotation – 'unaffected'. Said finds support for these judgements in a punchy statement from musicologist Joseph Kerman. 'Only Amneris comes to life', runs part of the quote from *Opera as Drama*: 'There is a curious falsity about *Aida* which is quite unlike Verdi.'²⁸

Said plainly admires certain aspects of *Aida*, describing as 'masterly' the way the work carries out Verdi's 'artistic intentions' (114, 116; see also xiv). At the same time, he insists that it contains 'disparities and discrepancies', like any work of opera (an inherently 'hybrid, radically impure' genre: 114). Said is thus trying not to attack *Aida* but to characterize what we might call the 'cultural work' that it performed in its day and perhaps still does today. Nonetheless, his essay, by the very depth and breadth of its challenge to opera lovers and critics, was also fated to be incompletely understood.

Responses to Said: Acceptance, Rejection, Misrepresentation

The responses to Said's essay – from brief allusions to full-scale discussions – have been many, varied and unending. They have come primarily from historians and cultural critics rather than musicologists. Perhaps the latter have been puzzled or even daunted: at first by Said's complex approach, and then even more so by the growing welter of disagreement about it.²⁹

I would like to spend some time with particularly hefty responses to Said from three thoughtful, opera-loving historians. I will, for one thing, note certain ways

²⁷ Ernest Reyer, *Notes de musique* (Paris, 1875), 197. Supernumeraries who were of sub-Saharan origin were likewise used in the Paris Opéra 1880 production, if one can trust costume sketches and magazine illustrations.

²⁸ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York, 1956), 160, quoted in Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 113.

²⁹ Encouragingly, in a recent issue of *Cambridge Opera Journal*, three musicologists do refer to Said's article: see Mary Ann Smart, 'Primal Scenes: Verdi in Analysis', Huebner, Steven, "'O patria mia": Patriotism, Dream, Death', and Gabriela Cruz, 'Aida's Flute' – respectively, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14 (2002), 1–9 (esp. 4), 161–75 (esp. 175), and 177–200 (esp. 180).

in which these writers mis-summarize his work. (Perhaps this was almost inevitable in the present case: Said's prominence as a spokesperson for the Palestinian cause seems to have led people to assume in advance that they knew what he must be thinking about *Aida*. But there is also a larger methodological point here about scholarly argument, and I shall return to it at the very end.) I will also note helpful new approaches to the opera that are hinted at by two of the three historians and that go beyond both traditional ones and those proposed by Said.

In 1993, literary historian and opera critic Paul Robinson responded to Said's essay with an article devoted primarily to refuting it. Robinson argues that the Middle Eastern setting – however crucial for the opera's commissioning – has scarce relevance to the work as a musical and theatrical entity. He barely bothers to counter the Kerman–Said claim that the work is, in certain crucial respects, unconvincing (Reading 2). His warm affection is plain enough when he invokes 'the magnificent outburst of Amonasro' in Act 3 ('Pensa ch'un popolo'), calling it 'my favorite phrase in the opera' – 'a wonderful opportunity for high baritone'.³⁰ And he readily admits that Said's basic conclusion (Reading 1, angled) is correct: the opera was 'an imperial *article de luxe*' created by the Khedive to 'entertain the European population of Cairo' with visions of Egypt's past.³¹ He utterly ignores, however, Said's no less novel Readings 3 and 5: that the opera assisted the colonial project by bypassing centuries of Ottoman and Islamic reality in favour of an obsessive reconstruction of a more prestigious but half-legendary pharaonic Egypt, seen as precursor to Greece, Rome and the modern West; and that it reflected the Khedive's military campaigns against Ethiopia. Indeed, he labels it 'an immediate embarrassment ... [for] Said's theory' that Egypt is the aggressor in *Aida*.³² But this is unfair: as we have seen, Said does address Egyptian aggression, and at length, linking the opera to the Khedive's Ethiopian war (Reading 5 above).

Instead, Robinson repeatedly characterizes Said as primarily espousing a sharply judgemental version of Reading 4: Said, he claims, argues that the characters in *Aida* are 'Orientalised', that the work is 'deeply inscribed with invidious representations of the non-European Other'. (Actually, as already noted, Said touches only lightly on this whole matter.)³³ Robinson then enumerates the numbers that, as everyone knows, are Oriental in style (mostly choruses and dances, plus the High Priestess's prayer), only to insist that they do not carry much weight within the work, for two reasons: first, each is immediately afterward 'negate[d]', 'ideologically cancelled', by music that is more Western in style, and, second, the exotic passages tend to be associated with slaves and women and therefore cannot be read as representing an Orientalized Egypt as a whole.³⁴ This double argument is particularly weak; perhaps it was motivated by some of the

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.

³³ *Ibid.*, 134, 138, 139.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 139 (quoted phrases) and 137–38. Robinson's claims have recently been endorsed, too quickly, by the noted opera scholar Barry Millington: 'Robinson convincingly demonstrates ... [that in *Aida*] oriental motifs [in a few of the dances and choruses] are constantly negated by occidental [ones in the rest of the opera]' (review of *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*, in *BBC Music Magazine*, Jul. 2002, 112).

same defensiveness about *Aida* that caused Budden to feel the need to find in *Aida* ‘a complete absence of racialist ... overtones’,³⁵

But, if Robinson misrepresents or ignores much of Said’s argument and unfairly muffles the impact of the exotic-sounding numbers, there is one reading he himself favours: the relatively standard one emphasizing ‘Italian patriotism’ (no. 6). He frankly states that the opera’s politics ‘look backward to the *risorgimento*’ (140), and he sees Ramfis and the other priests as stand-ins for the Catholic Church, whose oppressiveness Verdi had already attacked more directly in *Don Carlos*.³⁶ By this kind of reasoning, the love of the Ethiopian characters for the verdant hills of their homeland must be yet another relocated version – like the nostalgia of the Hebrew exiles in *Nabucco*, like the lament of the Scottish exiles in *Macbeth* – of the Italian *amor della patria* (to borrow words sung by Amonasro in Act 2) and of Italians’ longing for an end to their country’s oppression by the French and then the Austrians.³⁷ Previous writers, as I said earlier, have noticed the anti-clericalist tone conveyed by the portrayal of the oppressive Egyptian priests. But no recent writer (except perhaps political historian Anthony Arblaster, whom I shall mention again further below) has made as emphatic a case as Robinson for the ‘Risorgimento’ reading (no. 6).

The response to Said by John M. MacKenzie, a prominent historian of British imperialism, is similar to Robinson’s in favouring Reading 6 (though it seems he reached it independently) but quickly adds an even stronger vote for the broadly metaphorical Reading 9: ‘The opera ... is decidedly not about imperialism Its sympathies are with Ethiopian nationalism [in its fight against Egyptian domination] but above all with private griefs irrevocably caught up in national affairs.’³⁸ That first sentence is revealing: MacKenzie misrepresents Said’s main thrust by using the preposition ‘about’. Said, we recall, declared (and even italicized) that *Aida* is not primarily *about* imperialism (for example, about the peoples that Europe had conquered); rather, it functioned as a tool in a larger imperial project, in part through the authority carried by Auguste Mariette and other Western Egyptologists. This crucial argument of Said’s (his ‘angled’ version of Reading 1) is one that MacKenzie, like Robinson, seems to think is barely worth addressing.³⁹

Still, MacKenzie does, at one point, broaden the discussion helpfully when he notes that Said leaves in near-silence the well-established and crucial fact that Verdi was a deeply committed anti-imperialist regarding not just Italy but also, at least later in life, India and Ethiopia. MacKenzie points to a revealing and broad anti-imperialist statement that Verdi made to an interviewer in 1896 (see Appendix

³⁵ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols, rev. edn (New York, 1992) 3: 258. On Budden’s denial of ‘racialism’ (as well as on Robinson’s double overstatement), see Locke, ‘Beyond the Exotic’, 105, 112–13, 122.

³⁶ Robinson, ‘Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?’, 140; see also Arblaster, *Viva la libertà*, 142–3. Matthew Head rightly terms Robinson’s recourse to a familiar endotic (that is, internal European) explanation here an ‘ill-considered’ and inadequate attempt at a ‘corrective to Said’s complex essay’ – Head, ‘Musicology on Safari’, 213–14.

³⁷ Robinson, ‘Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?’, 139–40, also 135. This was relocated but also slightly belated, given that most of Italy had become unified by 1861, Venice was incorporated in 1866, and Rome, finally, on 20 September 1870 – just when Verdi was busy cajoling Ghislanzoni into remaking the *Aida* libretto to his demands.

³⁸ John M. MacKenzie, ‘Occidentalism: Counterpoint and Counter-polemic’ [review of Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*], *Journal of Historical Geography* 19 (1993): 342.

³⁹ John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester, 1995), 155.

on p. 72). Verdi's words, though spoken years later than *Aida*, suggest that the composer might not have objected to a truly fresh reading (no. 8) that equates the ancient Egyptians with nineteenth-century European imperialism, and Ethiopia thus with Europe's conquests.

Said himself leaves unmentioned the possibility of reading the opera's Egypt as imperial Britain (France, and so on). And certain things that he does say would seem to exclude it: by portraying an exclusively ancient Egypt (see Reading 3) and by enlisting multiple aesthetic pleasures, *Aida* 'anesthetise[d] the metropolitan consciousness' against thinking about current European actions on that same geographical terrain; in short, like other aspects of imperialist-era culture, Verdi's opera '[permits] the conqueror not to look into the truth of the violence he does'.⁴⁰ Interestingly, in one famous letter (see Appendix, p. 71), Verdi compared ancient Egypt to a somewhat different expansionist European military power: Prussia, after it defeated France in 1870. The reading that results from that remark of Verdi's – with Ethiopia standing in for a humiliated France – I call Reading 7.

To substitute one European power for another – Britain (in the Middle East, Reading 8) for Prussia (in France, Reading 7) – is no great stretch, but in this case might seem counterintuitive, even absurd. After all, if the opera's Egypt is Britain, then the opera's Ethiopia must stand for, among other spots, (current-day) Egypt, which would put some form of 'Egypt' on both sides of the equation. But metaphors are not mathematical equations and can work in several ways at once. For example, the Hebrews in *Samson et Dalila* can be seen as (among other things) 'we Christians' and the Philistines thus as 'those Jews'. Indeed, the identification between Philistines and current-day Jews in that opera may have worked in not one but two ways: Jews were widely accused of 1) craving gold and power – Dickens's greedy Fagin embodies the full negative stereotype, and the Rothschilds were often described as (more respectable) real-life exemplars – and 2) stubbornly clinging to an antiquated understanding of the Divinity that would doom them to perdition and cause their synagogues (like the temples of the Philistines) to fall.

Reading 8 – the British Empire one – gains further credence from a brief suggestion by John Rosselli, buried in a short discussion about *Aida*, which I take to be yet another attack on Said (unnamed). Rosselli's primary aim in this somewhat puzzling passage seems to be to dismiss any significance of the opera's two locales more emphatically even than Robinson and MacKenzie had done: Egypt (which we see) and Ethiopia (which we hear described, or fantasized about). The main point of the opera, Rosselli says, is simply 'the contrast between an imperial and to some extent oppressive regime on the one hand, and a rather wild, tribal society on the other'.⁴¹

Rosselli means this in a general way: *any* imperial regime and *any* simpler or more backward place. His brief formulation assumes that Amonasro, *Aida* and the Ethiopian chorus are presented as simpler or more primitive or instinctual

⁴⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 130, 131. At one point, Said nearly stumbles upon Reading 8 (in spite of himself?): he describes the Triumphal Scene as the 'one opening that Verdi allowed in the work, an aperture through which he seems to be letting in an outside world otherwise banned from entry'. But Said immediately continues that the denizens of the 'outside world' enter only this opera as 'exotica or as captives' (thus back to Reading 4) – *Culture and Imperialism*, 125.

⁴¹ John Rosselli "'Trust the Tale, Not the Teller'", in *Verdi in Performance*, ed. Alison Latham and Roger Parker (Oxford, 2001), 38–41, 40; Rosselli's paper derives from a conference in 1995.

than the Egyptians.⁴² And I find it stimulating, for it is by no means as widely accepted as Rosselli's wording implies. Writers, true, have written of Amonasro's 'wily, primitive ferocity'. But they regularly distance Amonasro's daughter Aida from those same origins and qualities. Budden, for example, paints the heroine somewhat colourlessly as an 'abstraction' of 'suffering and loving womanhood' (in this case his words reflect more closely the *disposizione scenica*, which describes her primary traits as 'amore, sommissione, dolcezza').⁴³ A striking advance in Rosselli's statement over Budden's is that it allows the title character some part in the anger, energy, simplicity and rural backwardness of Ethiopia. Also, Rosselli's statement encourages some attention to the Ethiopian slaves and prisoners, whose one somewhat distinctive musical moment has gone largely ignored (and will be explored in a moment).

In addition, nobody has much noticed the many careful distinctions made in the libretto and stage directions between the two nations. The Egyptian army, for example, is organized hierarchically into phalanxes (*falangi*) led by captains and by a *condottiero supremo* distinct from the king, and Egypt's temples are vast and dark, filled with looming statues and scowling, punitive priests. The Ethiopian army, by contrast, seems a more grassroots and egalitarian, not to say ragtag, affair. Amonasro calls his soldier-comrades simply 'my brave followers' (*i miei prodi*) – and Ethiopia's temples glisten in the sun (and have, it appears, no priestly caste doing dirty work for the government – if there *is* much Ethiopian government).⁴⁴ Even the Messenger refers to the Ethiopians' leader, almost with awe, as a nearly superhuman fighter, rather like the biblical Samson, and indulges in adjectives redolent of a beast that cannot be tamed:

Un guerriero indomabile, feroce,
Li conduce, Amonasro!

A fierce [or: wild], unconquerable [or: unsubdue-able] warrior
Leads them: Amonasro!

All the other characters on stage then merely add (almost as marginal information for the audience's benefit) 'il Re!'

Returning to Rosselli's statement, it ignores that Verdi and his collaborators – and the audiences of their day – perceived Egypt and Ethiopia as particularly *plausible* locations for, respectively, oppressive authority and wild (or even pastoral) primitivism. Both locations, in other words, were chosen for their understood, unspoken contrast to civilized Europe and its political and legal

⁴² Verdi objected, early on, to there being no singing for the chorus of Ethiopian prisoners in the Act 2 finale. In all published scores, though, they do sing along with Aida (though to more kindly words – see Ex. 4) when she repeats Amonasro's hymnic plea to the king of Egypt, sing two prominent cries of 'Pietà!' along with Aida, and join in singing briefly with the Egyptian *popolo* but to their own distinctive, if often inaudible, words: first pleading ('Tua pietade ... imploriamo', words they first sang in the passage with Aida), then joyful ('Gloria al clemente egizio'). This corrects a misleading statement in Busch, *Verdi's Aida*, 72. A recent musical-theatre version of the *Aida* story, by Tim Rice and Elton John, goes much further in giving the captive slaves a voice.

⁴³ Budden, *Operas of Verdi* 3: 258 (including the previous quoted remark, about Amonasro).

⁴⁴ Della Seta (among others) briefly notes the various contrasts of dark indoors (Egypt) and sunny nature (Ethiopia): "'O cieli azzurri'", 54–5.

systems, which were seen as (unlike those of Amonasro's Ethiopia) highly structured yet (unlike those of Ramfis's Egypt) humane and responsive.⁴⁵ In short, Rosselli, too, like MacKenzie, hints at several possible readings that he may not be wishing to encourage: a version of Reading 4 featuring Ethiopians as the 'timeless' primitives; or Reading 5 (the Egyptian Khedive attacking Ethiopia in the 1860s), or, most intriguingly, 8 (Egypt as Europe – with Britain in the lead – trying to contain the unruly hordes in distant lands).

Rosselli has a further bone to pick with those who see this opera as influenced by imperialism and coloured by Eurocentrist prejudice – for example, the more judgemental version of 4, which Budden and Robinson had already tried to ward off. Rosselli, like Budden, leaves his opponents unnamed; perhaps they include Viale Ferrero, Casini, Said (again), or certain stage directors engaging in 'socially critical' productions of the work. Whoever they are, they pander, Rosselli argues, to the predominantly anti-colonial attitudes of our own day and turn supposed critical evaluation into, as he sarcastically puts it, 'an homage to contemporary virtue'.⁴⁶ Fabrizio Della Seta, similarly, dismisses as 'too present-day' any readings that sniff out European 'imperialistic expansionism' in the actions and policies of the opera's Egypt.⁴⁷

Such objections to a 'presentist' approach in criticism – in other words, criticism that anachronistically judges the past by the values of the present day – could well be quite apposite in other cases. But in the case of *Aida*, the objections are rather neutralized by a central historical reality that neither Rosselli nor Della Seta mentions: colonialism and anti-colonialism *were* very much on people's minds throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thanks in part to the abolition of slave trading and to violent uprisings against European hegemony in Indonesia, India, Egypt and elsewhere.⁴⁸ Such issues were definitely on Verdi's own mind, as that late interview in the Appendix shows.

⁴⁵ See Locke, 'Beyond the Exotic', 107–8, 134.

⁴⁶ Casini argues that Radames's betrayal, later in the opera, is 'a deserved retaliation for Egyptian oppression of the vanquished Ethiopian people', *Verdi*, 304; see also Mercedes Viale Ferrero, 'Scenery and Costumes', in *Aida in Cairo*, ed. Codignola and de Sanctis, 144.

⁴⁷ Della Seta, "'O cieli azzurri'", 62 n. 47. I translate his original wording (which he kindly conveyed to me in a recent email): 'troppo attualizzanti'. The published translation of 1991 added a tone of moral disapproval: 'too fashionable'.

⁴⁸ I might mention the famous Indian Rebellion (or 'Indian Mutiny', as the British long called it) of 1857, repeated Algerian and Egyptian uprisings against the French and British, respectively, and the (short-lived but famous) military triumphs of Zulu warriors over the British in the 1870s (alluded to by George Bernard Shaw in analogy to Amonasro – 'Aida Fills the House', 520). On growing awareness in Europe of colonial resistance (for example, disillusionment and distress at the 'horrific atrocities and reprisals on both sides' of the Indian Rebellion), see A.J. Stockwell, 'Power, Authority, and Freedom', in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire*, ed. P.J. Marshall (Cambridge, 1996), 158 (147–84). Further on native resistance, see such diverse studies as Linda Colley, *Captives* (New York, 2002), 21–134, 389–401; Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham, NC, 1994); and – concerning an epoch-making event of 1896 (to which I shall return later) that caused rage and consternation in Italy and elsewhere in the West, namely the defeat of the Italian troops at Adwa – Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 55–84. More generally, on the West's refusal to recognize or even (in literature) portray non-Western and anti-colonial voices, see Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xix–xxii.

Need We Choose?

As my summaries may already have suggested, certain claims and counter-claims about race, place and nation in *Aida* seem limited to me by their one-sidedness. As with many questions that have an overt political, ethnic/racial/cultural or moral component, commentators feel the need to plump for a single interpretation and to leave others unmentioned, to misrepresent them, or even to discredit the presumed motivations of the individuals who have proposed them.⁴⁹

What I take to be a basic interpretive principle – opera is a multi-layered cultural product and, indeed, a shifting one, whose messages take on differing hues in different productions and performances, before different audiences – gets crushed under the weight of many competing, prescriptive, univocal (hence mutually incompatible) readings. Said's openness to interpretive multiplicity (repeatedly emphasized in *Culture and Imperialism*) strikes a welcome note within the sometimes dogmatic literature on this particular opera.⁵⁰ And that tolerance for debate is also very much in the spirit of critical thinking in diverse fields nowadays. For example, film-studies scholars writing about a repertoire directly analogous to *Aida*, Hollywood films about the Middle East and East Asia, seem to be able to hold in mind, as potentially valid and insightful for different viewers, a wide range of mutually enriching interpretive possibilities.⁵¹

One very recent addition to the discussion of *Aida* and its historical/political ramifications takes a similarly refreshing, open-minded tack. Cultural historian Michael P. Steinberg, in his book *Listening to Reason*, acknowledges the various readings that in some way emphasize Europe's conquest of the Middle East (for example, Reading 4, and even the rarely mentioned 8) – indeed, calls them 'obvious'. He does not hesitate, however, to endorse also the standard Reading 6 (pro-Risorgimento) and, bracingly, to give it a new, endotic (intra-Italian) twist, with Egypt as the industrialized, dominant northern part of the new nation:

The geopolitics of *Aida*, with its multiple articulations of north-south conflict, was potentially interpretable to its original listeners in 1871 as an allegory of Italian unification and its tensions. Here, the intra-Italian north-south axis would function as a compatible overlay above the more obvious Orientalist, European-African axis. Ethiopia might thus signify ... 'unredeemed' Italy in multiple ways: the peninsula before unification, and the impoverished south thereafter.⁵²

⁴⁹ Arblaster suggests that Budden 'is simply out of sympathy with the liberal idealist' as embodied in several of Verdi's tenor and baritone heroes: *Viva la libertà!* 139; see also 5–6.

⁵⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiv, xxi–xxii, 18, 39, 81, 96 (including repeated attacks on 'the rhetoric of blame and defensiveness'). It is also true that, as Michael Wood notes, 'what [Said] himself says very often sounds like blame'; Wood notes a passage in the *Aida* essay as 'too blunt', namely Said's remark that Verdi's insistence on maintaining sole domination over his operatic work 'dovetailed conveniently' with growing European imperialist control of Egypt – 'Lost Paradises', *New York Review of Books* 3 (Mar. 1994), 44–7. Wood substantially shortened and reworked this review when republishing it in his *Children of Silence: On Contemporary Fiction* (New York, 1998), 157–69. See also Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 116–17.

⁵¹ Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein, eds, *Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1997).

⁵² Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), 179–80.

This is a positive step on the road to a debate that recognizes the existence of previous interpretations,⁵³ is fair-minded, and recognizes that operatic meanings are richly multiplicitous and electrically unstable, though also tightly circumscribed and certainly not inherently arbitrary or random.⁵⁴

Indeed, I would argue that the confusion that has often reigned in discussions of *Aida* comes only in part from the fact that writers start from different, often unspoken premises. The other part derives from honest but incomplete responses to an inherent, productive tension in 'the work itself' (score, sung libretto, basic stage directions, and so on). The work and that tension now deserve to be brought explicitly into the discussion.

Meaningfully Mixed Messages in the Triumphal Scene

As I see it, *Aida* is driven by a vital tension between 1) the scenario drafted at the request of the Khedive (hence emphasizing the greatness of ancient and, by implication, modern Egypt) and 2) Verdi's lingering sympathy with any small or less-powerful country yearning for self-determination. Some moments in the work resonate more with the first of these goals, others with the second. And one's choice of interpretation will affect how one hears a given moment.

Exotic and other distinctive styles play a big role here, as noted earlier. The religious mystery and authority of Ancient Egypt, for example, are vividly conveyed. The beginning of the Consecration Scene contains the peculiar modal melismas of the High Priestess's chant (with lowered second degree and intriguingly variable seventh), over harp strumming, and the answering refrain in choral homophony, set in a more conventional ecclesiastical modality and deprived of accompaniment so as to hint at the Priests' stern asceticism and sullen implacability. A more recent-day exotic East is suggested by certain dance numbers for the priestesses (in the Consecration Scene that ends Act 1), and for women from various countries – including Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya and 'Asia' – in the Act 2 finale (Triumphal Scene).

No particular passage in that Act 2 ballet is set aside for – associated with – the Ethiopian women. By contrast, the *piccoli schiavi mori* – who were, aside from the Egyptian king's aforementioned sub-Saharan spear-carriers, the only characters who were presented as black or extremely dark in the opera's first productions – are assigned a distinctive episode: in F minor with lowered second degree (followed by an unusual variety of F major-pentatonic with a B \flat in it rather than a G and with the sixth degree – D – sometimes flattened and sometimes not).⁵⁵

⁵³ Steinberg's footnote cites Said, Robinson and Della Seta.

⁵⁴ For a more radical position on 'leaving things open' in interpretation, see Carolyn Abbate, 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2003–04): 516 (505–36).

⁵⁵ The slave boys were ballerinas made up to look 'completely black', according to Verdi's express wish (Busch, *Verdi's Aida*, 264), that is, with black leggings (and long-sleeved tops?) and body make-up. Here and elsewhere, he wanted the opera to avoid all 'display of nudity', which he considered a 'French import' (he associated it with the sexual provocativeness of Offenbach-style operetta: *ibid.*, 256). By contrast, Amonasro, *Aida* and, presumably, the other Ethiopians, must have 'olive, dark-reddish skin' according to the authoritative production book put out by the opera's publisher Ricordi (*ibid.*, 558–9). In an early letter, Verdi did propose this stage direction for Amneris's chamber scene: 'Ethiopian boys carry vases, perfumes, crowns, etc.', and 'dance to the sound of castanets' (Busch, *Verdi's Aida*, 48). But the specific identification of the Moorish boys with Ethiopia was

But, then, they are not clearly Ethiopian: their name ('Moors') suggests that they could equally well be from North Africa (for example, Morocco), and their music, here and in Amneris's chamber, carries echoes of *alla turca* found nowhere else in the score.⁵⁶ For the rest, Ethiopia is never given straightforward examples of 'diegetic' music: neither Aida nor Amonasro sings an Ethiopian song, nor do their fellow prisoners join voices in a chorus of longing for the *patria lontana ed oppressa* that could be taken as representing not just their feelings but, however obliquely, also their native musical style. Still, as Budden and others note, the natural beauty and sad fate of Ethiopia are evoked at various points of the opera through two distinctive musical devices with an exotic tinge: chromatic minorish oboe melodies (some of them involving a descent from the fifth degree to the tonic); and three flutes moving in fauxbourdon-like parallel motion.⁵⁷ Here, as Budden nicely implies, one feels one is overhearing a bit of actual Ethiopian culture, an aural snatch of what one otherwise learns about only through verbal descriptions – from Radames, Aida and Amonasro – and never sees.

These and other exotic passages deserve yet further exploration. But, as I pointed out earlier, there is also a plenitude of non-exotic music – music that is not racially or ethnically marked – in this and other operas of its sort, and those passages rarely get addressed at all. I therefore prefer to focus in some detail on two passages that are patently *not* foreign-sounding, and to suggest briefly the ways in which they, too, may feed into various of the interpretive readings that I sketched earlier. The two passages occur in close juxtaposition in the very scene to which Verdi referred in his letter about King Wilhelm, the famous Act 2 Triumphal Scene. They contrast both stylistically and dramatically, in ways that correspond to, in one case, the work's goal of displaying Egyptian military might (of the past and/or present) and, in the other, the work's goal of siding with the Ethiopians' struggle for national sovereignty.

The Triumphal Scene is, of course, the archetypal moment of Egyptian self-glorification in *Aida*. Indeed, its opening choral march, 'Gloria all'Egitto', is one of the best-known diegetic moments in all of opera. It is also one of the most

abandoned, consciously or inadvertently, in the published score, libretto and production book.

⁵⁶ See also Budden, *Operas of Verdi* 3: 216–17, 226. (Morocco and Algeria had, of course, been Turkish-ruled on and off for centuries by Verdi's day.) Filippo Filippi stated (in a review of the Milan premiere) that the episode in F major for the *moretti* in the Triumphal Scene is 'di stile etiopico', but he weakened the specificity by continuing 'just like similar things that Gottschalk transcribed in his piano pieces entitled *Bamboula* and *Bananier*' (Jürgensen, *Verdi Ballets*, 308); the comparison to Gottschalk's music is intriguing and plausible, as regards questions of musical style, but it also suggests that 'Ethiopian' was a broad, almost racial category for Filippi and perhaps other listeners. (The term was also used by various blackface minstrel troupes in the USA and Europe.) Another early critic saw the dances in Amneris's chamber, presumably including the one for the *moretti*, as Arab in style (306). And yet another describes that dance of the little Moors in terms that simply equate Ethiopian (or, rather, 'Nubian') and Arab: 'a Nubian dance composed on an Arab rhythm' (316).

⁵⁷ Complicatingly, the flute can also stand for Egyptian ritual (three flutes play the Dance of the Priestesses in the Act 1 Consecration Scene, for example) and can 'betoken [Radames's] death': Budden, *Operas of Verdi* 3: 203 (the quotation), 213, 236, 237–8, 241–2; see also Della Seta, "'O cieli azzurri'", 55–61 and Cruz, 'Aida's Flute'. For further discussion of the distinctive styles in *Aida*, such as the priests' supposed penchant for canonic texture, see my 'Beyond the Exotic', 112.

ridiculed, in part because of tastelessly extravagant stagings, but perhaps also because its unquenchable power to impress, stir and overwhelm makes some people uneasy. Early observers seem to have felt no such qualms. In 1872, the prominent music critic Filippo Filippi, commenting on the Cairo and La Scala premieres, praised the entire Triumphal Scene in straightforward terms: 'Verdi has never done anything more grand and beautiful [*mai nulla di più grandioso, di più bello*].'⁵⁸ He particularly admired the way in which the elements in the scene 'come and go, are interwoven, grow in effect and sonority'.⁵⁹ Twenty-nine years later, on the occasion of Verdi's death, the classicist Egyptian poet and Islamic spokesman Ahmad Šauqī responded with an effusive elegy focusing mainly on *Aida*. Though Šauqī does not mention the 'Gloria' chorus and trumpet tune, he must have had them – among other things – in mind when he declared that the moments in the opera in which all the performers make music together are like 'lightning and thunder that shoot forth from a morning storm cloud' and that '[*Aida*] represents Egypt, for this [our present] era, / As it was in the ages gone by' and thereby provides inspiring 'visions'.⁶⁰

Aside from the frankly exotic ballet, all the ceremonial music in the Triumphal scene is Western in style, following the manner of the march of the Druids from Bellini's *Norma*, the coronation chorus from Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, or the soldier's chorus from Gounod's *Faust*. If the offbeat orchestral thunderclaps in the opening 'Gloria' sound somehow crude or overemphatic (Ex. 1), so do those in the other marches just mentioned (for example, Ex. 2, Meyerbeer), all of which are set in a Europe of relatively more recent times.

Even the single most memorable departure – the use of straight, quasi-ancient trumpets in the contrasting middle section – has no distinctively foreign sound, and the instruments themselves were, for lack of information, built instead in ancient Roman style. Furthermore, they were equipped with a hidden valve on the side to enable the player to fit in better with the equal-tempered scale in use by the rest of the orchestra.

Still, the fanfare that the heralds play on those long trumpets confers a vivid character on Egypt's military hierarchy: a brash cockiness that may spill over into vulgarity and hollow grandeur (Ex. 3). The hollowness may be heard as artistic failure. Claudio Casini, for example, writes off the trumpet episode, indeed all the Act 2 celebratory music and staging, as 'brilliant and noisy kitsch', and Massimo Mila frankly declares these extensive sections 'dead' for modern audiences. To others, though, the cutting blatancy of the straight trumpets *is* the message. Political historian Anthony Arblaster concludes that 'all the requisite grandeur and brilliance ... [do] not conceal the harshness of the Egyptian regime'. Edward Said, similarly, argues that the celebratory numbers are well integrated into the work's dark vision: '[Even the] ballets and triumphal parades ... are undermined in some way' and provide an 'aperture through which [Verdi] seems to be letting in an outside world otherwise banned from entry': the world of European military might.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Filippi, *Musica*, 364.

⁵⁹ Filippi review in *La perseveranza* (12 Feb. 1872), in Jürgensen, *Verdi Ballets*, 308.

⁶⁰ Ahmad Šauqī, (untitled) elegy for Verdi, in Peter Bachmann, 'Zwei arabische Verdi-Würdigungen aus dem Jahre 1901', in *Musikalische Quellen – Quellen zur Musikgeschichte: Festschrift für Martin Staehelin zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ulrich Konrad, with Jürgen Heidrich and Hans Joachim Marx (Göttingen, 2002), 443–4 (439–47). Further excerpts are given in my 'Beyond the Exotic', 133, 134.

⁶¹ Claudio Casini, *Verdi* (Milan, 1981), 304; Mila, 'A Difficult Opera', 13, 19; Arblaster,

Ex. 1 **Triumphal March, in Act 2 Finale: main tune ('Gloria all'Egitto') *con* thunderclaps: the (undeserved and shortlived?) power of an empire, embodied in tones**

Allegro maestoso (♩ = 100)

ff

Gloria all' E-git - to, ad I - si - de che il sa - cro suol pro - teg - ge! Al

Gloria all' E-git - to, ad I - si - de che il sa - cro suol pro - teg - ge! Al

Gloria all' E-git - to, ad I - si - de che il sa - cro suol pro - teg - ge! Al

Gloria all' E-git - to, ad I - si - de che il sa - cro suol pro - teg - ge! Al

ff a tempo come prima

ff

Ex. 2 **Meyerbeer, *Le Prophète* (1849), Act 4, Scene 2: Choral March *avec* thunderclaps, for the coronation of an impostor**

Andantino (♩ = 88)

ff

Le — voi - ci, le — Roi — pro - phê - te,

Le — voi - ci, le — Roi, —

Le — voi - ci, le — Roi — pro - phê - te,

ff *dim.* *f* *ff*

ff *ff* *ff*

Ex. 3 **Triumphal March, Interlude for *trombe egiziane*, pounding the third scale degree and straining to stay in tune**

Allegro maestoso (♩ = 100)

None of these commentators, though, mentions how strange and intriguing the trumpet episode in Verdi's march, overly familiar today, sounded to ears hearing it for the first time: the edgy instruments strain to stay in tune, and the melody ferociously hammers the third degree of the scale. Filippi's description of the passage after the Cairo world premiere stresses its oddity: 'Long trumpets, with a ringing and almost pungent sound [*con suono squillante, quasi acre*], intone that motive – so bizarre, characteristic, full of colour – that later serves as grandiose peroration to the immense finale.'⁶² How might that bizarre and blaring sound, that perceived lack of normal, graceful mellifluousness, have figured into the audience's various readings? Did it make the Egyptians seem technologically primitive and thus unlike 'us' modern Westerners? More powerful and impressive – like Prussia and Britain of their own day? Or, an interesting possibility, more menacing and odious – like, again, Prussia and Britain? True, observers at the time never seem to have commented specifically on whether the Egypt of *Aida* was admirable or repulsive or both. But this is not unusual. In *Le Prophète* (as in Ex. 2), and also in some of Verdi's own operas (notably, as already mentioned, *Don Carlos* – especially the auto-da-fé and Grand Inquisitor scenes), there can be no doubt that various figures of religious or governmental authority are submitted to an angry or withering critique that can lead an opera-goer to see the alternately brilliant and solemn ceremonial music associated with them as manipulative (on the part of that society) rather than just impressive.⁶³

Viva la libertà, 144; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 124–5 (this is Said's strongest hint at Reading 8).

⁶² Review by Filippi, 14 Jan. 1872, in Jürgensen, *Verdi Ballets*, 304. Remarkably, one critic, in 1876 (Paris), reports that the sound of the long trumpets 'did not screech' (*n'a rien de criard*); perhaps he did not know that the instruments had a hidden valve and so was surprised that they played even approximately in tune (review in *Le Petit Journal*, 24 Apr. 1876, in Jürgensen, *Verdi Ballets*, 310).

⁶³ Cormac Newark insightfully points out that such interpretations must have been widely shared even though contemporaries rarely mentioned them: see his review of the

Ex. 4 Amonasro's plea for mercy, 'Ma tu Re, tu signore possente' (in Act 2 Finale): honeyed, arching phrases, as repeated (by Aida) over rapt harmonies from the prisoners and winds, all redolent of a rural land and kindly people

$\text{♩} = 76$

Aida *p*

Ma tu Re, tu si - gno - re pos - sen - te, a co -

Slaves and Prisoners *p*

Si: dai Nu - mi per - cos - si noi sia - mo; tua pie -

Si: dai Nu - mi per - cos - si noi sia - mo; tua pie -

sempre legato

6 6 \flat 5 VII + pedal *F* VII \flat

p

sto - ro ti vol - gi cle - men - te, Og - gi noi siam per - cos - si dal

p

tà, tua cle - men - za im - plo - ria mo; ah giam - mai di sof - frir vi sia

tà, tua cle - men - za im - plo - ria - mo; ah giam - mai di sof - frir vi sia

5 5 \sharp 6 6 6 \flat 5 6 6 \flat 5

Even less attention has been paid to the implications and overtones of another (and likewise non-exotic) passage a little later in the Triumphal Scene: the plea of the Ethiopians, launched by Amonasro over a sympathetic cushion of strings. The melody rings out nobly, in the baritone's eloquent upper register, and its shapely

Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera, ed. David Charlton: *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16 (2004): 239–47 (241).

Ex. 4 continued

[quasi-fauxbourdon]

fa - to, ahl do - man voi po - tria il fa - to col - pir.

Amonasro
Ahl do - man voi po - tria il fa - to col - pir.

da - to ciò che in og - gi n'è da - to sof - fir!
ciò che in og - gi n'è da - to sof - fir!

da - to ciò che n'è da - to sof - fir!

p *f*

V^b 6 6^b 5 V I

sequence of balanced melodic arches – some upright, some inverted – would soften the hardest pharaonic heart. But Amonasro's words, though they begin by pleading for mercy, end by hinting at Egypt's doom, in a way that momentarily disturbs the lulling effect of the music.

If love of fatherland is a crime,
We are all guilty, we are ready to die!
(to the King, in an entreating tone [grand tune begins here])
But you, oh King, mighty lord,
Show yourself merciful to them. ...
Today we are [the ones who are] buffeted by fate,
Ah! tomorrow it may be you that fate strikes down.⁶⁴

The music is placed in F major, whose traditional associations with pastoral realms and spiritual solace might at first seem irrelevant in context.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ My renderings of passages from Ghislanzoni's verses are based freely on William Weaver's translation, in *Seven Verdi Librettos* (New York, 1977).

⁶⁵ F major was the key of the most famous instrumental piece entitled 'Pastoral': Beethoven's Symphony No. 6. See also Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 2nd edn, (Rochester, NY, 2002), 258–62 (F major as appropriate to, among other things, 'serious and religious matters' – Pietro Lichtenthal, 1826; and 'inner holy peace, comforting solace, joy at the works of nature ... [and] spiritual ease' – Gustav Schilling, 1835–36).

Aida then takes up Amonasro's tune, with the Ethiopian slaves (female) and prisoners (male) lending chordal support (Ex. 4). Aida dutifully uses her father's exact words, but the chorus replaces the verbal threat with empathy:

Ah, may it never be given to you [Egyptians] to suffer
What we are given to suffer today!

The music, too, feels gentler than in Amonasro's statement. The accompaniment is now for woodwinds, playing so softly (*ppp*) that the resulting aural effect is either simply an *a cappella* hush or, to the extent that the winds *are* audible, a kind of pastoral serenade. The close vocal harmonies sung softly act as a solvent, with the women murmuring in a lowish register what had been the orchestra's 'alto' line. (Aida takes the soprano line herself.)⁶⁶ The tenors are on their best behaviour. And the choral basses now gently throb the tonic pitch that, in the orchestra, is a drone for four of the eight bars, again with pastoral implications.⁶⁷

The setting with chorus and winds also allows us to hear, more plainly than did the initial statement with strings, two other features: a distinctive use of chromatic part-writing, often embodied as an ostinato figure D–D \flat –C, or degrees $\hat{6}$ – $\flat\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$, and – at one point – a fauxbourdon-like progression. The chromatic pass back and forth between $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{5}$ is a style marker often associated, by scholars, with Russian music.⁶⁸ Here it points more toward communal singing, whether sacred – for example, four-voice hymn and chorale harmonizations – or secular – for example, Wilhem's widely influential Orphéon movement. The harmonization is direct, as often in participatory choral pieces, but decidedly artful, placing simple major triads on unexpected degrees in a downward chain: I, VII, \flat VII, and, at the climax, \flat VI (and then V⁷–I). This \flat VI (D \flat major) triad links perhaps to the various appearances that I noted of the pitch D \flat as a chromatic passing tone.⁶⁹

In the gentler statement for Aida and the chorus, especially, this broad tune comes across as an indicator of the Ethiopians' national character: sweet, rural, innocent – and spiritual by their very nature, rather than through indoctrination by fearsome clergy. Perhaps we take the passage on some level as a fragment of actual Ethiopian music. After all, its very placement makes it almost a counterpart, or response, to the Egyptians' hymn of triumph earlier in the scene. Indeed, might we argue that the heartfelt reassuring quality of the Ethiopian lament challenges or moderates, casts a shadow over, the bombastic choral march and various processions that we have witnessed for minutes on end? In that sense, the Ethiopians' F major plea-cum-lullaby might suggest to the audience that the Egyptian empire has built its power through the oppression

⁶⁶ Singing the soprano line alone gives Aida both more prominence and the option of singing with greater rhythmic flexibility and with other interpretive touches, such as portamento.

⁶⁷ The whole passage, beginning with Amonasro's statement, is caressed (particularly by Thomas Hampson) in the complete recording of the opera conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt: Teldec 8573-85402-2.

⁶⁸ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 55–8, 165–72, 176–85, 242–3.

⁶⁹ The moment of *faux*-fauxbourdon presumably echoes more with certain hallowed traditions of Renaissance sacred music, thus adding a hint of divine approbation to the Ethiopians' cause.

of kindly, distant peoples who wish only to live their peaceable, agrarian lives, such as the biblical Hebrews.⁷⁰

The tables, however, can be easily turned. The grand hymnic march and its crude trumpets recur at the end of the scene to re-establish the imperial frame and thereby cast doubt over the supposed sincerity of this plea of the Ethiopians, reminding us that a war between two rival and violent empires may be at issue here, not a one-sided triumph over innocent hunter-gatherers. Fabrizio Della Seta poses the 'rival empires' thesis in an extreme form, going so far as to free the word 'oppressor' from its longstanding association with the Egyptian overlords: '[In this opera,] the recollection of massacres carried out by both sides belongs to hostilities whose origins are lost in the mists of time; it would be futile to try to determine who are the "oppressors", who the "invading barbarians"'.⁷¹ Indeed, we know, from the moment that Amonasro first appears on stage in this same scene and begins to speak, that he is dissembling, hiding his identity as king and military leader. Before the end of the scene, Amonasro whispers to Aida his plan: to rally his troops and not just organize a prison break but wreak murderous *vendetta* (his word). Ramfis and the priests explicitly warn about this, first in full voice (after the Aida *con coro* statement of the Ethiopian plea) and then in Rigoletto-like mutterings, *pianissimo* (during a third, culminating statement of the same plea):

Destroy, oh King, these fierce hordes,
Shut your heart to the perfidious voices [of the prisoners and their naive sympathizers: Radames and the *popolo egiziano*].⁷²

We are left unsure whose words and music to believe more. Are the Ethiopians less naive than they seem? Do they resort to justified guile (understood as the only tool available to a conquered and subaltern population)? Are the Egyptians cruel rapists and plunderers (as Amonasro and Aida allege)? Is the Egyptian government a source of political stability and economic well-being that is simply seeking to impose minimal sanctions – such as Amonasro's detention without trial – that are perhaps necessary for the country's survival? Might the Egyptians be several things at once: vile rapists and slave-drivers *but also* a religio-military autocracy devoted to preventing the Ethiopians from raping and enslaving them in turn (as has perhaps happened many times before)? It is historical fact – and was already known in the nineteenth century – that ancient Nubia, the dark-skinned country to the south of Egypt (more or less equivalent to today's Sudan), conquered Egypt

⁷⁰ Casini argues that Radames's betrayal, later in the opera, is 'a deserved retaliation for Egyptian oppression of the vanquished Ethiopian people', *Verdi*, 304. A word here about the biblical account of the Hebrews' enslavement: increasingly, archeologists and biblical historians are regarding it – and the Exodus and the 'conquering of the Land' – as more mythical than historical. See, for example, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York, 2001). Still, the biblical account was widely accepted by most opera-goers of the day (including Aida's original Cairo audience, which was primarily European) and so, almost automatically, functioned as a silent subtext.

⁷¹ Della Seta, "O cieli azzurri", 62; his allusions, unidentified, are to lines in Act 1 (Egyptian messenger: 'invaso dai barbari Etiopi'; Aida: 'le squadre dei nostri oppressor').

⁷² Weaver's translation of 'alle perfide voci' – 'to their perfidious voices' – seems too narrow, if one takes his 'their' as referring only to the Ethiopians.

on several occasions and ruled it for extended periods, perhaps at times as harshly as Egypt treated Nubia in its turn.⁷³

That is the advantage and richness of a work's having multiple agendas. Each party's point of view is valid and powerful in its own way; each is put into question by the other. Time cannot stale a work so fruitfully enriched by internal tensions, ambivalences, multiple sympathies. Or, to borrow a term from Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt, the work engages in a 'strategic opacity'. It takes care not to declare simple allegiances. It conveys – as do *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, with their unclearly motivated title characters – a 'refusal of easy consolations'.⁷⁴

Other Works Built on Racial Difference or Imperial Struggle

I would like to close by briefly suggesting that a continuum of multiple readings, similar to the one proposed in Fig. 1 and hence stretching from the most literal to the most metaphorical, can inform our understanding of important operas and musical-theatre works. Many Handel operas, Mozart's *Abduction*, Weber's *Oberon*, Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Bizet's *Carmen*, several operas each by Massenet and Puccini, and, in our own day, John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer* and Osvaldo Golijov's much-praised multi-cultural oratorio *La Pasión según San Marcos* all portray 'Other' nations and 'Other' racial, ethnic and religious groups. And all may suggest a range of struggles beyond the ones that they portray on the surface. The meaning is in the eye and ear of the beholder. Is *West Side Story*, for example, possibly a metaphor for tensions between whites and blacks in America, or even for more worldwide struggles, not so much racial as geopolitical: the Cold War of the 1950s–60s, or the industrialized and the 'developing' worlds?⁷⁵

At the very least, greater clarity about what each critic (contemporary witness, and so on) is saying may help us avoid talking past each other and thereby either confusing the discussion or clamping it off altogether. Issues of race and empire are important, timely, and of interest to a wide variety of observers. In the case of *Aida*, these observers range from a devout Muslim poet in 1901 to someone who could be fairly described as his cultural opposite: maverick cultural critic (and forthright defender of homoeroticism and pornography) Camille Paglia.⁷⁶ Unless treated with the sharpest precision, the discussion can easily degrade into

⁷³ David O'Connor, *Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993).

⁷⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York, 2004), 323–4 (cf. 328: 'arbitrary' actions thus appear 'rooted in deep psychological needs'). See Adam Gopnik's insightful review of Greenblatt's book, arguing that Shakespeare was 'an instinctive liberal humanist' in that he '[made] all the parts in a play sound like real people'; he had 'a matchless all-sidedness ... which could prove two ideas at once and never quite come down on the "side" of either' – 'Will Power', *The New Yorker* (13 Sep. 2004), 94, 95 (90–95).

⁷⁵ See my 'The Border Territory between Classical and Broadway: A Voyage Around and About *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *West Side Story*', in *Liber Amicorum Isabelle Cazeaux: Symbols, Parallels and Discoveries in her Honor*, ed. Paul-André Bempéchat (Hillsdale, NY, 2005), 179–226.

⁷⁶ Camille Paglia repeats Reading no. 9 (*Aida* as a general attack on 'political tyranny' in whatever time and place) in her review 'Scholar, Aesthete, Activist: Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*', reprinted in her *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays* (New York, 1994), 382–6 (384).

pronouncements of ‘the single correct meaning’, name-calling, exaggerated (or *ad hominem*) side-taking, and – perhaps worse because harder to spot – straw-man arguments based on an inaccurate or overly schematic summary of a previous writer’s reasoning or on quotations taken out of context.

The world of literary and arts criticism has been wisely termed by Michael Wood a ‘utopian space’, one in which ‘thought and argument are active’, not ‘vulnerable to all sorts of conformities’.⁷⁷ Honest challenge and debate are needed rather than hasty and potentially coercive dismissals of positions that one finds uncongenial or even deeply flawed. I hope that what I have laid out here can help us to continue wrestling, respectful of each other’s views, with the large issues of how race and empire relate to music and culture.

Appendix: Verdi on Empires (Austrian, Prussian, British, Italian)

Verdi’s own writings, some widely and others rarely cited, give crucial support for various related interpretations of *Aida* that directly invoke some strand of nineteenth-century European imperialism. Evidence for his support of a united Italy free of the yoke of the Austro-Hungarian empire (Reading 6) is, of course, plenteous, especially in letters to Clarina Maffei, a noted Risorgimento activist, and to his publisher Giulio Ricordi.⁷⁸ Evidence for his opposition to Prussian militarism, especially in its attacks on France (Reading 7), is often cited in regard to *Aida*, and with good reason: in one letter to Antonio Ghislanzoni – who was hard at work turning into a full libretto a scenario written largely by Mariette and Du Locle – Verdi made a direct comparison between events in the opera and the newspaper headlines of his day:

You must help me ... by having the chorus sing a little something about the glories of Egypt and the King... . Eight more [lines] must be added for priests: ‘We have triumphed with the help of divine providence. The enemy has surrendered. May God help us in the future.’ Look at King Wilhelm’s telegrams [written after the decisive Battle of Sedan (1 September 1870) at which Napoleon III was captured].⁷⁹

The verses that Ghislanzoni then went on to craft for this spot invoke the gods in much the way that Verdi requested: as all-powerful deciders of victory (*della vittoria ... arbitri supremi*).

As for Reading 8 (which sees European colonialism worked out symbolically in the opera), it receives clear support from an unexpected but reliable source:

⁷⁷ Wood, ‘Lost Paradises’, 45 (borrowing the term from Said, who used it in reference to the academy).

⁷⁸ That Verdi’s early operas embodied an intense Italian patriotism is not doubted by any Verdi scholar, even Roger Parker, despite his patient efforts at exploding certain myths, such as that ‘*Va pensiero*’, from *Nabucco*, was widely recognized and sung, from its first days, as a hymn of national liberation. See Roger Parker, ‘“*Va pensiero*” and the Insidious Mastery of Song’, in his book *Leonora’s Last Act: Essays in Verdi Discourse* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 20–41, and the fuller version: ‘*Arpa d’or dei fatidici vati*’: *The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma, 1997). See also Philip Gossett, ‘Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in *Risorgimento Opera*’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (1990): 41–64, and James Parakilas, ‘Political Representation and the Chorus in Nineteenth-Century Opera’, *Nineteenth-Century Music* 16 (1992–93): 181–202.

⁷⁹ 8 September 1870, in Busch, *Verdi’s Aida*, 61.

memoirs of meetings with the aged Verdi by the Florentine archivist (and Orientalist, actually) Italo Pizzi, a welcome friend during the last eighteen years of the composer's life.⁸⁰ Pizzi transcribes a vivid rant in which Verdi, in 1896, lambastes the British in India and, for good measure, the Italians, who have just been routed in (as it happens) Ethiopia. The passage is published in full by two major Verdi scholars (George Martin, Marcello Conati) and quoted by Budden, but none of them has related it specifically to *Aida*.

Here you have a great and ancient people [in India] who have now fallen prey to the English. But the English will be sorry! A people might suffer tyranny, oppression, maltreatment – and the English are sons of bitches. Then comes the moment when national sentiment, which no one can withstand, reawakens. That's how we treated the Austrians. Alas, we [Italians] are playing the tyrant now in Africa – inopportunately, and we shall pay for it. It is said that we are going there to bring those people our own [Western] civilization. A fine civilization we have, with all its miseries! Those people will not know what to make of it, and in many respects they are much more civilized than we!⁸¹

One may or may not agree with Budden's proposal that Verdi, in his last decades, 'modified the political views of his early days', and that the 'swaggering' and 'warlike' *Aida* reveals his newfound 'implicit acceptance of the closed society',⁸² in contrast to the politically liberal, tyranny-hating *Don Carlos* of 1867, a mere four years earlier. But the 1896 interview makes clear, as Budden himself notes, that Verdi 'retained the Mazzinian belief that no nation had a right to rule another'.⁸³ Indeed, I might note that, in this interview, one of Verdi's remarks – about 'national sentiment, which no one can withstand' – practically quotes something he had written in a letter 48 years earlier: 'The hour of [Italy's] liberation is here: be sure of that. The people want it: and when the people want it, there is no absolute power that can resist.'⁸⁴

In any case, the composer's bitter rejection of the supposed benevolence of empire, in the form of *pax britannica* c. 1896, suggests, as historian John M. MacKenzie has briefly pointed out, that similar doubts are utterly appropriate to seek and find in *Aida's* portrayal of *pax egyptica* (in 1871).⁸⁵

⁸⁰ On Pizzi, who worked at the famous Biblioteca Laurenziana, and his annual visits with Verdi, see Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford, 1993), 670, 752, 759.

⁸¹ Italo Pizzi, 'Unpublished Verdi Memoirs' (first published under that title in 1901), in *Encounters with Verdi*, ed. Marcello Conati, trans. Richard Stokes (Ithaca, NY, 1984), 337–57 (351). I have incorporated some details of translation from Martin, *Verdi*, 466–8; the paperback edition is differently paginated. On the Ethiopians' defeat of the Italian colonial troops at Adwa, see Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 72–9. (Adwa is sometimes written as Adowa or, in Italian, Adua.)

⁸² Julian Budden, *Verdi* (London, 1985), 150, 272. See also, similarly, Della Seta, "'O cieli azzurri'", 62 ('the priests are the custodians of a *raison d'état* whose necessity the ageing Verdi's political realism could not fail to comprehend').

⁸³ Budden, *Verdi*, 150.

⁸⁴ Letter to Francesco Maria Piave, 21 Apr. 1848, in Phillips-Matz, *Verdi*, 230–31.

⁸⁵ MacKenzie, 'Occidentalism', 342, 344 n. 10; and *Orientalism*, 173 n. 38.