

## The I-hate-opera-guide to Aïda

*Philip Eisenbeiss for Opera Hong Kong*

Much as it is easy to hate operas, especially the long and boring ones, Aïda is impossible to dislike. This masterpiece by Giuseppe Verdi, written for the 1871 opening ceremony of the Royal Opera House in Cairo, remains hugely popular.

The world famous Arena of Verona puts it on nearly every year, filling the stage with hundreds of singers, dancers and extras as well as sundry animals (though elephants are no longer acceptable).

Aïda is grand opera at its grandest. Big stories, big sets, big chorus, big scenes and big voices. In about 2 hours and 40 minutes, this opera packs in everything:

- an exotic setting in ancient Egypt
- a love triangle between a princess, a slave and a soldier
- the struggle between family loyalty and romantic love for an enemy
- jealousy, intrigue, passion
- love, sacrifice, death
- and some of the most spectacular music ever written!

Here, you can learn the music and its context in **under 30 minutes**, so you will enjoy the live performance even more:

In ancient Egypt, the king is constantly battling his enemies, the Ethiopians. **Radamès** is the young Egyptian army captain chosen by the king to lead the fight against the Ethiopians. He's a dashing young fellow. He has also been having a smoldering affair with the attractive Ethiopian slave **Aïda**.

Radamès almost opens the opera with his show-stopping aria "Celeste Aïda" (Heavenly Aïda), singing of his hopes to lead the army so he can dedicate his victory to his beloved Aïda.

**Take less than 5 minutes to watch Luciano Pavarotti nail this difficult aria, even if he doesn't look like a fit warrior.**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP1vp\\_G9mLc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP1vp_G9mLc)

But since this is opera, it cannot be that happy and simple. Radamès has a huge problem: Princess **Amneris**, the daughter of the king, is Aïda's employer; and she is also hopelessly in love with Radamès. The two women don't initially know about the common object of their affections, but when they do, they become bitter rivals.

**Take 11 minutes to watch the emotional duet where the manipulative princess, sung by Fiorenza Cossotto, tricks her slave to reveal her secret. Aïda is sung by Leontyne Price, possibly the greatest Aïda of all times.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEOZNjLWhT8>

Radamès goes to war and defeats the Ethiopians, returning with hundred of prisoners, who are then paraded in front of the victors in the Triumphant March. One of the prisoners is **Amonasro**, the king of the Ethiopians, who also happens to be Aïda's father (but of course this is a secret). On Radamès' behest, the king pardons the prisoners, including Amonasro who predictably goes on to plot the Ethiopian counter-attack.

**You can watch 9 minutes of the Triumphant March as performed in the largest opera house in the world, the Metropolitan Opera in New York. But since this scene is so well known, you get no credit points for studying it.**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxgOIwOd\\_5I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxgOIwOd_5I)

Aïda's toughest aria comes in the third act. "Oh Patria Mia" (Oh my homeland!) is her lament that as a slave of a defeated nation she will never see her fatherland again.

**Spend 5 minutes watching Leontyne Price on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IaV6sqFUTQ4>. Her singing starts at 1:10, but pay special attention to the thinly accompanied high C at 5:59. This aria is so difficult that many leading sopranos choose not to perform Aïda at all.**

Aïda becomes even unhappier when her father Amonasro pressures her to betray Radamès and get vital war secrets from him. She very reluctantly does this, though she tries to convince him to flee the country with her.

Radamès' clumsy betrayal is discovered by Amneris, who denounces him to the authorities. In the third act judgment scene, Amneris witnesses her erstwhile lover being condemned to death. Roaring with regret, she tries to convince the judges to change their mind.

**Spend 10 minutes with Fiorenza Cossotto leading this scene at the Met. Verdi cleverly juxtaposes a simple, unaccompanied chorus of judges with Amneris' bombastic musical pleading. The sound and image quality is poor, but you can feel Cossotto's phenomenal effect: the audience is banging on the walls in delight.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHD0OBSF6Po>

Radamès is interred alive in a big tomb, but finds that Aïda has snuck in ahead of him so they can die together. Amneris laments her decision outside.

**Don't miss Opera Hong Kong's landmark production to mark the 20th anniversary of the HKSAR, featuring a world-class cast on October 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15.**