Crossing the Mediterranean (Sea) in Opera: the case of *Aida*

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Summary

Based on interactions between music and cultural studies, my contribution approaches Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, which is part of the cultural archive of western modernity. Since the political and cultural context in which Verdi worked on *Aida* from 1870 to 1871 included not only Italy but also imperialist Europe and viceroyal Egypt, I would like to take up the concept of contrapuntal reading developed by Edward Said, who adopted the term from music theory in order to adequately capture the relationship between dominant and subaltern voices in literary texts, including the genre of opera. A contrapuntal reading is aware of both "the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said 1994, 63). Therefore, the creation of *Aida* is first examined with a view to the historical context of the time; in a second step, the question is whether the almost unheard voices, melodies and stories silenced by hegemonic powers can possibly find expression in music.

In 19th-century Italy, the *melodramma* was the popular genre par excellence: since the *Risorgimento* period, it had been an expression of mass culture as it popularized aristocratic genres. The abstract basic situations of tragedy were transposed in everyday life and recombined with novelistic elements. Applying words, music, gesture, and decoration, the *melodramma* spoke to all social classes and was able to evoke a high potential of identification among the audience, as the stage functioned as a projection area for repressed desires and feelings as well as their fulfilment. Due to Italian history, opera also became politically significant and, because of its critical potential, a social mouthpiece. In young Italy, "opera was a national signifier, the occasion for the creation of a collective memory", as Serena Guarracino (2010, 13) noted, and Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (1871) occupied a special place in Italian national discourse.[2] At the time the opera was conceived, with the end of the Papal States and the transfer of the capital from Florence to Rome in 1870, the Italian national unification was being completed. Italy transformed from an oppressed and fragmented peninsula into a modern nation state, including imperialist ambitions on the southern coast of the Mediterranean (cf. Janowski 1994, 253, 301f.).

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Giacomo Debenedetti declared that 'the portrait of the Italian' – "l'anima italiana" (Debenedetti 1934 cit. in Sanguineti 2001, 14) – mirrored in an image of an exalted vital tone, would come from Verdi's characters. Edoardo Sanguineti remarked similarly: "[Il] canto, la canzone verdiana, fu cogente perché, occorre rammentarlo, in una nazione spaventevolmente analfabetizzata, e spaventevolmente dialettofona, ci ha pensato Verdi […] a fare gli italiani, dico, una volta fatta l'Italia, ci ha pensato, pressoché solo, Giuseppe Verdi" (Sanguineti 2001, 14f.). In view of the Italian dominance in opera, Sanguineti wondered whether the "romanzo popolare musicato" (Sanguineti 2001, 16) in the sense of Gramsci could and should be recognized in it; Antonio Gramsci considered the *melodramma* as a substitute for the absence of a popular novel and realized that in Italy music was far more popular than literature. Unlike in other European countries, the late and ambiguous development of the Italian bourgeoisie was reflected not in the novel but in the opera. Since Verdi's librettists mainly got their inspiration from Italian romantic poetry, Gramsci expressed his concerns in this regard: "La musica verdiana, o meglio il libretto e l'intreccio dei drammi musicati da Verdi sono responsabili di tutta una serie di atteggiamenti 'artificiosi' di vita popolare, di modi di pensare, di uno 'stile'." (Gramsci cit. in Sanguineti 2001, 17)[3] Romantic hegemony, which was actually bourgeois hegemony, was practised in *Risorgimento* Italy as melodramatic hegemony, first and foremost in the Verdi style. The operatic genre expressed bourgeois ideology and taste, thus the bourgeoisie, as Sanguineti put it, "culturally colonized", in other words: "melodramatized" (Sanguineti 2001, 19 [my translation]), the proletarian population. Sanguineti argued that Verdi melodramatized the Italians, that is, as mentioned, "to make them Italians". It seems to be this hegemony of realistically dramatic artifice that, according to Sanguineti, invents 'reality' and why Verdi is more a "realist" than a "verist" (cf. Sanguineti 2001, 17)[4] – this refers to the perhaps most famous critical theoretical enunciation by the composer:

> Copiare il Vero può essere una buona cosa, ma *Inventare il Vero* è meglio, molto meglio. Pare vi sia contradizione in queste tre parole "*inventare il vero*", ma domanda[te]lo al Papà. Può darsi che Egli, il Papà si sia trovato con qualche Falstaf, ma difficilmente avrà trovato un scellerato cosí scellerato come Jago, e mai e poi mai degli angioli come *Cordelia Imogene Desdemona* et. et… eppure sono tanto veri!… Copiare il vero è una bella cosa, ma è fotografia, non *Pittura*.
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> Giuseppe Verdi (letter to Clara Maffei, 20 October 1876; cf. Verdi 2012, 717)

Referred to as "Papà" in his letters to Clara Maffei, Verdi saw in Shakespeare the archetype of the artist who does non imitate the 'true' but invents it, does not copy but creates it. In this way, as Sanguineti (2001, 21) pointed out, to the dissolution of romantic and bourgeois realism in late 19th century naturalism, Verdi offered 'the truth' of that *Verismo* which is the realism of his *melodramma*. It must be specified that 'the truth' that Verdi was looking for was always, as he insisted, 'the truth' of a purely artistic creation or rather *poesia*, "la poesia che scaturisce dalla ricreazione di un carattere anche estremo di un personaggio e dalla tinta

che l'opera d'arte [l'opera musicale] deve assumere".[5] Hence his distrust of *Verismo*, folklore and local colour, much in demand at the time.[6] Verdi gave an artistic answer to these demands with *Aida*, an opera in which the exoticism and local colour of ancient Egypt played an extraordinary role (cf. Pinagli 1967, 152f.).

Even if Italian opera had already crossed the Mediterranean Sea to entertain audiences in cities like Cairo and Alexandria, for the first time in the history of European opera a composer could draw on historical studies of Egyptology going towards full bloom in the 19th century. This scientific discipline was embodied by the renowned French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, who not only advised Verdi during the composition of *Aida*, his contribution to the libretto can definitely be seen as the initiation of the project. The commission from Khedive Ismail Pasha[7], viceroy of Egypt, to Verdi to compose a special opera for Cairo was a consequence of the composer's undisputed position in European opera: he was considered the very first choice, ahead of Wagner and Gounod, and received the highest fee ever granted in the history of European opera. The premiere of *Aida* had to be postponed for almost a year as the costumes and stage decorations produced in Paris could not be delivered due to the Franco-Prussian War and finally took place on December 24, 1871 in the Cairo Opera House, which had been inaugurated with a performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto* as part of the celebrations for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (cf. Kreutziger-Herr 2007, 81f.).

Thus, the political and cultural context in which Verdi worked on *Aida* from 1870 to 1871 included not only Italy, but also imperialist Europe and viceroyal Egypt technically belonging to the Ottoman Empire but increasingly subject to British influence. In his influential study *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), paying special attention to Verdi's opera, Edward Said remarked, that *Aida*, like the operatic form itself, is a hybrid, complex work that draws on both cultural history and the historical experience of overseas rule (cf. Said 1994, 145). Indeed, this opera held a special place within Verdi's operatic production insofar as it was a commissioned work and the reason, why *Aida* would cause discomfort, argued Said, comes from the fact "that it is not so much *about* but *of* imperial domination" (Said 1994, 145). Based on the considerations outlined, in my contribution I will reread Verdi's opera, which is part of the cultural archive of western modernity, taking up Said's suggestion that *Aida*'s peculiarities – its subject matter and storyline, the monumental dimension, its visual and musical effects, etc. – require what he called a "contrapuntal interpretation" (Said 1994), borrowing the term from music theory to adequately capture the relationship between dominant and subaltern voices in literary texts, including the genre of opera.[8] In the following, the creation of *Aida* is first examined with a view to the cultural and historical context and, in a second step of my approach to Verdi's masterpiece, the focus is on the silenced or unheard voices – in particular on the title character Aida.

The making of *Aida* in a Mediterranean context

> Ecco di che si tratta:
> Fin dall'anno passato fui invitato a scrivere un'opera in paese molto lontano. Risposi di nò. – Quando fui a Parigi Du Locle fú incaricato di parlarmene di nuovo e d'offrirmi una forte somma. Risposi ancora di nò. Un mese dopo Egli mi mandava un programma stampato dicendomi essere fatto da un personaggio potente […] che gli pareva buono, e che lo leggessi. Io lo trovai buonissimo […].
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> Giuseppe Verdi (letter to Giulio Ricordi, 25 June 1870; cf. Verdi 2012, 584)[9]

At first Verdi was reluctant to engage in an opera for Cairo, but why did he finally accept Khedive Ismail's invitation to compose a special opera set in ancient Egypt? As Edward Said supposed, money might have been a reason, or maybe he was flattered to be first choice, but no less significant seemed the story told to him by Camille Du Locle, who had received an "Egyptian scenario" for a possible opera libretto from Auguste Mariette-Bey, head of archaeological excavations and antiquities in Egypt and Bey (baron) of the Ottoman Empire (cf. Said 1994, 147).[10]

The famous French Egyptologist, a friend of Du Locle, had convinced the Khedive to commission an opera on an Egyptian theme for the new opera house in Cairo, and Du Locle approached Verdi who, inspired by the scenario, eventually agreed and got involved in the project. According to Du Locle, the draft for the libretto was the work of Khedive Ismail Pasha and Auguste Mariette. The alliance between the viceroy, who wanted to modernize and westernize his country, and a European Egyptologist, that is, between western-oriented Egyptian modernity and the pharaonic past, "made the opera commission to Verdi part of the Europe-oriented modernization programme", noted Jan Assmann (2002, 7 [my translation]). However, the theme of *Aida* was pharaonic and not contemporary Egypt and it was the particular ambition of Egyptology and of archaeologists like Mariette to reconstruct ancient Egypt, quite different from the modern one. Edward Said remarked in this regard: "[…] the temples and palaces were reproduced in an orientation and perspective that staged the actuality of ancient Egypt as reflected through the imperial eye." (Said 1994, 150) Mariette's scenario for *Aida* led to his designs for costumes and stage sets, and according to Said, it is likely that Mariette's designs were inspired by the illustrations in Napoleon's *Description de l'Égypte*, which he adapted for the opera, with sets, costumes and props being made in Paris. For example, Said continues, in the "Nile scene" of the third act, an idealized representation from the Napoleonic *Description* was supposedly the model for Mariette's draft of the setting, which seemed "like a synthesis of *his* Egypt" (Said 1994, 155). Mariette actually saw himself, like Verdi, as the creator of *Aida*. For Assmann (2002, 10), *Aida* was an attempt to transform the antiquarian into an aesthetic principle, since buildings, furniture and costumes were copied exactly from historical originals and antiquarian studies, in other words, the opera was not just an Egyptian but also an Egyptological commissioned work. In fact, Auguste Mariette seemed to be the real protagonist of the opera's context, the

scriptwriter, so to say, who assigned the roles to everyone else: he inspired the Khedive for his project, managed to win Verdi through Du Locle and was responsible for the staging in every detail. With Mariette's precise archaeological reconstruction of the scenes and the meticulous drafts of the costumes, according to Mercedes Viale Ferrero (1982, 140), the historical-archaeological apparatus in Cairo was the communicated purpose, while in later editions it became a means of communication.[11]

Since the opera was intended as a national triumph by its initiators Auguste Mariette and Ismail Pasha, it aimed to show the greatness of Egypt in the shape of its pharaonic past in a triumphant way. A central element is therefore the famous triumphal scene, in which the idea of national and military triumph, symptomatic of 19th-century European nationalism, found expression not only in its Egyptian form,[12] but also in relation to the situation in Italy, France, Germany, etc. at the time (cf. Assmann 2002, 10). As a kind of 'general national opera', *Aida* may indeed have supported the formation of collective as well as national identities. Contemporary to the opera's creation, as previously mentioned, with the declaration of Rome as the capital in 1870, the national unification of Italy was, so to speak, completed, and the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in the same year affected the production of the opera's scenery and costumes in Paris. *Aida* thus recalled the circumstances of its realisation quite clearly and corresponded to aspects of the contemporary context, including imperialist policies by European nations on the southern side of the Mediterranean (cf. Said 1994, 159). Egypt and Italy in some ways shared the symbolic and representational space of *Aida* for the creation of a national discourse as well as the geographical space of the Mediterranean and colonial ambitions towards Ethiopia in order to strengthen their national identities, as stated by Guarracino (2010, 6). Furthermore, the opera's story about an ancient Egyptian-Ethiopian rivalry gained considerable resonance when read in the context of Anglo-French rivalry in East Africa during the 19th century. From the British perspective, the aims of Khedive Ismail, who aspired to expand southwards to achieve more independence from Istanbul, were seen as a threat to British hegemony on the Red Sea and the security of the India route; nonetheless, Ismail's expansionist policy in East Africa was encouraged in order to counter French and Italian ambitions in Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia (cf. Said 1994, 160).

Following Gramsci's observations on the potentiality of geography to expose the spatiality of power, Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello pointed out "how the Mediterranean is culturally and politically produced; it is never simply a geographical or historical 'fact'" (Chambers/Cariello 2020, 141). In the colonial period, new strategies of representation, "a staging of power", produced the effect of an "appearance of order" (Bergeron 2002, 151). The spatial transformation of the imperialist structure was particularly visible in large-scale projects such as the Suez Canal, completed in 1869, which changed the map and rank of the Mediterranean, making it a passage between two oceans, while the Cairo Opera House, for example, can be seen as a spatial manifestation of cultural hegemony. With the staging of *Aida*, commented Katherine Bergeron, "inside the theatre [was reproduced] a vision of the new order that increasingly defined the state of things outside" (Bergeron 2002, 151).

The history of *Aida* thus originated in the context of Europe's imperialism in the Mediterranean as well as its presence in Egypt, a presence that had begun with the Napoleonic invasions of 1798 and had transformed the country into a kind of semi-colony by the time of the opera's premiere in Cairo (cf. Robinson 1993, 134). As outlined above, Auguste Mariette adapted the stage and costume designs for *Aida*, probably inspired by Napoleon's *Description de l'Égypte*, as Edward Said assumed. "The result was an Orientalized Egypt", argued Said (1994, 154), and by accepting the commissioned work, Verdi wrote an opera under the influence of French orientalism. Said's reasoning suggested that not only Ethiopians were silenced in the opera, but also Egyptians, as their image was created in and for 'the West', in other words: the opera was intended to express an 'oriental identity' which was actually the projection of western fantasies of domination over what was represented as 'the Orient'. For Said, "*Aida*'s Egyptian identity" (Said 1994, 165) was part of Cairo's European facade, imprinted on those imaginary walls that separated the old town from the imperial quarters – *Aida*'s would be an "aesthetic of separation" (Said 1994, 165), he concluded. Moreover, with the separation of the ancient vision of Egypt from any contemporary one, the aesthetic sphere of the opera was divided from its social sphere. Said suggested that *Aida* seems to suffer because of the selectivity and emphasis on what is included or excluded. How did Verdi transform the 'Egyptian scenario' into a means of dramatic expression? Although the composer declared to write music just for the sake of music, "for the sake of pure art of opera" (Busch 1978 cit. in Goehr 2009, 139), he showed political sympathy for the oppressed. Given its orientalist implications, could the opera show "any resistance toward the inevitability of a historical narrative in which it seemed to be enmeshed" (Goehr 2009, 138)? Was *Aida* able, despite the imperialist context, to make those voices, melodies and stories silenced by the power discourse audible in music? In the next sections I will try to address these considerations.

Aida's story: a "manifestation of the unattainable"[13]

Verdi was involved by Mariette to the point of the archaeological setting: the composer, for his part, also wanted to work as historically correct as possible; he strove for historical instruments and inspected an Egyptian flute in Florence, but ultimately decided on the famous trumpets, which he had copied from Egyptian murals. For Verdi, the historical accuracy and scientific foundation of the Egyptian local colour of the opera became a matter of artistic form, as Assmann observed: "The effect of the opera was apparently related to the scientific accuracy of the staging." (Assmann 2002, 12 [my translation]) Verdi and Du Locle therefore decided to follow Mariette's programme closely and entrust the writing of the libretto to the poet Antonio Ghislanzoni, a member of the Milanese *Scapigliatura*. However, as many scholars confirm (e.g. Verardi 1996, 526 [3]), the composer carefully guided Ghislanzoni in writing *Aida*'s libretto. Verdi sought coherence between music, dramatic events, theatrical and choreographic action, scenic decoration (cf. Viale Ferrero 1982, 143). Despite his

efforts for 'historical authenticity', reflected not only in the theme of the trumpets, but also in the precise information requested from Du Locle on divine worship in Egypt, the mysteries of Isis, the temples of ancient Egypt, etc., it is all the more surprising, Assmann (2002, 12) commented, that the plot is neither based on documented sources of Egyptian history nor, as a fictional story, cares little about historical credibility. Nevertheless, regardless of historical inconsistencies in the plot, *Aida* is a historical opera, a "historicized fiction" (Assmann 2002, 22), i.e. an invented story that is embedded in a historical setting and serves as a pretext to make this context aesthetically present. In *Aida*, as Mariette seemed to have in mind, the visual presence of ancient Egyptian archaeological monuments and antiquities is transformed into the aesthetic presence of the work of art, Assmann (2002, 18) noted. Verdi had formed his own imagination of ancient Egypt, all in all in a traditional form, that of a sacred and initiatory world in which he felt the oppressive and violent force of a theocratic power (cf. Viale Ferrero 1982, 142).

From the beginning, *Aida* makes the conflict between two worlds perceptible: that of theocratic power and that of love and freedom; the priesthood is represented as the actual opposing force of love. The Egypt of the opera is a strict theocracy, the scene takes place now in Memphis, now in Thebes.[14] From an expressive point of view, the plot proceeds in crossed positions: while Aida and Radamès are a loving couple and at the same time tied to their countries Ethiopia and Egypt respectively, Amonasro, father of Aida and King of Ethiopia, Amneris, daughter of the Pharaoh and in love with Radamès, and Ramfis, the high priest of Isis, are also allies, so to say, who want to prevent the lovers. The opera publicly deals with acts that arise from private motives:[15] Radamès and Aida express an affection that contradicts the political order. The story focuses on the denial of freedom, which is attacked by Amneris from her position of power in furious jealousy, as well as by Ramfis dominating everyone, and by Amonasro oppressing his terrified daughter with tormenting intolerance. Aida represents the violently denied human being, and with Marchesi (1987-88, 35ff.) it can be argued that this was the reason why Verdi put her name in the opera's title and offset the priests' trial against Radamès to their detriment, siding with 'the weak' as in earlier operatic works.

Aida's structure is quite complex, since political and patriotic events are not limited to the background, but Ramfis and Amonasro try to appropriate and take advantage of the situation caused by private relationships. By virtue of Ramfis's indirect paternal function to Amneris (and also to Radamès), the characters of Ramfis and Amonasro are also symmetrical. The feelings and personal goals that move Aida, Radamès and Amneris are the means by which the plot develops. Aida's love for her distant land is exploited by her father Amonasro to blackmail her into manipulating Radamès and getting him to reveal the movements of the Egyptian troops. The aria "O patria mia" captures Aida's despairing memory of Ethiopia that she will never see again.[16] "This emotion forms the active link between the private and public spheres of the action", observed Fabrizio Della Seta (1991, 52). However, Aida's nostalgia for her country seems to create not only pain and unresolvable contradictions, but also "the vision of an imaginary otherworld" (Della Seta 1991, 53). Aida envisions this potential

world, which, in contrast to the political power structure, offers the prospect of realizing individual human desires without the constraints of collective relationships and limitations. Thus, in the celestial visions of the protagonist, the imagined place of Ethiopia is linked to the likewise imaginary realm beyond the grave, towards which Aida and Radamès are moving. Della Seta pointed out that at the level of visual communication realized through the staging, only the 'Egyptian present' is visually represented or included, while the nostalgic otherworld is conceived as a visual absence and is evoked more through poetic language and music; through music, Verdi created for the protagonists the illusion of a different world, where there is space for contradictions (cf. Della Seta 1991, 54f., 62).[17]

As the consecration scene (Act I) shows, Radamès is part of the ancient Egyptian political and religious system and is initially unaware of the incompatibility of being both Aida's love and the Pharaoh's commander-in-chief. His authority is finally challenged in the Nile scene (Act III), which can be considered the turning point of the opera: in relation to the semantic fields outlined above, the 'natural' setting of the scene at the Nile, whose waters connect Egypt and Ethiopia, seems to symbolically open up the possibility of escaping restrictive political orders. Aida desperately tries to make the best of a predicament: she is exploited by her father,[18] but 'for an instant' she deceives herself that the unfortunate situation could be resolved if Radamès betrayed his country. Ultimately, Aida elicits the military secret more by accident than on purpose, so that Radamès unwittingly commits treason and agrees to flee (cf. Huebner 2002, 174).

Musically, as Katherine Bergeron (2002) has convincingly demonstrated, Verdi indeed staged "Radamès's fall *as* a convention, forcing the tenor to go through the motions of an emotion that appears all the more inappropriate because it is not so much listened to as overheard" (Bergeron 2002, 157) – not only by Aida, but also hidden on stage by Amonasro and Amneris. "Convention" here refers to the conventional form of the closing cabaletta[19] for the Nile scene. By turning the conventional cabaletta into Radamès's failure, argued Bergeron, Verdi not only alienated the scene, but from a dramatic point of view the cabaletta even became necessary "to underscore the compromised political position that Radamès represents at the level of the plot" (Bergeron 2002, 157). The composer was looking for unusual forms of expression, preferring, however, "to transform the conventions of his time rather than to overturn them" (Budden 1973 cit. in Gossett 1974, 334). Due to its musical misplacement, the cabaletta conveys the feeling that there is no way out and expresses the impossibility of escape (cf. Bergeron 2002, 157). Jan Assmann (2002, 21) remarked that the more concisely the form emerges in its traditional genre specifics, the more it appears as a kind of quotation and as a form of aesthetic reflection. So the cabaletta is actually a "quoted form", an element of "ironic distance" (Assmann 2002, 21), manifesting itself in the genre-specific conciseness of the formal expression. However, the term 'ironic' seems inappropriate because Verdi was concerned with 'authenticity', with realistic representation, and he called himself "verista":

> Ah il progresso, la scienza, il verismo… Ahi Ahi… Verista finché volete, ma… Shakespeare era un verista ma non lo sapeva. Era un verista d'ispirazione; noi siamo veristi per progetto per calcolo. Allora tanto fa; sistema per sistema; Meglio [sic] ancora le cabalette. Il Bello poi si è che a furia di progresso, l'Arte torna indietro. L'Arte che manca di spontaneità, di naturalezza e di semplicità, non è più Arte.
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> Giuseppe Verdi (letter to Giulio Ricordi, 20 November 1880; cf. Verdi 2012, 802)

In Verdi's elaboration, Radamès's fall reflects "the *verismo* of its staging", as Bergeron (2002, 159) has stated – this can be seen as an expression of "the new order of realistic representation" (Bergeron 2002, 159). Radamès's military triumph entailing personal failure, i.e. a political success involving a hopeless human situation, or what Said referred to as "*Realpolitik*" (Said 1994, 157), seems to be configured by Verdi in the opera as "*verismo* by calculation". *Aida* shows well how delusive it was to glorify 'modern progress', while people are continually moved by the same passions and troubled by the same fears (cf. Viale Ferrero 1982, 144).

In a broader sense, fleeing with Aida to Ethiopia would mean surrendering to the will of Amonasro and undermining the Egyptian state. Overheard by Amneris, Radamès realizes the hopelessness of these contradictions and seems to have no alternative but to accept death in order to redeem both his loyalty to the Egyptian value system and his loyalty to Aida (cf. Della Seta 1991, 60). For Radamès it is impossible to achieve a synthesis between his public role and personal autonomy: "This manifestation of the unattainable" (Huebner 2002, 170), which Aida implicitly shares in "O patria mia", "leads to a death that will function as the lovers' most powerful escape from a tyranny of patriotic symbols" (Huebner 2002, 170).

In the trial scene, the silence of Radamès facing the priests' demands ("Discolpati!", Act IV) produces a remarkable effect, as Huebner has pointed out: the absence of vocals creates a vital expression of the character's political resistance and claim to autonomy. His silence also reaffirms his masculinity in a new way, "a striking antinomy to the sheer volume of sound previously deployed to celebrate his virility as a reflection of Egyptian military hegemony" (Huebner 2002, 165). By accepting the moral consequences of his actions, Radamès assumes political and personal responsibility, showing the self-empowerment by which he is able to make his decision despite the oppressive circumstances.

In opera, the conflicts that the main characters need to face are often between political duty or family and love. In *Aida*, it is the impact of the war between Ethiopia and Egypt, of nationalism and patriotism that prevents Aida's and Radamès's love from ending happily. What should be alive in the opera, according to Lydia Goehr, seems to be buried from the beginning, even if the ineluctability of historical processes becomes most evident in the final scene. The place of resistance to political or social administration and thus against the influence of its emotions like patriotism or nationalism is the "counter public sphere" (Negt/Kluge 1993 [1972] cit. in Goehr 2009, 144). In *Aida*, it is about listening to what can hardly be heard in this opera of pomp and context (cf. Goehr 2009, 144ff.), as I would like to point out in my final reflections.

Aida's melody

Although I cannot go into detail, it is important to note that the contrast between militaristic Egypt and subjugated Ethiopia is also embedded in the music that Verdi composed to depict the two countries. Egypt is largely characterized by regular music for brass instruments; described by Assmann (2002, 14) as "national aesthetics", this brass musical language of *Aida* refers to the representation of the nation in the 19th century and its imagination as a form of socio-political unity.[20] In addition, Verdi set the music for Ramfis and the Egyptian priests within a contrapuntal texture, while he introduced 'oriental' musical effects in liturgical episodes and for ballets, both ceremonial occasions.[21] The singing of the main characters follows Verdi's traditional Italian operatic style. In contrast to the Egyptian mass scenes, no collective musical expression is given to the Ethiopians in the opera; rather, their concerns find a voice in the characters Amonasro and Aida, who sing about their distant, beloved country. Aida, the enslaved protagonist, is devoid of sensual exoticism – her melodies are notable, among other things, by their woodwind orchestration (cf. Robinson 1993, 136; Assmann 2002, 15). As Guarracino (2008, 95) has remarked, the melody associated with Aida characterizes a very intimate moment in which the imaginary geography of her homeland, in a dialogue between voice and flute, narrates the drama of exile.

This tender musical illumination of inner conflicts is in extreme contrast to the noisy "national aesthetics" and culminates in the scene of the lovers' death (cf. Assmann 2002, 19). Aida seems to enter the tomb by choice to die along with Radamès. Her call to the angel of death was described by Verdi as being sung in delirium, as if upon entering the tomb, "between a human and a phantom state", her living body would dissolve into a "pure, disembodied song" (Goehr 2009, 147). In the last scene of the opera, Aida is united with Radamès in death, and the decision to die for love symbolizes for her escaping the power structure. Escape is fragile, however, and is achieved in something almost unheard of. Behind the aesthetic surface of the visual and textual messages, Aida's melody seems to countervail the power structure as it still expresses something truthful or hopeful; thus, the almost unheard voices, melodies and stories silenced by hegemonic power can still find their expression in music. The gentler the voice, even to the point of silence, the more it may be about listening. Aida's resistance lies in the refusal to die the way people in power would let her die – alone. Her melody of resistance is a song of silence, made audible by the composer and found by those being able to hear this music from the heart. Lydia Goehr (2009, 154) recalls the gesture to appeal to music – both literally and as social metaphor – as what saves individuals and societies from falling apart. Since a piece of music can deeply affect spectators, Aida passes on her melody to everyone who still hears the music of the counter public sphere, an almost unheard space that eludes the power structure. It is about being able to hear these voices, melodies and stories.

"Is *Aida* an orientalist opera?"[22]

Aida configures an imperialist situation against the backdrop of Egypt's war with Ethiopia and the romantic plot is about a conflict between desire and politics. Since Verdi had not carried out any ethnomusicological research, but appropriated some characteristics of contemporary Arabic music projecting them back on ancient Egypt,[23] Edward Said argued that the composer's effort for 'authenticity' was a mirror of orientalist gestures that could not deal with 'the other' of the East but resulted in an "Orientalized Egypt" (Said 1994, 154). Said's argumentation was followed by a controversial discussion among scholars as to whether "*Aida* is an orientalist opera" (Robinson 1993, 135). Verdi's Egypt is represented as both an imperialist power trying to subdue its neighbouring country and an authoritarian theocracy tyrannised by its priesthood, while Ethiopia, on the contrary, is portrayed as a land of natural beauty, oscillating between dream and reality, not in the 19th-century national sense of collective search, but on a personal level, as outlined earlier. Verdi was known as a lifelong supporter of the Italian independence movement, yet, as Said pointed out, while working on *Aida* his attitude to the politics of the *Risorgimento* was rather disillusioned and is reflected in the opera as military success followed by personal failure, in other words, "as political triumph rendered in the ambivalent tones of human impasse, in short, as *Realpolitik*" (Said 1994, 157). Thus, in Said's metaphorical reading, Egyptians seem to be equated with "successful Risorgimento fighters" (Huebner 2002, 175).

For Robinson too, *Aida* is an allegory of *Risorgimento* politics, in which Egypt, however, would play the role of the aggressor or Austrian oppressor, while Ramfis and the Egyptian priesthood are associated with Verdi's *Risorgimento* anticlericalism and in this sense identified with the reactionary politics of the Roman papacy (cf. Robinson 1993, 135, 139f.). In this reading, *Aida* is seen as an "anti-imperialist work" (Robinson 1993, 135) that criticizes the European imperialist enterprise, translating the relationship between Europe and its empire into one between expansionist Egypt and colonized Ethiopia. Serena Guarracino (2010, 6, 8) notes that insofar as *Aida* elaborates the colonial narrative in terms of 'east' and 'west', with Egypt in the role of the colonizer, Italy's western national discourse was shaped by its mirror-image on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Fabrizio Della Seta (1991, 62), on the other hand, questions readings of *Aida* that emphasize imperialist expansionism or an anticolonial orientation, while for Katherine Bergeron the political idea that *Aida*'s representation of Egypt was able to express "has never been entirely clear" (Bergeron 2002, 149).

Edward Said proposed to interpret *Aida* as "a kind of curatorial art" (Said 1994, 165) that evokes a precise historical moment of an imaginary 'ancient Egypt' in the mirror of a European orientalist perspective and based on Auguste Mariette's Egyptology. Modern Egypt, Said argued, was a place to which Verdi could only relate through a European orientalist gaze; nevertheless, in my take it is difficult to imagine that Verdi was not aware of *Aida*'s imperialist entanglements. Despite all efforts to create a local colour in accordance with the commission, Verdi wanted to see his opera as a timeless work of art designed to be repeated over time and not as an event-related commissioned work (cf. his letter to Paul

Draneht Bey, 9 August 1869; cf. Verdi 2012, 569). His narratives usually express solidarity with the oppressed. In *Aida*, the state of exclusion is embodied by the title character, who is turned into an outcast by both opposing sides: on the one hand, Ramfis represents the denial of freedom, the exploitation of religion by a social group, the arbitrariness of power; on the other hand, this danger is also expressed by Aida's authoritarian father Amonasro, who demands the sacrifice of his daughter's love. Indeed, neither the Egyptian nor the Ethiopian system seems to be confirmed in the opera – rather, the character Aida appears "removed from the space in which she would take a side" (Goehr 2009, 140). The final scene of the opera has been read by several critics, e.g. Mercedes Viale Ferrero (1982), as a metaphor for the triumph of an oppressive power over individual striving and love. The past seems thus linked to the present, because freedom can be threatened at any time and anywhere; since politics in *Aida* is, in particular, power that crushes those who try to resist its dominion, the opera can be read as a metaphor of power. Viale Ferrero commented in this regard: "paradossalmente […] i 'colonizzatori' e gli affaristi europei potevano essere visti come i nuovi Ramfis […] dopo Suez" (Viale Ferrero 1982, 144).

Simultaneously, *Aida* seems to challenge the imperialist narrative from inside the operatic work: despite the orientalist implications in which the opera is entangled and the context-oriented aspects to be included into interpretation, *Aida* gives expression through music to those voices, melodies and histories silenced by the dominating discourse, suggesting a contrapuntal listening in order to be able to hear these melodies sounding from the counter public sphere.

Endnotes

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2 Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) was Italy's most important composer of the 19th century and had great success with his opera *Nabucco* (1841), followed by the famous popular trilogy consisting of *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il Trovatore* (1853) and *La Traviata* (1853), and finally with operas like *Un ballo in maschera* (1859), *La forza del destino* (1862), and *Don Carlos* (1867). From 1870 onwards, Verdi dedicated himself mainly to the composition of three further operas: *Aida* (1871), *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). Almost all of Verdi's operatic works before *Aida* were conceived as political operas, directly involving his predominantly Italian audience (cf. https://cultura.gov.it/aida150; "La strada per Menfi e Tebe passa da Torino", Jean François Champollion, cf. https://www.museoegizio.it/esplora/mostre/aida-figlia-di-due-mondi/).

3 Gramsci continued his concerns as follows: "'Artificioso' non è forse la parola propria, perché negli elementi popolari questa artificiosità assume forme ingenue e commoventi. Il barocco, il

melodrammatico sembrano a molti popolani un modo di sentire e di operare straordinariamente affascinante, un modo di evadere da ciò che essi ritengono basso, meschino, spregevole nella loro vita e nella loro educazione […].” (Gramsci cit. in Sanguineti 2001, 17)

4 Verdi, however, called himself “verist[a] per progetto per calcolo” (letter to Giulio Ricordi, 20 November 1880; cf. Verdi 2012, 803).

5 Cf. Spada 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeHlyb7zfG4. Verdi thus remodelled the older concept expressed by Rossini, which was still part of the neoclassical environment. According to this concept, as Marco Spada explains, “la musica è una sublime arte perché non avendo mezzi per imitare il vero si innalza al di là della natura comune in un mondo ideale” (Spada 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeHlyb7zfG4). This means that music was considered an ideal art and not an imitative art – Verdi tried to overcome this concept in the sense that for him “inventare il vero” had to do neither with idealism nor with *Verismo*, but with poetry [*poesia*].

6 In this context, ‘local colour’ means for the opera stage that the local conditions, customs, religion, habits and clothing of the country where the plot is located have been observed and imitated in an exaggerated artistic way (cf. Kreutziger-Herr 2007, 80).

7 Ismail Pasha, descendant of the dynasty of viceroys that began with Muhammad Ali in the early 19th century and laid the foundation for modern Egypt, was attempting to establish Egypt’s independence from the Ottoman Empire. The title of ‘Khedive’ was held by Ismail Pasha from 1867 to 1879 (cf. Re 2003, 163).

8 Said explains: “The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded [...].” (Said 1994, 83) A contrapuntal reading makes it possible to listen to those voices that have been silenced by imperialist historiography, since it assumes that history does not consist of a single ‘melody’ that others just accompany, but of various ‘melodies’ or stories that are related to one another (cf. Guarracino 2008, 89f.).

9 Giulio Ricordi was Verdi’s publisher; Camille Du Locle, co-librettist with Joseph Méry of Verdi’s opera *Don Carlos* (1867, in French language), was the director of the Opéra Comique in Paris (cf. Gossett 1974, 294). The copy of the *programma* sent to Verdi in French was translated into Italian by the composer himself and his wife Giuseppina Strepponi and later elaborated from scenario to libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni.

10 Although archaeology, opera and world exhibitions are different spheres, Mariette connected them in a remarkable way: Said refers to Mariette’s role in the Paris Exposition of 1867, one of the largest and earliest displays of imperialist power; Mariette not only wrote the exhibition catalogue and designed the Egyptian pavilion, “leaving little doubt in anyone’s mind that he, Mariette, had brought Egypt to Europe for the first time, as it were. He could do so because of his spectacular archaeological successes at some thirty-five sites, including those at Giza, Sakkarah, Edfu, and Thebes […]” (Said 1994, 152f.).

11 Mariette was convinced of creating a staging “à la fois savante et pittoresque”, in his words, and as mentioned, he paid the most careful attention to the costumes he designed himself: “[...] sont élégants et riches, mais ils sont exactes [...]” (Mariette cit. in Viale Ferrero 1982, 141f.). The critic Filippo Filippi noted in *La Perseveranza* that it might be difficult to reproduce the Cairo

'archaeological' production of *Aida* in other theatres. A comparison between the stage directions of the libretti for the *Aida* world premiere in Cairo and for the Italian premiere in Milan (Teatro alla Scala, February 8, 1872) indeed reveals quite a few differences, as Viale Ferrero has shown. In general, the scenes conceived by Mariette for Cairo were perhaps considered too scientific, so several modifications were added to create a scenario adaptable to many theatres, including the less equipped ones (cf. Viale Ferrero 1982, 140).

12 The Triumphal March (Act II scene 2) was even adopted as Khedivial national anthem (cf. Guarracino 2010, 7). According to Assmann, with the premiere of *Aida*, Egypt's entry into the circle of modern nations was to be officially and visibly celebrated (cf. Assmann 2002, 20).

13 Cf. Huebner 2002, 170.

14 With regard to the fictional character of the story, Assmann (2002, 12) points out that there is a distance of 622 km between these two places, which would have taken weeks to bridge under historical conditions.

15 According to Huebner (2002, 163), this is typical of the *Grand opéra.*

16 Cf. Aida: "O fresche valli… o questo asil beato / Che un dì promesso dall'amor mi fu… / Or che d'amore il sogno è dileguato… / O patria mia, non ti vedrò mai più!" (Ghislanzoni 1962 [1871], libretto Act III). In terms of its geographical location, the Ethiopia of the opera does not correspond to the present-day state of Ethiopia, but rather to Sudan or ancient Nubia, which the Greeks called "Ethiopia" and which appears in Egyptian sources as "Kush", explains Jan Assmann. In its political form as a kingdom with Napata as its capital, it can be dated quite closely to the late period from about 750 BC (cf. Assmann 2002, 17).

17 In the libretto, the contrast between the artificial landscape of the pompous Egyptian court with its religious ceremonies and the nostalgic evocation of a distant and mysterious region of serene nature, Aida's Ethiopia, is realised through opposing moods: "on the one hand of heat, sultriness, contrasting colours of oppressive darkness and blinding light, suffocation […]; on the other hand of freshness, morning light, subtle colours, transparency and virgin nature […]." (Della Seta 1991, 54)

18 Amonasro imposes on her to save the Ethiopian people: "Pensa che un popolo, vinto, straziato, / Per te soltanto risorger può..." (Ghislanzoni 1961 [1871], libretto Act III).

19 The *cabaletta* is the lyrical conclusion of a multi-part composition; in the duet, "each protagonist would sing the entire melody in turn, followed by a middle section, and a repetition of the theme, now sung by both together" (Gossett 1974, 305).

20 These include the Marseillaise-style hymns, both the war anthem "Su! Del Nilo" (Act I) and the triumphal hymn "Gloria all'Egitto" (Act II) as well as the triumphal march (Act II) and the military fanfares in Act I (cf. Assmann 2002, 15).

21 Parts of the opera are written in the "peculiar 'oriental' style" (Robinson 1993, 136), developed particularly by 19th-century French composers to treat 'exotic' subjects; this 'oriental' music has "no necessary relation to the actual musical practices of non-European cultures" (Robinson 1993, 137).

22 Cf. Robinson 1993, 133ff.

23 In the ceremonial scene of Act I, for example, there are moments of hybridisation, such as the interweaving of a typically 'oriental' melody (sung by the choir of priestesses) and a Gregorian chant (performed by the priests) (cf. Guarracino 2008, 95; cf. Marchesi 1987/88, 33).

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