



The Khedive's Opera:

Aida and Ismail Pasha's Cultural Europeanization of Egypt

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of Giuseppe Verdi's opera Aida (premiered in 1871) within Egyptian Khedive (viceroy) Ismail Pasha's broader scheme of cultural Europeanization. Although Aida is one of the most researched works of classical music, no scholars have approached the geopolitical implications of the commissioning of Aida with any depth. By placing Aida alongside Ismail's other opportunities to show off his new vision for Egypt, including the completion of the Suez Canal, the 1867 Exposition universelle, and the architecture of the Khedivial Opera House, this paper reveals the political background of the opera and highlights Egyptian agency in its conception. This essay also clarifies Verdi's role, both his selection for, and acceptance of, the Aida commission.

In March 2015, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi announced that his government would build a brand-new capital city near Cairo. It was described as a massive construction project, stretching to over 270 square miles and including “660 hospitals, 1,250 mosques and churches, and a theme park four times the size of Disneyland.”¹ The bespoke capital was only one of many grand ideas that the newly elected leader announced, including an unprecedented

1. Patrick Kingsley, “A new New Cairo: Egypt Plans £30bn purpose-built capital in desert,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/16/new-cairo-egypt-plans-capital-city-desert>.

expansion of the Suez Canal and a broader scheme of widening highways and improving infrastructure across the country.² El-Sisi's plan provides an interesting parallel to the goals of an earlier Egyptian head of state, Ismail Pasha (1830–1895). Ismail rose to power in 1863 as the Khedive, or viceroy, under the aegis of the Ottoman empire. His reign was marked by rapid modernization and included major building projects alongside cultural changes which took two forms: the spread of European art and music into Egypt as well as the placement of ancient Egyptian history at the forefront of modern Egyptian culture. One of Ismail's most enduring legacies was the commissioning of Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) to compose the opera *Aida*. In *Aida*, Ismail's twin cultural goals were fulfilled.

Aida itself has been thoroughly studied. Opera scholars Clyde McCants and Mary Jane Phillips-Matz provide thoughtful musical analysis and research on *Aida*'s performance history, while Hans Busch's translations of Verdi's extant letters prove especially useful to uncovering the history of the composition.³ Several academics of various fields, especially musicologist Katherine Bergeron and founder of postcolonial studies Edward Said, have explored the opera in a negative light, examining *Aida*'s Orientalist aspects.⁴ Both historians and musicologists have perceived Orientalism here almost exclusively in the music, and I do not disagree with the notion that the music and European stagings of *Aida* are Orientalist. Instead, few scholars have given more than a cursory glance to the background of *Aida*, particularly from the Egyptian perspective. By examining the dual roles of Ismail and Verdi, *Aida* can be understood as a projection of Egypt endorsed by Egyptians and as an instrument of Egyptian geopolitical power alongside, and complementary with, this Orientalist framework.

This essay will chart the prehistory of *Aida* to demonstrate its significance to broader Egyptian politico-cultural goals. In order to do so, this essay will explore the connections between Ismail's commissioning of *Aida* and his other attempts to present a new Egypt, namely the 1867 Parisian *Exposition universelle* and the Suez Canal opening ceremonies. Ismail's choice of Verdi followed by Verdi's initial refusal, and subsequent acceptance, of the commission will also be examined to establish why Verdi was seen by Ismail as a political composer and thus of especial interest to the Egyptian state. Lastly, the site of the first performance of *Aida*, the Khedivial Opera House, will also come under investigation, as it provides proof that the premiere of *Aida* was more than merely a musical affair. This essay highlights the significant roles played by Egyptians, restoring their agency in the work's prehistory and providing a new lens to understand *Aida*.

2. Rachel Elbaum, "Egypt builds a new capital city to replace Cairo," *NBC News*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/egypt-builds-new-capital-city-replace-cairo-n893606>.

3. Hans Busch, *Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978); Clyde McCants, *Verdi's Aida: A Record of the Life of the Opera On and Off the Stage* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005); Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

4. Katherine Bergeron, "Verdi's Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of *Aida*," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 14, no. 1 (March 2002): 149–59; Edward Said, "The Imperial Spectacle," *Grand Street* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 82–104; Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 111–32.

The Khedive: Ismail Pasha

In 1801, when Napoleon's French army departed Egypt after capitulating to combined English and Ottoman forces, they left a power vacuum in their wake. The Ottoman sultan—nominally in charge—was desperate to restore peace to the fertile territory of Egypt, and thus appointed military commander Muhammad 'Ali as the *wali* (governor) of the province in July 1805.⁵ 'Ali was a powerful reformer who attempted to Europeanize Egypt, as well as increase his personal control.⁶ His successors endeavored with varying degrees to do the same, but none reached the heights of success (nor the depths of failure) of his grandson Ismail.

Ismail rose to the throne in 1863. He is today largely remembered as the “second great reformer of the nineteenth century” behind 'Ali.⁷ Ismail, who used the term “Khedive,” or viceroy, to describe himself, was just as interested as his grandfather in Europeanizing Egypt and hoped to transition fully away from Ottoman control. In 1867, the sultan allowed Egypt to become a tributary state rather than a province under direct administration.⁸ With his greater independence, Ismail was desperate to increase Egyptian coffers, so he duly expanded the land area under cultivation and worked hard to increase agricultural output.⁹ During the sixteen years of Ismail's reign, infrastructure was the main focus of government spending. He deepened existing harbors, built new lighthouses, paved dirt roads, erected large bridges, and extended railway lines.¹⁰

Ismail's paramount project was the building of the Suez Canal, which was completed in 1869 with French and Russian assistance. The canal was a massive engineering endeavor connecting the Mediterranean and Red Seas and removing the need for ships to sail around the entire continent. Instead, they passed through Egyptian ports and custom houses, bringing indispensable revenue and tourism. At the same time, Ismail also paid close attention to culture. For him, a modernized Egypt meant two other things: a society with venerable customs obvious to all as well as a new, Europeanized high culture. These twin goals inspired many of Ismail's decisions; the commissioning of *Aida* was a small but notable part because it successfully fulfilled both objectives.

Ismail knew first and foremost that advertising the ancient history of Egypt would be an excellent way to bring international attention and sorely needed economic investment to his country. He funded many archeological and restoration projects and hired the French scholar Auguste Mariette (1821–1881) to catalogue Egyptian history. Mariette was also chosen to direct a new repository and showcase for Egyptian history, which would eventually become the Egyptian Museum.¹¹

5. Khaled Fahmy, “The era of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, 1805–1848,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Vol. II*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 141.

6. *Ibid.*, 139.

7. F. Robert Hunter, *Egypt Under the Khedives: 1805–1879* (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 70.

8. F. Robert Hunter, “Egypt under the successors of Muhammad 'Ali,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Vol. II*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193.

9. *Ibid.*, 186.

10. Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid-Marsot, *A Short History of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 68.

11. Said, 91.

While Mariette focused on excavating artifacts, Ismail turned his attention outward. In June 1867, the *Exposition universelle* was held in Paris. By then, Egypt was essentially an autonomous state, and the fair was a perfect opportunity to present a new face to the world. The Egyptian pavilions, designed with much input from Mariette, were a grand display incorporating several different periods of Egyptian history. The pavilions showcased an Orientalized version of Egypt, its Otherness highlighted by the exhibit's location in the "Oriental section" alongside China and Japan.¹² But the display was also, as *Aida* would become, a fascinating interplay between European expectations and Egyptian projection. Alongside the predictable miniature pyramids, the Egyptian-led canal project featured prominently with the "Isthmus of Suez" pavilion, emphasizing the complexity and sheer scale of the canal.¹³ With the pyramids adjacent to the canal model, the display accentuated Egypt's engineering prowess, both ancient and contemporary. Attendees would have been most amazed, though, by the recreated royal palace. In the highly decorated bedroom, Ismail himself was the featured attraction, smoking a hookah and daily receiving guests from elite Parisian society.¹⁴ Ismail's personal attempt to promote this mixed Orientalist and endogenous version of Egypt was successful: the display won three gold medals, including best-in-show.¹⁵

Ismail was aided in these attempts by contemporary European fascination with Egypt, a movement termed Egyptomania. Egyptomania, inherently associated with Orientalism, spread throughout the arts, from architecture to literature to music. *Aida* was the most well-known European opera set in Ancient Egypt. Other late-nineteenth-century works include Georges Bizet's *Djamileh* (1875) and Jules Massenet's *Thaïs* (1894). *Aida*, like the works of Bizet and Massenet, has been noted before as a prime example of Egyptomania.¹⁶ But, as Carole Jarsaillon writes, Egyptomania and the burgeoning scholarly field of Egyptology were rarely inseparable; instead, "Egyptomania laid the groundwork for Egyptology to be recognised as a successful science, and Egyptology, in return, inspired Egyptomaniac productions, in which Egyptologists themselves participated."¹⁷ Jarsaillon argues that Egypt's World's Fair display was a perfect simulacrum of this interdependence—the Egyptian Temple and pyramids can be interpreted both as "yet another Egyptomania-inspired entertainment" but was also "a scientific and didactic attempt at explaining ancient Egyptian architecture."¹⁸ *Aida*, as another form of entertainment with scholarly backing, functioned in a similar way.

But while the eyes of the world were on Egypt, Ismail was equally drawn toward European culture. As a boy, he had received a European education and

12. Alia Nour, "Egyptian-French Cultural Encounters at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867," *MDCCC 1800*, 6 (July 2017), 41, <https://doi.org/10.14277/2280-8841/MDCCC-6-17-3>.

13. *Ibid.*, 35.

14. Bergeron, 149.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See, for example, Gabriela Cruz, *Grand Illusion: Phantasmagoria in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

17. Carole Jarsaillon, "Modern Egyptomania and Early Egyptology: The Case of Mariette's 1867 Egyptian Temple," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 40, no. 4: 360, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2018.1484610>.

18. *Ibid.*

spoke French.¹⁹ For the Khedive, European high culture, especially classical music, was a powerful way to project a modern and wealthy Egypt. And, as a bonus, a robust entertainment sector with familiar songs, dances, and customs was essential as a way of attracting Europeans to invest and live in Egypt. Immigrants were important for Egypt for several reasons, mostly as employees in government agencies and for their technical expertise, necessary to further infrastructure projects and fill the coffers of the state.²⁰

Almost as if to prove his dedication to the idea, even Ismail's palace was caught up in the Europeanization. At his receptions, according to one contemporary report, instead of the expected Middle Eastern dancing, visitors were treated to a performance of the play *Un Caprice* by Frenchman Alfred de Musset, followed by a concert of classical music.²¹ He was following a well-trod path, as with similar wooing the Khedives—over the course of the nineteenth century—increased the European population in Egypt dramatically. More than 30,000 people arrived each year between 1857 and 1861, most of them Italian, Greek, or British.²²

Ismail's bold economic and cultural plans for Egypt came together in 1869 when the Suez Canal was completed. He invited a magnificent gathering of heads of state from around the world to the opening ceremonies. It was the most prominent occasion since the *Exposition universelle* for Ismail to show off his country—its culture as well as its infrastructure—and establish beyond a doubt Egypt's keen embrace both of its tradition and of the modern world. He pulled out all the stops. Everything was carefully planned to the last detail. Heads of state sailed through the canal in an order that reflected the relative status of the respective leaders on board each boat. The arrangement of ships was publicly released a month earlier to stimulate excitement as well as flatter the most powerful visitors. The Empress Eugenie of France, the star guest, was the first to enter alongside the Khedive.²³ Many other monarchs from Europe and Asia took part and Ismail, as historian Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot argues, “fancied himself a member of that select club of royals,” building two new palaces near the canal just for the occasion.²⁴ Countries from several continents were represented in the lineup, and the *New York Times* described the “exquisite picture” of the menagerie of flags flying from masts.²⁵

The ceremonies were not limited to the canal area. There were formal dances, fireworks, and even the combined dedication of a church and a mosque

19. Hunter, “Egypt under the successors of Muhammad ‘Ali,” 186.

20. Hunter, *Egypt Under the Khedives*, 87.

21. Sadly, the program for this recital does not seem to have been recorded. John Pudney, *Suez: De Lesseps' Canal* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

22. David Landes, *Bankers and Pashas: International Finance and Economic Imperialism in Egypt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 87.

23. “The Inauguration of the Suez Canal,” *The Times of India*, November 15, 1869. Reprinted from *The Malta Times*, October 21, 1869, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

24. Al-Sayyid-Marsot, 68.

25. “The Great Canal: Events Connected with its Formal Opening,” *New York Times*, December 13, 1869, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

in the city of Suez.²⁶ Further afield, preparations in Cairo had been years in the making. The Egyptian capital was at the epicenter of Ismail's significant agenda, especially since, as Edward Said explains, unlike Alexandria, which had been cosmopolitan for centuries, Cairo remained thoroughly Arab and Islamic.²⁷ The nature of the city meant that it was more unapproachable for foreigners who would have felt dramatically out of place culturally and geographically. As Ismail found attracting Europeans to his capital to be of the utmost importance, changing the face of the city was vital. The subsequent Europeanization was often referred to as Cairo's "Haussmannization" after Baron Haussmann, the French official who led the contemporaneous renovation of Paris. The new Cairo was, in fact, directly modelled after Paris, with boulevards, formal gardens, and monumental public buildings completed the same year as the Suez Canal.²⁸

The Composer: Giuseppe Verdi

Not everything had gone to plan, however. Ismail had tried to convince Giuseppe Verdi, the Italian opera composer, to write a hymn for the opening of the Suez Canal, but Verdi had declined the offer. Yet Ismail clearly saw Verdi as key to completing his cultural goals. Why Ismail would have been drawn to Verdi and why Verdi refused this commission are both important questions that reveal much about the two men.

Previous scholars have seen Verdi's international fame as reason enough for Ismail's interest, but there was considerably more beneath the surface. Firstly, Ismail probably limited his vision to Italian composers as the influence of Italian music on Egypt already had a long history. The many foreigners enticed to settle in Egypt by Khedivial reforms naturally brought their own cultures with them. The intermingling of traditional Egyptian music with European music (supported both by newcomers and the Khedive) was a fascinating phenomenon even before Ismail took the throne and Italians had taken center stage in these developments. For example, in the early nineteenth century, Muhammad 'Ali created five military schools with Italian instructors given the added job of providing brass bands for the army.²⁹ The district of Azbakeya in central Cairo, eventually renovated as part of the city's "Haussmannization," was the nucleus of European cultural life in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century. Visiting Italian musicians often performed there for their compatriots in the 1840s, and a local theatre even put on small-scale Italian operas during the 1850s.³⁰ The proximity of the Azbakeya district to the royal palace and the seeming near-monopoly of Italians on European music in Egypt would have convinced Ismail that Italy possessed the most attractive and potent European culture available.

26. "The Suez Canal: The Programme of the Opening Ceremonies and Festivities," *New York Times*, November 17, 1869, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

27. Said, 101.

28. Bergeron, 151.

29. Salwa El-Shawan, "Western Music and Its Practitioners in Egypt (ca. 1825–1985): The Integration of a New Musical Tradition in a Changing Environment," *Asian Music* 17, no. 1 (Autumn–Winter 1985), 143, <https://doi.org/10.2307/833746>.

30. Adam Mestyan and Markian Prokopovych, "Power and music in Cairo: Azbakiyya," *Urban History* 40, no. 4, (November 2013), 687–688, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926813000229>.

Ismail also had reasons to choose Verdi out of the many Italian opera composers living and working at the time. Unlike most others, Verdi had a penchant for writing operas seen as inherently political, a style of writing that would have appealed to a leader seeking to promote his country on both the cultural and geopolitical stages. One of Verdi's earliest operatic successes, *Nabucco*, tells the history of the Jewish people under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and includes a chorus of exiled Hebrew slaves. Many have argued that the Italian audience living under a foreign Austrian government at the premiere in 1842 sympathized with the characters and the emotional setting of the text.³¹ Four years later, another deeply political opera, *Attila*, premiered. The story of the violent king of the Huns, it describes Attila's invasion of Italy and its successful repulsion. After opening to mixed reviews, it soon came to be considered one of the most patriotic of all Italian operas, immortalizing those who fought for Italian independence.³² With *Les vêpres siciliennes*, written in 1855, Verdi again returned to the idea of Italy under invasion, this time by the hostile French.³³ After these three successful operas, Verdi strayed from his earlier consistent theme (Italy vs. an invader) and shifted towards religious intrigue in the most relevant opera to the *Aida* project, *Don Carlos*, which was completed in 1867.

Even while primarily religious, *Don Carlos* touches on many significant political issues. The opera is a French-language adaptation (although it is more commonly performed in its Italian translation as *Don Carlo*) of an earlier play of the same name by Friedrich Schiller, set during the reign of King Phillip II of Spain. However, *Don Carlos* was coolly received by the French press after its premiere in 1867, with most reviewers finding that it suffered from a flawed libretto.³⁴ Verdi, stunned at the disastrous opening, claimed he would never again allow his works to be performed at the Parisian Opéra, which had premiered the piece.³⁵ The Inquisition and auto-da-fé are both shown in a negative light, which left Verdi open to accusations of anti-Catholic sentiment.³⁶ *Don Carlos* had mixed results overseas and remained far from a clear-cut success. The *Times of London* wrote of its English premiere at the Royal Opera House, "Verdi has long been unrivalled; but in *Don Carlos* . . . he has simply coped with a giant, and honourably succumbed."³⁷ Verdi later angrily wrote to a French music critic about the "bad performance[s]" at opera houses in Bordeaux, Brussels, and Darmstadt.³⁸ Even if Ismail had not heard of the politics of Verdi's earlier operas, word of *Don Carlos* would have undoubtedly made it to Egypt and Ismail may have been intrigued to find politics and culture mixing in unexpected ways across Europe. Seen in this

31. See, for example, Charles Osborne, *Verdi: A Life in the Theatre* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 28.

32. Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Vol. 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 248.

33. Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Vol. 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 172.

34. Francis Toye, *Giuseppe Verdi: His Life and Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), 138.

35. Pierre Petit, *Verdi*, trans. Pierre Petit (London: John Calder, 1962), 130.

36. Elsa Bienenfeld and Theodore Baker, "Verdi and Schiller," *The Musical Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (April 1931), 207, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/738421>.

37. 'Royal Italian Opera,' *Times* (London) April 6, 1868, The Times Digital Archive.

38. Franz Werfel and Paul Stefan, ed. *Verdi: The Man in his Letters* (New York: L.B. Fischer, 1942), 255.

light, Ismail's preference toward Verdi demonstrates his unique political agenda. Additionally, the Khedive may have also believed that Verdi would be desperate to put *Don Carlos* behind him and may have been more likely to accept a smaller fee in exchange for his services.

Indeed, as the sun bore down on Italy in the summer of 1868, Giuseppe Verdi could be excused for thinking that his career had peaked. His operas had been performed around the world, he had been featured at every major city in Europe, and there was a good case to be made that he was the most famous living composer. All of this meant, of course, that he was fabulously rich. Verdi spent most of his time in the following decades at the Villa Verdi, his palatial estate in St. Agata in the north.³⁹ From there, Verdi wrote many letters, pondered ways to revise earlier works, and ran a small farming operation in the surrounding countryside. By all accounts, it was a peaceful existence.

This is not to say that Verdi's life was mostly composed of triumphs. His last magnificent blockbuster was almost a decade earlier with *Un ballo in maschera* (premiered in Rome in 1859), and the contentious failure of *Don Carlos* was still fresh on his mind. Verdi was understandably afraid of jumping into another new project and took several months to relax and enjoy life in a rural setting. He turned down an operatic commission from St. Petersburg and insisted that he would never again work at La Scala, the most important opera house in Italy.⁴⁰ When the Italian translation of *Don Carlos* was performed at La Scala, the venerable theatre had changed the names of some characters at the behest of the Catholic Church, and Verdi felt the theatre was partially at fault for the bad reviews and took the alterations personally.

It was in this context that Verdi, at the beginning of August, received a letter from Paul Draneht (1815–1894), the director of the Cairo Theatre, writing on the Khedive's behalf to request Verdi's compositional talents for the Suez Canal opening ceremony. Verdi replied tersely a few days later, "Although I deeply appreciate that you . . . wanted to give me the honor of writing a hymn to mark the date of the opening, I regret that I must decline this honor, because of the number of my current activities and because it is not my custom to compose occasional pieces."⁴¹ These were excuses and not strictly true. Verdi was completely finished with *Don Carlos* and thus was between major projects. A planned requiem in honor of Rossini that would include movements from several Italian composers had captured Verdi's imagination for some time, but that plan had quickly fizzled out for a number of reasons, including Verdi's reputation as anticlerical after the *Don Carlos* imbroglio.⁴² And although he was certainly more comfortable composing operas, Verdi did write some smaller, "occasional" pieces, including a patriotic Italian hymn in 1848 and a *Hymn of nations* written for the 1862 International

39. In 1856, Verdi had bought a sizeable estate, known then as Piantadoro, near Sant'Agata in the region of Campania. The villa and surrounding farms, purchased for the large price of 300,000 francs, made Verdi one of the most sizeable landholders in the area. Phillips-Matz, 348.

40. *Ibid.*, 552.

41. Busch, 3.

42. David Rosen, *Verdi: Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

Exhibition in London. Verdi's hidden excuse, not included in his response to the Khedive, was that the political nature of the controversy over *Don Carlos* meant that he was nervous about jumping into a new work that was inherently political, as the commission in honor of the canal would certainly have been.

When Verdi refused to compose for the canal opening, the Khedive turned to one of his employees, Temistocle Solera, to write the piece, entitled *Hymn for the Celebrations at Ismailia*. Solera had a curious past. He had run away as a young man to join the circus, led a police force in Italy, owned an antique dealership, and supposedly had a love affair with the Queen of Spain.⁴³ Solera was also deeply involved with the theatre business, managing opera houses and writing libretti, including for Verdi himself. Indeed, Solera was Verdi's first librettist, but while working on *Attila*, Solera abandoned the project halfway through for a theatre management job in Spain, rupturing his relationship with the composer and causing mutual dislike for years to come.⁴⁴ Eventually, Solera parlayed his former work with the Italian police into a position with the Egyptian government. He became a member of the Khedive's personal security force and eventually organizer and director for the celebration of the opening of the Suez Canal, the perfect launching pad to put himself forward after Verdi's refusal.⁴⁵ The Khedive's choice of Solera to write the hymn demonstrates both his commitment to Italian music as well as to Verdi, especially as Ismail almost certainly knew of Solera's connections with Verdi but not necessarily of the rupture in their friendship.

The Opera: *Aida*

But the Khedive was not to be dissuaded. Even if Verdi would not write for the opening of the canal, perhaps the composer might write an opera to celebrate the building of the Khedivial Opera House, which Verdi would have seen as a much less outwardly politicized proposal. Draneht thus approached Verdi again. Ismail's second commission invitation, a few years later, came at a perfect time. Verdi had just secured a triumph with *La forza del destino* in 1862. He had gotten past his pique with La Scala and agreed to work with the opera house again. After the revised Milan opening, Verdi wrote to a close friend, politician Giuseppe Piroli, that it was "excellent" and the orchestra and chorus performed "divinely."⁴⁶ He was so pleased that he even hosted a dinner for the chorus and stagehands, usually the forgotten members of any production, at a trattoria afterwards.⁴⁷ Verdi would have left Milan that evening feeling fully refreshed and ready to work again.

Receiving a commission for an opera—rather than an occasional piece—would have had greater appeal for Verdi as well. A story eases along the

43. McCants, 10.

44. William Weaver, "Verdi and His Librettists," in *The Verdi Companion*, eds. William Weaver and Martin Chusid (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 128.

45. Phillips-Matz, 571

46. Charles Osborne, ed. *Letters of Giuseppe Verdi* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 145.

47. Phillips-Matz, 557.

composer's writing process and, although Verdi had never visited Egypt, the insight of someone who had in the words of the work would have been invaluable. Instead of starting with nothing, as he would have done if he had accepted the canal commission, Verdi was beginning with both a plot and his formidable operatic expertise.

There were several other mitigating factors for Verdi's change of heart. He had made clear that he was upset with the size of the honorarium for the canal commission. He asked his friend and former student Emanuele Muzio, the conductor-in-residence at the newly-constructed Cairo Opera House, to "let the Egyptian authorities know how unsatisfactory their offer had been."⁴⁸ This second proposition, though, came with *carte blanche* in terms of salary and production, a sign of Ismail's desire to secure Verdi's involvement. Camille Du Locle (1832–1903), the director of the Opera-Comique in Paris and another friend of Verdi's, was drafted to act as a go-between for Verdi and the Egyptians. Du Locle had helped with the libretto for *Don Carlos* and was anxious to see Verdi composing again. He assured Verdi on May 26 that his "conditions will be accepted no matter what," and Verdi should just "say what [he] want[s] done and the sum [he] want[s] to receive."⁴⁹ A few days earlier, Du Locle had written that if Verdi were to "ask for one of" the Great Pyramids of Giza "as a bonus (the biggest, of course) they may be inclined to give it to [him]."⁵⁰ With flattering terms like that, Verdi found it impossible to turn down the commission.

The Egyptians appealed to Verdi's ego in another way. Mariette wrote to Du Locle from Alexandria on the 19th of May that, "if Verdi cannot do it, get M. Gounod; if necessary, see Wagner."⁵¹ Charles Gounod, a French composer who had already penned two notable operas, *Faust* and *Roméo and Juliette*, was in some ways the French version of Verdi: successful, wealthy, and well-regarded. Richard Wagner was the only contemporary composer to challenge Verdi's operatic preeminence seriously. He was then in the midst of completing the final alterations to the last part of his famous ring cycle, *Götterdämmerung*, and it is difficult to imagine Wagner as a third choice for any opera commission. This hierarchy of composers was communicated only in letters between intermediaries, but since Verdi had frequent visitors to his estate, some of whom were involved with the project from the earliest stages, it is unlikely that it was never mentioned to the composer. Regardless, his placement above Wagner and Gounod shows the Khedive's immense regard for Verdi's music.

However, the origin of the operatic plot gave Verdi reason to pause. Du Locle told him on the 29th of May that "The Egyptian libretto is the work of the Viceroy and Mariette Bey, the famous archaeologist. None else has put a hand to

48. Ibid., 570.

49. Busch, 16. Emphasis in the original.

50. Ibid., 15.

51. Ibid., 16.

it.”⁵² It is difficult to say exactly what Du Locle is intimating here. No libretto had been completed; the text was still only a rough outline. More importantly, though, most scholars agree that the Khedive and the archeologist had little to do with the actual writing process.⁵³ Verdi himself had his doubts, expressed in a letter a month later to his publisher, Giulio Ricordi.⁵⁴ He stated that Du Locle sent him “a printed outline, telling me that it was written by an influential person (which I do not believe).”⁵⁵ However, the Khedive likely had veto power over the outline and, as Du Locle thought it was believable that Ismail would assist in the writing stage, it is clear that Ismail was intensely interested in cultural programming and ready to see the opera succeed. That in itself may have been encouraging to Verdi.

The original outline is lost, but it probably closely followed the story of the finished opera. Mariette is generally seen as coming up with the narrative, although several others have maintained that it was theirs instead. The Khedive is not the only name mentioned, as Solera and Mariette’s brother Édouard both at times claimed authorship.⁵⁶ There is no doubt, however, that the finished libretto was the work of Verdi’s eventual librettist, Antonio Ghislanzoni (1824–1893). The outline, when it arrived in Verdi’s hands in early 1870, already bore the title *Aida*. Mariette explained to Du Locle in April that “*Aida* is an Egyptian name. Normally it would be *Aita*. But that name would be too harsh, and the singers would irresistibly soften it to *Aida*.”⁵⁷ *Aida* was a common enough ancient Egyptian name, but some historians have tried to find alternate origins. Classicist Jon Solomon argues that Mariette read the name on the newly discovered Rosetta Stone, where it appears twice.⁵⁸ Mariette’s work as an Egyptologist made him perfect for the job of writing the outline and provides support for Solomon’s argument, as he may well have used the Rosetta Stone to search for an accurate ancient female name.

Mariette also used his knowledge of the nascent world of Egyptology to fill out the plot. Egyptologist Thomas Schneider believes that Mariette was deeply influenced in the project by the recent discovery of several commemorative columns in ancient Nubia. Known as the Gebel Barkal stelae, they were unearthed by an English army officer stationed in modern-day Sudan in 1862.⁵⁹ They detail the historical background of *Aida*, including the war between Egypt and Nubia,

52. Ibid., 17.

53. Phillips-Matz, 577.

54. The Ricordi firm has a long history in Italy and Verdi had worked with both Giulio and Giulio’s father, Tito, on works before. In fact, Ricordi’s first major “hit” was Verdi’s early opera *Oberto* (premiered in 1839), and Verdi had remained on friendly terms with the Ricordi family since then. See Richard Macnutt, “The House of Ricordi,” *The Musical Times* 120, no. 1632 (February 1979), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/963932>.

55. Busch, 27.

56. Jon Solomon, “Aida, Aetos, and the Rosetta Stone,” *Acta Musicologica* 85, no. 2 (2013), 187, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24595503>.

57. Busch, 12.

58. Solomon, 193. Solomon also quotes John Wilson, who wrote that *Aida* was the name of one of Ismail’s concubines, but Solomon admits that this is, in effect, an unsubstantiated legend.

59. Thomas Schneider, “The Gebel Barkal Stelae and the Discovery of Ancient Nubia: Auguste Mariette’s Inspiration for *Aida*,” *Near Eastern Archeology* 78, no. 1 (March 2015), 45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5615/neareastarch.78.1.0044>.

the conquering of Thebes, and the resounding victory of Egyptian troops.⁶⁰ It was enough, then, for Mariette to insert a love story with some palace intrigue, and the outline was prepared. After all, what better way to follow through with the Khedive's plans of displaying ancient Egyptian history to the world than utilizing newly discovered primary sources?

After reading the outline and considering his options, Verdi was convinced. On the 2nd of June, Verdi wrote Du Locle with his final stipulations for the deal. There seems to have been no debate about the title. It is a short letter:

1. I shall have the libretto done at my expense
2. I shall send someone to Cairo, also at my expense, to conduct and direct the opera.
3. I shall send a copy of the score and the music for use only in the Kingdom of Egypt, retaining for myself the rights to the libretto and to the music in all other parts of the world.

In compensation, I shall be paid the sum of 150,000 francs, payable at the Rothschild Bank in Paris at the moment the score is delivered.⁶¹

Verdi would specifically request that Ghislanzoni, who had worked with him on earlier libretto projects, complete the *Aida* libretto.⁶² Understandably cautious after the *Don Carlos* debacle, Verdi also wanted a friend in charge on the ground in Cairo to make certain that higher forces did not meddle there as they had at La Scala. This ally was conductor and fellow composer Giovanni Bottesini, who remained in contact with Verdi throughout the project.⁶³ Only a few days later, Du Locle's wire informed Verdi that the offer was accepted. The Khedive's only condition was that *Aida* must be finished by the end of January.⁶⁴

Verdi was still somewhat nervous about a project set in Egypt. Ricordi soothed his fears. "I shall find out all you want to know about the various historical facts and shall write to you about them," he promised the composer.⁶⁵ Verdi also consulted the work of François-Joseph Fétis, a Belgian musicologist who "had been the first European to attempt a study of non-European music as a separate part of the general history of music."⁶⁶ Verdi's concerns remained, as evident in a letter to his friend Giuseppe Pirolì: "I am busy. Guess! . . . Writing an opera for Cairo!!! Oof. I shall not go to stage it because I would be afraid of being mummified."⁶⁷ Some scholars have made much of this quote, arguing that it shows an antipathy toward Egypt at best, and outright racism at worst. But Verdi's

60. Ibid., 50.

61. Busch, 19. Emphasis in the original.

62. Philip Gossett, "Verdi, Ghislanzoni, and 'Aida': The Uses of Convention," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (December 1974), 294, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1342787>.

63. Janclaire Elliott, "The Orchestras for the Cairo and Milan Premieres of *Aida*," *The Opera Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (October 2001), 655, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/17.4.647>.

64. Busch, 23.

65. Ibid., 30.

66. Said, 93.

67. Busch, 34.

sense of humor is apparent throughout his letters. If “mummified” represents an ill-advised pun on “Egyptianized,” the letter may show Verdi aware that he would have to see through both European and Egyptian lenses to complete the opera, largely due to Khedive’s strong-willed leadership. Also, at a basic level, it is clear that Verdi knew he had extended himself, writing on a topic he knew little about and was nervous about how it would be received by the audience in—and the leadership of—Egypt.

Meanwhile, Ismail was working hard behind the scenes to make sure the opera would be a triumph. Mariette wrote to Du Locle that the Khedive referred often to *Aida* as “his opera” and was considering involving the French emperor in the project.⁶⁸ The Palais Garnier, the grand home for opera in Paris, was being built right in the middle of the city. Ismail, likely remembering his success at the *Exposition universelle*, was hoping that the emperor would perform *Aida* at the opening of the Garnier. He also later sent Mariette to Paris with precise instructions, as Mariette described it in a letter to Draneht: “The Viceroy wants the opera to retain its strictly Egyptian color, not only in the libretto, but in the costumes and the sets; and I am here to attend to this essential point.”⁶⁹ He wrote a few weeks later that Draneht should supply Verdi and Ghislanzoni “with all the proper information to enlighten them about the local color to be given to the work.”⁷⁰ Perhaps Verdi’s nervousness had been communicated to Egypt; regardless, Mariette remained in Paris throughout the pre-production phase of *Aida*, in close contact with both the composer and the Egyptian authorities.

The Performance: *Aida* in Egypt

Mariette loathed his new job. The Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) broke out as the French government declared war in July of 1870, changing the face of his homeland. Draneht, who was visiting Mariette in Paris when the war began, wrote the Khedive’s private secretary that the “majority of the French theatrical personnel” employed to create the sets and costumes had been drafted into the military.⁷¹ Work was stalled, and Mariette was forced to wait out the war. Things only got worse, as the Prussian army rapidly advanced through France and approached Paris. After arriving at the capital city, the Prussians set up a long siege, forcing the French to use the still-unfinished Palais Garnier as a storage house for food and supplies.⁷² It was difficult to get letters past the Prussian blockade, but Verdi wrote to Ricordi that he received a note sent originally by balloon from Mariette and Du Locle. It read that “All work on *Aida* has been suspended because there aren’t enough workmen” and that there was only one thing to do in Paris at the time: “stand guard.”⁷³

68. *Ibid.*, 20. Emphasis in original.

69. *Ibid.*, 33.

70. *Ibid.*, 35.

71. *Ibid.*, 47.

72. Delphine Mordey, “‘Dans le palais du son, on fait de la farine’: Performing at the Opéra During the 1870 Siege of Paris,” *Music & Letters* 93, no. 1 (February 2012), 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41418808>.

73. Busch, 110.

In the meantime, Verdi kept writing. He and Ghislanzoni traded words and music and Verdi sent detailed critiques and addendums. Verdi was composing at record pace, often updating Ghislanzoni on his progress over three times a week from August to December.⁷⁴ He was determined to keep his half of his agreement with the Khedive, no matter what happened elsewhere in the world. The date for the Khedivial Opera House opening had already been set, and the finances had gone through. But with the situation in France, Ismail and his civil servants were understandably worried about not being able to perform the opera in time. Verdi wrote angrily to Du Locle in early December in a letter with almost every word underlined: “I have fulfilled the conditions of my contract, fulfill yours. If the scenery and costumes are in Paris, that does not concern me.”⁷⁵ Verdi was concerned mostly that he would not be paid for the work that had so consumed him. However, if a performance in Cairo would not happen at all, Verdi felt that he might still be able to insert the opera into the schedule of another opera company.

Eventually, though, with the Prussian siege of Paris still holding strong as 1871 arrived, Verdi admitted that he saw “the impossibility of giving *Aida* in Cairo in the course of this season” and hoped everyone involved would “take measures so that the opera can be given next season.”⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the Khedivial Opera House, one of the grand projects included in the ongoing Cairo renovation, was completed. Ismail decided that, if not *Aida*, he would go for the second-best option—*Rigoletto*.

On opening night, over a thousand guests were invited for this popular Verdi opera, which had made its premiere over a decade earlier.⁷⁷ It was a smart move. The Khedive simultaneously whetted the audience’s appetite for a new Verdi commission while proving to the composer that he was serious about showing *Aida* in Cairo. Meanwhile, the opera house itself was a testament to Ismail’s cultural vision. Cairo, in its new “Hausmannized” plan, was now laid out in a defined, Europeanized pattern, with the opera house in an important position. A contemporary British travel guide described the avenue on which the Khedivial Opera House was built as travelling all the way “from the purely European Ismailiya quarter to the mediæval Arab city.”⁷⁸ It was a significant location, near the larger, modern Azbakeya district and right on the dividing line between the old Arab neighborhoods of Cairo and the new construction zone, just as *Aida* encapsulated the Khedive’s wish to preserve the ancient and embrace the modern.

The inside of the Khedivial Opera House was opulent. The *New York Times* sent its Egyptian correspondent to the opening ceremony. The reporter was enamored of the marble columns, glass chandeliers, and spacious boxes. He admired the golden busts of classical composers and noted that Verdi featured prominently alongside other Italian opera composers (as well as Mozart and

74. Gossett, 298.

75. Busch, 112.

76. *Ibid.*, 135.

77. Zachary Karabell. *Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 252.

78. Douglas Sladen, *Oriental Cairo: The City of the “Arabian Nights”* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1911), 62.

Beethoven). It is impossible to know whether the bust of Verdi was imagined before or after the composer accepted the commission, but in either case, Ismail was showing that the opera composed specially for him was by one of the greatest of classical composers. The main stage curtain displayed:

the great temple of Karnak, surrounded by the Pyramids, the Sphinx, an obelisk and a ruin or two. Upon the steps of the temple are grouped the Muses; at the right are emblematic figures of the Nile and of the productive powers of Egypt, while at the left a group of girls in modern costume are clustered about a telegraph machine.⁷⁹

It was a perfect exhibition of Ismail's dual goals of highlighting traditional Egyptian culture while pushing forward rapid modernization. The imagery of the Pyramids and the Sphinx juxtaposed against the Nile and a device of modern communication would have been unmistakable.

Similarly, the Khedivial Opera House included one significant traditional element amongst the Europeanized surroundings. As historian Adam Mestyan has noted, it housed a traditional "harem box," enclosed with lace to hide the Khedive and his entourage watching the performance.⁸⁰ There is a strong sense of candor with which the theatre displayed Ismail's idea of a modern Egypt—a mix of European high culture with historical Egyptian elements—likely since there were many foreign dignitaries in the audience. The Khedive probably had some say in the curtain design and certainly requested the inclusion of the harem box, so the opera house shows off his goals with remarkable clarity. Even though a gas pipe explosion during the second performance threatened to derail the evening, *Rigoletto* was received well and future productions of *Aida* were secured.⁸¹

It is easy to see how the opera, when it was finally premiered in Egypt in December 1871, fit into these luxurious and politicized surroundings. Ismail, demonstrating once again the political nature of the work, ensured that the premiere was an invitation-only affair.⁸² He sent a telegram to Verdi reporting that *Aida* was a "triumphant success" with "total fanaticism" and an "enthusiastic audience," not wholly a surprise with the carefully chosen audience.⁸³ Verdi recognized the role of Ismail in the preparation of the opera, writing to Draneht that he was "happy about the success of *Aida*, not only for myself but above all for H.H. [His Highness, Ismail]" and that he was cognizant of "his generous sacrifices for the art of music."⁸⁴ Perhaps in honor of Verdi, Draneht programmed a strictly Italian

79. "Letters from Abroad: Fourth Letter from our Suez Canal Correspondent," *New York Times*, December 4, 1869, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

80. Adam Mestyan, *Arab Patriotism: The Ideology and Culture of Power in Late Ottoman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 96.

81. *Ibid.*

82. This angered Verdi, who would have preferred a mixed audience. As he wrote to Ricordi a few days before the premiere, "What pleasure for an artist to study so much and work so hard in order to be applauded as if at a private concert. What a joke! And to think that I am part, and a victim, of it!!" Busch, 267.

83. Verdi quoted the telegram from Ismail in a letter to Ricordi on December 26. *Ibid.*, 268.

84. *Ibid.*, 270.

repertoire for the rest of his tenure as director of the Khedivial Opera House.⁸⁵ Draneht clearly agreed with Ismail about the political uses of music, telling a journalist from the Arab newspaper *Al-Jawaib* that the opera house provided “the relaxing side of civilization.”⁸⁶ And *Aida* continued to echo throughout Khedivial Egypt, with, as Edward Said has noted, a march from the opera repurposed to serve as the national anthem, demonstrating Ismail’s goals of Europeanization again and again.⁸⁷

Eventually, though, an overreliance on borrowing from European bankers and the changing fortunes of the once-lucrative cotton trade decimated the Egyptian economy. In 1879, the British pressured the Ottoman sultan to remove the Khedive and, three years later, Egypt came under British occupation. Ismail was attacked in contemporary British publications as a ruler of “base selfishness”⁸⁸ whose extravagant reign was “the direct cause of wide-spread misery, injustice, cruelty, and corruption.”⁸⁹ Most of his cultural innovations fell quickly into disrepair without his strong advocacy to protect them. In 1916, a European travel writer reported that at the opera house, “performances are only occasional for the [government’s] subsidy, it need not be said, is trifling compared with what it was in Ismail’s time.”⁹⁰ As Egyptian scholar Amira El-Azhary Sonbol explains, the high cost of tickets meant that the opera was prohibitively expensive for average Egyptians, so that, when the building burnt down in the 1970s, only the “cultured” lamented the loss.⁹¹ Currently, the site is occupied by a multi-story garage while a statue of Ismail’s father, Ibrahim Pasha, stands as the only remaining sign of the area’s former glory.⁹²

The Legacy: *Aida* and Egypt

Ismail’s legacy is conflicted. On one hand, he spurred major growth in various industries and prioritized complex and prominent construction projects. His impact on Egypt also extended far into cultural heritage. Commissioning *Aida* was merely one of a series of ventures designed to westernize Egypt. His focus on ancient history helped catalyze a period of far-reaching fascination with Egypt and its history. In order to complete these massive tasks, however, Ismail deeply indebted the country to European powers, so much so that he was eventually forced to hand over power to the British.

Now, well over a century later, it would be hard to imagine Abdel

85. Mestyan and Prokopovych, 699.

86. *Al-Jawaib*, 12 Apr. 1871, 2, as translated in P.C. Sadgrove, *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century: 1799–1882* (Reading, Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1996), 61–62.

87. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 125.

88. Blanchard Jerrold, ed. *Egypt under Ismail Pacha: Being Some chapters of Contemporary History* (London: Samuel Tinsley & Co., 1879), 28.

89. Walter Miéville, *Under Queen and Khedive: The Autobiography of an Anglo-Egyptian Official* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), 9.

90. Eustace Reynolds-Ball, *Cairo of To-day: A Practical Guide to Cairo and the Nile* (London: A&C Black, 1916), 39.

91. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, *The New Mamluks: Egyptian Society and Modern Feudalism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 87.

92. Scham, 318.

Fattah el-Sisi commissioning an opera from a European classical composer to commemorate the creation of another vision of a new Egypt. But for Ismail Pasha, it was a logical means of completing his twin goals of cultural modernization: highlighting ancient history and simultaneously incorporating European culture. Verdi's *Aida*, a European opera in Italian about ancient Egypt, perfectly encapsulated his objectives. *Aida* allowed Ismail to appear more cosmopolitan as well as provide an image of Egypt more approachable for Europeans. Only by understanding the prehistory of *Aida* and its connections to other Egyptian geopolitical events does its relevance to Ismail's broader scheme become clear. The finished musical product may be Orientalist, but like that of the Suez Canal, the continued success of *Aida* is a testament to Ismail's vision. The latter, of course, with a great deal of help from Giuseppe Verdi.

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