

The New Criterion

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Nile & Euphrates by the Adige

by Eric C. Simpson



Aida at the Arena di Verona. Photo: Fondazione Arena di Verona.

Aida is all about spectacle, and in Verona's first-century Roman amphitheater, it has a special resonance, a meeting between two ancient civilizations. The production I saw a week ago is another Franco Zeffirelli number, but it doesn't quite go for the hyper-"realism" of the director's other work; it's a little stylized, for good and for ill. The pyramid that dominates the middle of the stage isn't made of mock-stone blocks, but rather of metallic rods suspended horizontally, combining in an attractive whole whose top half rotates niftily to suggest different settings. The bird costumes worn by the priests, meanwhile, border on camp.

María José Siri seemed to be doing fine in the title role, even floating some impressive pianissimos at the end of her first extended scene, "Ritorna vincitor." And then, before Act III, it was announced she had experienced a "sudden indisposition" and would be unable to continue. Rebeka Lokar, starring in the run of *Nabucco*, came on to finish it off, and what a moment to step in: right before "O patria mia," the role's biggest aria. It's not quite fair to give a minute critique under the circumstances, but Lokar sang admirably, all things considered.

Radamès, the victorious Egyptian commander who betrays his own troops for Aida's love, is a notoriously tough part that requires the tenor to sing a high-lying, full-throated paean, "Celeste

Aida,” just minutes after walking onstage in the first scene, and demanding the same level of vocal firepower until the final curtain. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever heard a satisfying performance of the role; it eats tenors alive. Carlo Ventre could sing all the notes, which isn’t nothing, but his voice was entirely colorless. He was almost upstaged by Rafał Siwek, who brought a huge barrel of a voice as the high priest Ramfis.

Carmen Topciu showed a mezzo-soprano of warm, dark color, with a bit of a rough grain. Her most devastating moment, though, was not any of her scenes of burning rage, but her quiet prayer in the closing trio, whispering “pace t’imploro” as the couple sang their final duet in the tomb below. Ambrogio Maestri, no surprise, was a wonder, with commanding weight in his voice as Amonasro, the vanquished king of the Ethiopians.

Daniel Oren, who led last Thursday’s *Turandot*, returned to conduct *Aida*, and he held nothing back, going for size and force over nuance. The brass, alas, picked the worst possible time to lose their pitch: one of the trumpets was flat for almost the entire triumphal march.

Let me say something a little heretical before we move on from Egypt: of all of Verdi’s major operas, I find *Aida* the least compelling. A mature work, it of course demonstrates Verdi’s gifts for characterization and choral writing, but in cleaving to the grandeur of its scenario the score can feel awfully pageantlike. Some of the most striking music in the entire opera comes from a character who is never even seen, when the offstage priestess in the second scene of Act I sings her invocation, “Possente, possente Ftha,” which wafts in from the wings with hair-raising fervor. Here, Verdi gets a little more adventurous, reaching for an unusual tonality to color the scene. The result is hypnotic.



Nabucco at the Arena di Verona. Photo: Fondazione Arena di Verona.

Verdi is of course celebrated around the world as one of the all-time greats of opera, but his connection with the Italian unification movement is an important part of his legend, as well. “viva verdi,” honoring both the composer and Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia, became a popular slogan of the Risorgimento. Indeed, patriotic sentiment is evident in a number of his operas, notably *Les vêpres siciliennes* (now usually performed in Italian as *I vespri siciliani*). Some music historians have suggested that some of these works are, in fact, allegorical.

With few exceptions, making an allegory explicit has never struck me as a particularly imaginative interpretive act, though the *Nabucco* presented on Saturday night at the Arena di Verona was at least entertaining in the attempt. The director Arnaud Bernard recasts the Hebrews as Italian patriots and the Babylonians as the oppressors of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The “sacred temple” is a baroque palazzo that’s taken a direct hit or three to its top floor from artillery fire.

The columns of mounted dragoons trotting past, the bright uniforms of the Hungarian fusiliers, the jägers creeping through the debris, all make for an impressive display, if not exactly a coherent one. Drawing on the legendary status of the “Va, pensiero” chorus as a sort of anthem of the Risorgimento, Bernard reimagines the scene as a performance at an opera house, with the choristers singing along from the balconies as the Imperial staff officers down on the floor try to hush them. It’s a clever idea, but it requires the audience to entertain the bizarre notion of the Italians being forced to put on an opera about the Exodus as some form of punishment. Nor is it clear why Nabucco, here an ersatz Franz Joseph I, converts suddenly to Italian nationalism. The tricky thing about allegory, it turns out, is that even if it is about something else, the frame stops making sense once you strip away the details.

Luca Salsi’s performance as Nabucco was a marvel, his baritone robust and consistent, capable of bellowing with enormous power. His presence dominated the stage whenever he entered, so that his pronouncements of his own divinity were truly terrifying. His domineering portrayal underscored his eventual collapse, as he pleaded pitifully for his daughter’s mercy in “Deh, perdona.”

Having sung half an *Aida* the night before, Rebka Lokar returned as Abigaille, dressed in a flashy hussar’s uniform. In spite of a slight wobble, she had all the technical fireworks necessary for the role, delivering a bracing account of “Salgo già del trono aurato” in the first scene of Act II. The orchestra supported with sonorous playing, led by Jordi Benàcer, who took a more toned-down

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approach than Oren had in either of his performances.

As Zaccaria, Riccardo Zanellato's baritone sounded a little weary when he tried to push it, but in more intimate moments, such as the lovely Act II aria "Tu sul labbro de' veggenti," he showed a rich, warm color. Vincenzo Costanzo impressed with his bright, ringing tenor as Ismaele, and Géraldine Chauvet was an ideal Fenena, her cool lyric mezzo perfectly suited to the role.

At both of these performances I was reminded of a Fred Buscaglione number: "Guarda che luna!" At last week's *Turandot*, as previously reported, the moon rose over the rear wall of the Arena just as the chorus was pleading with it to do exactly that. Friday's *Aida* featured a blood-red total eclipse that lasted from the first curtain until the end of Act III. And on Saturday, the full moon appeared in all its glory at the precise moment that Nabucco was struck senseless by divine wrath. It was as if they had it under contract.

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