Verdi's Aida: The Music

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Scottish Opera

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John Mauceri

What is it that holds an opera together structurally? Surely it is more than its mise-en-scene, its characters and its musical motives. In Verdi one finds a composer who wrote both quickly and fluently, but who hardly made use of the complex motif-system developed by Wagner or the key relationships of Mozart. Is there something beyond the inherent structure of his well-crafted librettos that served as an underpinning for his composition?

During the 1985 season, when conducting Rigoletto for the first time, we were fortunate enough to make use of the newly-published critical edition, edited by Martin Chusid. Besides the obvious interest in corrected dynamics, phrasing and text, the overriding discovery was the support of Verdi's tempo indications. Professor Chusid pointed out that Verdi included metronome markings for his operas from La battaglia di Legnano to Falstaff and provided them for Attila and Macbeth of the earlier works as well. These metronome indications were always preceded by a subjective tempo indication, like Allegro moderato or Largo, but the precise speed of these subjective "feelings" was always given in parentheses (\( \frac{\text{d}}{\text{s}} = 100 \) or \( \frac{\text{d}}{\text{s}} = 63 \)). This is particularly interesting because it is so very specific (Wagner, for example, does not use metronome markings in any of his mature works). What makes the issue so troublesome for the conductor of today is that these tempos have very little to do with current international expectations. We have many letters from Verdi asking if the tempos were right at a performance of one of his operas which he did not attend. The metronome indications are generally consistent among the sources, and yet few seem to have observed them during the past half century.

Are Verdi's tempo indications so important? In pursuing the issue regarding Rigoletto the conclusion that Verdi used tempo as a structural element in his operas became apparent. In an extensive article I wrote for Opera Magazine one can see how certain speeds became the unique heartbeat of the opera. For example, the opening pulse of the prelude to Act One (\( \frac{\text{d}}{\text{s}} = 63 \)) is the same as the opening to the second scene of Act One, the opening cantabile of

*This article is reprinted from a program of the Scottish Opera for Aida, dating from 1987. Mr. Mauceri, who conducted the Aida performances, is Musical Director of the Scottish Opera and a member of the advisory board of AIVS.
Act Two, the opening prelude to Act Three, as well as the tempo of its major ensemble("Bella figlia dell'amore") and the final duet between Gilda and her father. This single example of structural tempos is made all the more fascinating since our twentieth century traditions lead us to expect different tempos for all this music. Why is this? Does Aida support the idea of temporal structures and do the Aida metronome markings work?

The answer to the first question of where our performance expectations of Verdi's music come from seems clear enough. Toscanini is the answer. His authority and influence is still the most powerful of any opera conductor though the maestro has been dead for over thirty years. His influence in the major opera companies of the world continues today in the attitudes and traditions of the very oldest maestri in our greatest opera houses who either worked with Toscanini or his disciples. Toscanini was an anti-nineteenth century performer. In cleaning up the excesses of that century he cleaned away the portamento from orchestral string playing while setting up an expectation of driving intensity at all times in performances which came as an entirely new way of performing music. Tempi were generally quite fast, i.e., faster than indicated in the scores of Verdi, except when they were markedly slower. In developing the most brilliant orchestral playing ever heard, he made the conductor the most important personality in opera performance. Toscanini brought the nineteenth century into the twentieth century by making it sound new and relevant.

But now we are on the verge of another century, and we performers are faced with the overwhelming evidence that string portamenti were expected in the nineteenth century and that tempos had a much greater give and take than we are accustomed to hearing. We also know that Verdi's tempos were generally quite fast, i.e., faster than indicated in the scores of Verdi, except when they were markedly slower. In developing the most brilliant orchestral playing ever heard, he made the conductor the most important personality in opera performance. Toscanini brought the nineteenth century into the twentieth century by making it sound new and relevant.

The question of tempo is a particularly interesting one. Most people consider tempo the personal choice of a conductor or soloist even when the composer clearly requires a specific speed. This license would never be considered acceptable in the realm of pitch, rhythm, or, for the most part, dynamics. Thus a conductor who started Beethoven's Fifth Symphony pianissimo or in a waltz rhythm would not be considered serious, but it is perfectly acceptable to conduct a "slow" or "fast" Fifth.

Even in the field of music theory and analysis, which has spanned the entire period of western music from the Greeks to the present time, very little thought has been given to temporal structures. Most writing deals with pitch (intervalllic and harmonic) structures. This must say something about our music and the way we generally perceive it. After all, our music is rhythmically built on a pulse and fractions of that pulse (in America, like Germany, our nomenclature for a note's duration represents this). Psycho-acoustics is a fairly recent field of study, but it takes little investigation to realize that by changing the overall tempo the human ear and brain hear different things. A slow tempo can actually make the shorter, faster notes clearer and a faster tempo can make the longer musical line more obvious. This apparent contradiction—a fast tempo brings out the "slow" notes and a slow tempo brings out the "fast" notes—is at the heart of the matter of metronome indications, and it is the responsibility of an artist to consider them without peril of giving up his interpretive license. After all, it is still what happens within a tempo that can make the difference.

But the issue of tempo choice becomes even more critical when one is dealing with a composer who made it as much the building blocks of his composition as his melodies and harmonies. This brings us back to Verdi and Aida.

These Scottish Opera performances are based on a reading of Verdi's manuscript as well as other contemporary scores. With Aida we are missing a number of important sources—a new edition is many years off—but we are fortunate in having the score Verdi used for the Paris premiere, from which he actually conducted. In hearing these performances there will be some surprises regarding phrasing, dynamics and articulation. But the most startling
Verdi's *Aida*: The Music

differences from what one has come to expect from *Aida* will be some of the tempos.

Do they function structurally as they do in *Rigoletto*? Yes. For example, the prelude (Andante mosso) moves at 76 beats a minute. It is always associated with this Aida-theme, but it is also the opening of Aida's pivotal act: Act Three, and returns later in that act for the magnificent conclusion of the Aida/Amonasro duet, just after she is thrown to the ground. This music is traditionally taken much slower, but clearly is meant to return our heroine to her unhappy pulse, the one which pervades so much of her music. Another example comes at the end of Act Three. Amonasro, Radames and Aida sing a final trio at 120 beats per minute. Amneris' interruption of six bars is at 144, followed immediately by a pulse of 120 to end the act. When we see Amneris next, at the opening of Act Four, the music continues the speed of her Act Three "Traditor!" at 144. Later, when Radames enters and sings of Aida, the music returns to 120, the speed at which we last saw her. Verdi uses tempos to link scenes and to refer to emotional states, much the way Wagner used thematic motifs to do the same thing.

Modern technology has made it relatively simple to practice Verdi's music at his requested speeds, since pocket metronomes are easily available. The performers have joined me in the journey of discovery, testing each speed and inevitably finding that the score emerges in a wondrous way. New things are heard, fewer breaths are needed for some phrases, more text is singable in another. It is possible to perform *Aida* many other ways and with almost guaranteed success. However, it is time, using all the information given us by the scores and by our colleagues who have spent their lives researching the history of performance practice, to consider the score as the source of our performances rather than an imitation of other performances. Verdi should be allowed to speak directly to our time without the aid of interpretive middlemen. We owe it to him and we owe it to our own time.

I am particularly grateful to the American musicologist and conductor, David Lawton, for making his research on *Aida* available to me. The sources for editorial decisions regarding these performances of *Aida* are on microfilm in the archives of the American Institute for Verdi Studies at New York University. Dr. Martin Chusid, Director of the Institute, has been especially gracious in allowing me access to them.