

RECORDINGS  
IN REVIEW



D E W E Y F A U L K N E R

Cue the elephants, position the marching trumpets, Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* is back in town, or at least back in the recording studio. And the hype machine is marching in with it. After all, this is the first studio recording of the opera in a quarter-century, so we have now today's singers in this great work, not long ago the most popular opera in the repertory, and the latest in digital recording, all packaged in today's favored book format for CDs with libretto, notes, and the three discs in attached sleeves (which makes them a bit difficult to retrieve).

The reviews have been appropriately enthusiastic, if more so about Antonio Pappano's conducting and the playing of his Roman Santa Cecilia Orchestra than about the singing. *Gramophone's* review calls the set "as fine an all-round *Aida* as the gramophone has yet given us," whereas *BBC Music* hedges a bit with "The cast is surely impossible to beat today," true enough, but . . . The French *Diapason* is less restrained: "An ensemble of qualities as impressive as the pyramids of Cairo. We can confirm without hesitation that this is not just an *Aida* for the present, but an *Aida* made to last, at the same level as the benchmark recordings of the past." Hmmm. Perhaps it's more convincing in French.

Before glancing at these benchmark recordings, and a few others, we might consider some of the problems that *Aida* poses and those that it does not. Verdi had firm control over the plot. He wrote it to an original scenario, almost unique for him, in which he had a firm hand. Its commission was from the khedive of Egypt to open the new Cairo Opera house, where it was premiered on 24 December 1871. Verdi was more interested in its European premiere, which occurred on 8 February 1872 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. As expected, it soon became a great success, spectacular but not unmanageably so.

With its “ancient Egypt” plot, *Aida* allowed in elements of French grand opera, particularly the massive closing declaration of war in Act 1, scene 1, the ceremony before the god Phthà in Act 1, scene 2, and the huge triumphal scene in Act 2, scene 2. There are three separate ballets and numerous ensembles, though only three arias. There are sonic effects created by placing the chorus and many extra trumpets at varying distances from the proscenium, even burying them backstage. The orchestral writing is colorful and exotic but often delicate and subtle. And it is relatively short for grand opera: Verdi clearly did not want a repeat of the cuts inflicted upon *Don Carlo* by the Paris Opéra in 1867.

In keeping with the work’s scale, Verdi uses five principal singers. A heavy dramatic soprano in the lead role, the enslaved “Ethiopian” princess Aida; a heavy mezzo-soprano for Pharaoh’s daughter, and Aida’s mistress, Amneris; a moderately powerful tenor for Radamès, the up-and-coming Egyptian warrior; a solid baritone for Amonasro, Aida’s captured father; and a solid bass for high priest Ramfis. It helps to have a first-rate bass for the King (= Pharaoh) as well. In Acts 3 and 4 the singers dominate, especially Amneris in Act 4, scene 1. Verdi’s main casting concerns were for Amonasro, who must be a superb actor, and Amneris, of whom he wrote, “Amneris has a bit of a devil in her, needs a powerful voice, is very emotional and very, very dramatic.” A key element here is power, both for her and the other principals, as Verdi does not hold back, either with his vocal writing or his orchestras and choruses. And finding sufficient power in singers, particularly the soprano and tenor, has been the casting problem for the past quarter-century, though it was not earlier.

Capturing *Aida* for posterity was attempted with acoustic re-

cording horns as early as 1906–7, three of these recordings made at La Scala. The arrival in the 1920s of “electrical” recording, taken down by microphones, enabled producers at last to capture Verdi’s sounds, both massive and delicate, though still only on short disc sides. The long-playing vinyl record introduced in the late 1940s meant that sides could run up to twenty-three minutes, capturing whole scenes of *Aida*. Finally, after 1979, “digital” recording and the 80-minute digital compact disc allowed the entire opera to be set down on two CDs, as a number of recent digital reissues of earlier *Aida* performances have been. Many of these have been carefully remastered and restored to bring out sounds truncated previously, allowing singers and orchestras to sound today more as they did live. Compared to our 2015 newcomer, how successful have these been in capturing *Aida*?

*1928; or, Aida Made Electric*

Both the major companies, His Master’s Voice (HMV) and (Italian) Columbia, went to La Scala late in 1928 to set down the opera, the former under old hand Carlo Sabajno, and the latter under the less established Lorenzo Molajoli. HMV acquired mostly first-tier singers for the higher voices, Columbia mostly lesser luminaries except for the two basses, the magnificent Tancredi Pasero as Ramfis and pre-buffo Salvatore Baccaloni as the King. HMV worked in the theater, while Columbia made do with a dry-sounding secondary hall. Both recordings have been masterfully restored by Ward Marston, the HMV on a deleted Romophone set and the Columbia on a more recent Pristine Audio set (PACO 054; 2 CDs).

One feature of both is a superb *Aida*, both singers possessing large, well-controlled, beautiful voices. Dusolina Giannini from Philadelphia on HMV sails through the part with vocal ease and dramatic conviction; Giannina Arangi-Lombardi on Columbia is more grand and more histrionically generalized. Both would be major *Aidas* today. HMV’s Amneris, Irene Minghini-Cattaneo, is a true (and formidable) mezzo who has power throughout her wide, evenly produced range and knows how to use it. Their Radamès, leading tenor Aureliano Pertile, sings with intelligence, style, and

beautiful, controlled tone; his “Celeste Aida” is considered to be a model interpretation. Were the HMV in more modern sound, it would be among the preferred versions: voices are clearly distinguished, if a bit forward, and Marston brings out the excellences of both orchestra and chorus. To those who don’t care about modern sound, it still is one of the great *Aidas*.

*1937; or, Aida Live, with the Saga of Beniamino Gigli’s Radamès*

New York’s Metropolitan Opera had been broadcasting *Aida* since 1932, but only on 6 February 1937 would a matinee be both recorded and historic at once. This was the debut of the Italian soprano Gina Cigna, come from La Scala to try assuming the mantle of Rosa Ponselle, who would depart the stage shortly. Cigna had a large and beautiful, if not always well controlled, voice and drove the Met audience into a frenzy – clearly audible in Richard Caniell’s fine restoration on Immortal Performances (IPRMS IPCD 1020-3; 3 CDs). Supporting her are Giovanni Martinelli’s elegant Radamès, Bruna Castagna’s lush Amneris, and especially Ezio Pinza, the best sung and acted Ramfis on any *Aida* set. Caniell gives Martinelli’s voice the body that it had in the house, something rarely done, and the tenor’s perfect legato and dramatic intelligence do the rest. This recorded performance, conducted expertly by Ettore Panizza, is the real thing.

Cigna and Martinelli took their roles to Covent Garden in May for the gala Coronation Season. But the big news in *Aidas* that spring was the first assumption of the role of Radamès in Rome on 28 March by Italy’s leading tenor, Beniamino Gigli. Gigli joined the La Scala company for a tour of Germany and sang the young warrior in Berlin, where it was recorded on 22 June – or at least the first three acts were. His Aida there was Cigna, in wonderful form, his Amneris the young and imposing Ebe Stignani, who had been in Cigna’s Covent Garden performances, and his Ramfis the superb Pasero. Most important, the conductor was Victor de Sabata, who achieves a precision of ensemble unique in recorded *Aida* performances until Toscanini’s, as well as a balancing of detail, a delicacy of execution, and a sheer sweep and power that are unmatched. Still, the greatest interest centers on Gigli, for

whose lighter voice the role would appear to be too heavy. Fortunately, in 1937 the tenor retains much of the lightness and color for which he is famed; and there are even a few proto-sobs, especially on “Non e ver!” at the end of Act 3.

The splendid restoration of this performance is also by Richard Caniell (IPRMS IPCD 1034-3; 3 CDs), who has supplied a fourth act primarily from Sir Thomas Beecham’s 1939 Covent Garden recording, also with Gigli and Stignani, with Cigna and Pasero added in imperceptibly. De Sabata’s *Aida*, with or without Beecham’s, is a great interpretation.

Beecham’s 24 May 1939 recording was part of a commercial project to capture the season’s Covent Garden repertory. In the title role it has Maria Caniglia, Cigna’s La Scala rival. Alas, it does not have Pasero’s Ramfis. Even so, this is an important *Aida* and Beecham is very lively and effective in conducting it. It has been less than fortunate in its restorations, apart from Caniell’s work on Act 4; the best is a high-resolution download from Stephan Zucker’s Bel Canto Society, which has some technical problems. This is doubly distressing because Caniglia, Stignani, and Gigli are in fine voice, and the performance overall is also fine.

Such is not the case in the next attempt to record *Aida* commercially, in 1946, in postwar Rome, with most of the La Scala prewar cast Beecham used. Tullio Serafin’s conducting here is ordinary at best and the war years have not been kind to Caniglia and Gigli, although Stignani and Pasero remain in excellent voice. Gigli was this set’s selling point, yet even in 1939 his emphasis had shifted away from lyrical sweetness toward more powerful singing, and that is pretty much all there is by 1946. Most audiences today would welcome the 1946 Gigli as Radamès, but the coarsening of his singing from that of 1937 is lamentable. An “official” EMI restoration of this was issued in 2000 (567487; 2 CDs), but it sounds dull since both the top and bottom frequencies have been shaved off. Far better sounding is Zucker’s Bel Canto Society renovation (Opera Fanatic OF54; 2 CDs).

### *After the War: New Aidas*

Arturo Toscanini’s concert *Aida* was broadcast on television in the spring of 1949 (Testament DVD SBDVD 1005). The singers were

mostly acceptable, even the generalized Radamès of Richard Tucker, who would not sing the opera onstage for over a decade. Herva Nelli, the Maestro's Aida, certainly had the voice necessary for the role, just not the artistry; Eva Gustavson's Amneris had neither. Toscanini joins de Sabata at the pinnacle of *Aida* conductors, bringing color, flexibility, delicacy, and power in exactly the right proportions.

A year earlier the role was first undertaken by the Greek-American soprano Maria Callas. Live recordings of Callas's Aida survive from 1950, 1951, and 1953, the first two in Mexico City and the latter at Covent Garden. The 1951 was restored by EMI in 2003, which reissued it in 2013 as part of a four-opera Callas-Verdi live collection (979920; 8 CDs). EMI's work deemphasizes most of Callas's gulping breaths, heard in other versions – the air in Mexico City is thin – and allows us to concentrate on her and her companions: Mario del Monaco as Ramfis, Giuseppe Taddei as Amonasro, and the extraordinary Mexican contralto Oralia Dominguez as Amneris. This is grand-scale casting and the performance is the same, though Callas stands out by bringing intelligence and subtlety to her part, as well as an infamous high E-flat at the end of the Triumphal Scene (the house goes wild). Vocally she lacks the even production of most earlier Aidas; dramatically she runs circles around them in creating a real person, aided by the sure hand of conductor Olivero de Fabritiis. In somewhat congested sound, this is a vital if unsubtle rendition of the opera.

### *The Wonderful Summer of 1955*

Callas ceased singing Aida onstage in 1953, but in August 1955 she was brought into La Scala by EMI to record the work under Tullio Serafin, with Tucker as Radamès, Fedora Barbieri as Amneris, and especially Tito Gobbi as Amonasro. Callas has here deepened her interpretation, which is filled with dramatic subtleties undreamt of by most other Aidas, and she is in fine, well-controlled voice. Of her colleagues, her equal can be found in Gobbi's Amonasro; their Act 3 duet is the best on record. (They never sang it together in a theater, alas.) Barbieri's Amneris has an awe-inspiring range and an equally imposing evenness and power throughout that range.

Tucker is more accomplished than under Toscanini. Unlike in 1946, Serafin is fully involved here, although his orchestra and chorus, typically for the time, are placed behind the principal singers. This *Aida* has been effectively remastered, both by Warner Classics in 2014, heir to EMI (634097; 2 CDs), and with a less dry, sharp-edged sound by Mark Obert-Thorn for Naxos in 2007 (8.111240-41; 2 CDs). It too is among the great *Aidas* on records.

It is matched by 1955's RCA version and its mostly Metropolitan-based singers, recorded in Rome in July. *Aida* is Zinka Milanov, who had been singing the role at the Met since 1938. Nuance is not her way, but rather the grand style and the grand line, of which she is absolute master. Barbieri is the Amneris again, as fierce and formidable as in August, the Amonasro is the great Verdi baritone Leonard Warren, and Ramfis is the equally great Boris Christoff, stupidly barred from the United States by Congress. But the crown of the set is the magnificent Radamès of Jussi Björling, whose voice is a silver trumpet or an elegant silver thread as required by Verdi. (Björling never sang Radamès at the Met; most of his appearances in the role were in his native Sweden.)

This recording also has been recently restored, by Andrew Rose for Pristine Audio in 2015 (PACO 127; 2 CDs). Voices are clarified and given more body, and the overall sound is given air and resonance. Jonel Perlea's orchestra and chorus are too far back, though less so than Serafin's. As with that recording, the 1955 RCA is among the touchstone *Aidas* on records, especially in Rose's stunning new remastering.

### *Aida in Stereo; or, The War Between Karajan and Solti*

The arrival of two-channel sound commercially in 1958 led to a demand for everything to be redone stereophonically, a challenge taken up on behalf of *Aida* in 1959 by Herbert von Karajan, his producer John Culshaw, and Decca Records (called London Records in America). The addition of a second channel, plus some careful engineering, led to the ability to pinpoint all the varied forces, from singers to choruses to brass groups, that are required in Verdi's score and its Ricordi production book. To do this, Culshaw actually staged the opera, blocking the movements of princi-

pals on a floor grid emulating their movements in a theatrical production. And the sound was captured with care so that no blasting occurred at the opera's enormous climaxes: everything was set down in balance with everything else, something that is clearest on a good set of headphones.

Renata Tebaldi in 1959 was nearing the end of her *Aidas* (she never sang it at the Met after the fall of 1955) but is still a great, if generalized, master of the role, as is her *Radamès*, the elegant Carlo Bergonzi, and her striking *Amneris*, Giulietta Simionato. Karajan restrains the Vienna Philharmonic to support his singers, not overpower them. Especially in its 2007 remastering, the Decca/London Karajan *Aida* is a stunning presentation of the piece (4758240; 2 CDs).

Decca also recorded an *Aida* for RCA in 1961, done in Rome and conducted by Georg Solti. Solti's mentor, Richard Strauss, admonished conductors never to look encouragingly at the brass; his pupil never gives them a discouraging glance, and the result is orchestrally noisy. It is redeemed by its singers and by Solti's energy. The principal men, all in splendid voice, had sung their roles at the Met: Robert Merrill as *Amonasro*, Giorgio Tozzi as *Ramfis*, and Jon Vickers as *Radamès*. The French *Amneris*, Rita Gorr, though chosen to sell to the French-speaking market, is most impressive, with her deep, rich voice and dramatic intelligence. Recording her first *Aida* is Leontyne Price, who has everything the part needs and then some: voice, intelligence, acting ability, temperament. An ideal *Aida*.

Solti's American producers are less fussy than Culshaw about stereo placement of their forces and are content in general to let the solo singers stand in a row and sing, although the onstage brass and choruses move about in the big scenes and choral voices in the distance certainly are distant. The sound remains clear and full on its latest Decca release (478267; 2 CDs). This has lately become the Leontyne Price *Aida* recording of choice for most critics.

*The early 1970s; or, Aida's Golden Age on Records*

A decade on, *Aida* recordings reached their apex in Leontyne Price's second, with Erich Leinsdorf; Martina Arroyo's live perfor-

mance, with Claudio Abbado; and Montserrat Caballé's, with Riccardo Muti.

Nine years after her recording with Solti, Price made another version for RCA (39498; 3 CDs), with even more solid Metropolitan Opera credentials. All five principals sang their roles with the company: Price, Grace Bumbry as Amneris, Plácido Domingo as Radamès, Sherrill Milnes as Amonasro, and Ruggero Raimondi as Ramfis. All are in excellent voice. Price is slightly less vocally glorious than nine years earlier, but minimally so. She interacts with her colleagues in a near-perfect mixture of drama and vocalism, making this one of the best balanced readings on record. There are no weak links – except for Leinsdorf, who strives for subtlety but achieves a frequently dispirited efficiency most of the time. The London Symphony and the John Alldis Choir needed to be inspired. They mostly weren't.

Soprano Martina Arroyo sang *Aida* thirty-nine times with the Met company between 1965 and 1986 and was a leading interpreter of the role, with a powerful voice somewhat less lustrous than Price's. She was never recorded commercially in the part, but a live recording in good sound survives from a 1972 La Scala performance on tour in Munich. Their then-new conductor, Claudio Abbado, leads a truly stellar cast: Fiorenza Cossotto as Amneris, Plácido Domingo again as Radamès, Piero Cappuccilli as Amonasro, and Nicolai Ghiaurov as Ramfis. Abbado's leadership is vital, even electrifying, and his cast is as good as one could find, all interacting with that special intensity arising uniquely from live performance. Especially thrilling is Cossotto's alternately despairingly tender and wildly fierce portrayal in the Act 4 trial scene. As with other great Amnerises, Cossotto is a force of nature, and Abbado and his orchestra complement her fully. This remarkable set comes in an unadorned version (Opera d'Oro OPD-1167; 2 CDs) and a version with libretto (Grand Tier 7002; 2 CDs), both from the same company. Essential.

Two years later EMI engaged the same cast for a commercial studio recording with Riccardo Muti, replacing Arroyo with Montserrat Caballé. The chorus was from Covent Garden, the orchestra Muti's New Philharmonia. The sound has somewhat more impact than the Abbado, the perspectives organized for the studio rather than taken from the audience, the singers more

clearly placed with respect to the orchestra. Caballé is a large-scale, passionate Aida, the equal in her way of many great Aidas of past recordings. Muti attacks the score's dramatic moments ferociously while giving needed delicacy to its more muted ones. Even so, Abbado's 1972 leading of the same forces generates more electricity and flows more naturally, unfolding on a real stage as it does. (For one example, Muti rushes the triumphal scene mercilessly, while Abbado lets it unfold as a grand ceremony.)

In 1974 Muti's recording was considered the pinnacle of *Aida* recordings, even receiving a favorable review from Robert Craft in the *New York Review of Books*. It continues to be reissued, most recently by Warner Classics (554005; 3 CDs). *BBC Music* magazine said of it, "Most recordings of this opera have a weakness here or there; this has none." Not everyone agrees with this judgement, but the performance as a whole is truly extraordinary.

### *The Decline; or, Aida Lite*

Five years after recording Muti's take on *Aida*, EMI returned to Vienna with Karajan to record yet another version with the Philharmonic (81877; 3 CDs). But the world had changed, and dramatic sopranos were no longer available in abundance. Karajan's Aida was Mirella Freni, a lovely Mimi and Butterfly, who somehow decided to become a "spinto" soprano and take on heavier parts, such as Elizabetta in *Don Carlo*. (One is reminded of Anna Russell's admonitions against precisely this kind of thing.) Karajan holds his forces back for Freni, her Radamès, the lyric tenor José Carreras, and the similarly lower powered Agnes Baltsa her Amneris. Karajan argued that this would restore the lyricism of the opera, but it merely diminishes it.

Claudio Abbado's commercial *Aida*, made digitally two years later at La Scala, suffers from the same problem in its Aida, Katia Ricciarelli, whose lovely voice is clearly being pushed beyond its capabilities. His Amneris, Elena Obraztsova, is just the opposite: driving and powerful, perhaps overly so. (Obraztsova is the only singer I have seen who literally chewed the scenery, and in this part.) Abbado keeps the splendid Domingo as Radamès and Ghiaurov as Ramfis; Leo Nucci is not an improvement on the placid Cappuccilli as Amonasro. But then, especially compared to

Abbado's 1972 performance, the entire opera is rather placidly conducted. (This set is currently out of print except as an MP3 download.)

Casting Freni and Ricciarelli, not to mention Carreras and Baltsa, in *Aida* is at best undesirable and at worst unacceptable, but they are part of a syndrome that everywhere has crept over the heavier dramatic roles from their time to now: owing to inadequately trained singers jetting about from one engagement to the next, the heavier voices do not develop and heavier roles are cast with voices too light to encompass them – or these operas are phased out of the repertory. (Who has seen *Gioconda* lately?)

### *The Fall; or, Three American Aidas*

In the mid-1980s to the mid 1990s three promising new American dramatic sopranos appeared who seemed capable of restoring proper weight to *Aida*: Susan Dunn, Cheryl Studer, and Aprile Millo (born April Hamill). All three sang the part, and two recorded it.

Dunn had debuted in *Aida* in 1982, and in 1986 she sang it at La Scala. Too much, too soon. By the early 1990s a “vocal crisis” had struck, and her operatic career was largely over. Cheryl Studer's career, in America, in Europe, and on recordings, was far more extensive and lasted longer. Although she had begun it traditionally in 1981 singing small parts with small German companies, she soon was performing and recording everything everywhere, especially really heavy parts. Vocal problems began in 1993 in a Vienna Opera *Trovatore*. A few short years later the manager at Munich's Bavarian Opera said Studer's voice was unemployable, “ravaged by overuse.”

It was in late 1994 that Studer performed *Aida* at Covent Garden, a workmanlike performance now captured on DVD (Kultur 1487). Luciana d'Intino's Amneris and Robert Lloyd's Ramfis are both fine, the Radamès and Amonasro less so. Edward Downes's conducting is efficient, no more. Studer's singing is characterized throughout by a typical dissociation of her lower register from her voice's more brilliant middle. She flubs badly in “O patria mia” and has moments of uncertain pitch, especially in the softer pas-

sages of Act 3. She is memorable as Aida for the wrong reasons. She is now mainly retired.

Our third American Aida, Aprile Millo, first sang the role with the Utah Opera in 1980; like Dunn she then sang in Europe but returned in 1984 to join the Met, where James Levine discovered her and became her mentor. Basically a lyric soprano, she (or Levine) decided that she wanted to become a dramatic one, specializing in the operas of Verdi, particularly the heavy, demanding roles, adding Aida in 1986. Not surprisingly, her voice collapsed in a Vienna Opera *Aida* in 1994 and she was compelled to reconstruct it, which she did for a while with some success, in a different repertory.

Millo's last Met *Aida* was in late 1991. She had appeared in a live telecast in October 1989, now on DVD (DG 73001), and a year later she recorded the opera on CD for Sony with Levine and Met forces (reissued in 2015, but apparently now unavailable). Millo had a large voice, even from top to bottom though heavy on the vibrato, and had rather limited dramatic insight. Her partners in both recordings are Dolora Zajick, an effective if petulant Amneris, and Domingo, an audibly aging though still striking Radamès. In both performances Levine's conducting moves between routine and inspiration. By the end of both, *Aida*, like its heroine, indeed appears dead.

#### *Once More into the Breach; or, A Twenty-first-Century Aida*

With no major or enduring Verdian stars in the operatic firmament for the past quarter-century, and with numerous excellent *Aida* recordings being refurbished in improved sound, there has been little reason for a studio to invest in an expensive new recording of the opera. (And as one no longer hears it often, demand has diminished.) But in February 2015, Warner Classics, recent heir to EMI and other labels, stepped in and recorded *Aida* in a Roman studio under conductor Antonio Pappano (552766; 3 CDs). Pappano, music director at Covent Garden, has made successful non-studio recordings of several Verdi operas, including three of *Aida*'s immediate predecessor, *Don Carlo* (two Italian and one French). His 2013 Salzburg Festival *Don Carlo* in Italian, available on DVD

and BD, starred Anja Harteros (Elisabetta), Jonas Kaufmann (Carlo), and Ekaterina Semenchuk (Eboli). Could *Aida* with this cast be far behind?

And here it is. Is it the perfect *Aida*, as claimed? Of course not. Does it stand up well to its predecessors on disc? Well enough in many ways, and quite well in others. Still, there are issues: None of the five principals is Italian and as of the recording only the Amneris (Semenchuk) had sung her part onstage. The *Aida* (Harteros) has said that she would *never* sing it onstage (smart lady), while the Radamès (Kaufmann) first sang his role live in Munich in late September 2015. At least Pappano, his orchestra, and his chorus are all Italian – and sound it.

Pappano and his engineers keep the orchestra much to the fore but make Verdi's textures generally transparent. All forces are balanced well in scenes where Verdi uses distance and perspective such as Act 1, scene 2, though occasionally choruses and orchestra are inaudible.

Still, the principal singers sound to some extent strained, not having the customary easy vocal heft for their roles. Although Pappano and his engineers labor mightily to prevent the down front orchestra from pressing against his singers, it happens and it's audible. To compensate, his singers are at their best in restrained singing, which carries easily (engineering?), and fortunately Verdi asks for lots of this, though one wouldn't know it from most earlier recordings.

Harteros produces lots of vibrato when she forces, as in parts of "Ritorna vincitor." "O patria mia" is redeemed by expert soft singing, though its high notes are effortful. Kaufmann's sound is unusually baritonal for him; the gleam of a Verdian heroic tenor is too often missing. As expected, he is exceptionally intelligent both in following Verdi's markings and in creating a character from the text. In "Celeste Aida" he works with the orchestra's delicate textures and ends in a wonderful quiet. After all, the aria is part of Verdi's buildup to the King's arrival at scene's end and not a "can belto" interruption of it. The final duet features lovely soft singing by both Harteros and Kaufmann.

Semenchuk is a true mezzo Amneris, with some reserves of tone in all registers. She is an intelligent actress but is clearly still

working on the role. Ludovic Tezier's Amonasro is acceptably acted and sung, though the sound is dry.

Perhaps the singers' faithfulness to Verdi's markings and their indications of restraint provide a solid basis for our 2015 recording's claim to being a new, twenty-first-century *Aida*. But anyone who knows any of the major twentieth-century recordings will most likely be disappointed.

Is *Aida* finished as a repertory item? Perhaps. Certainly as long as sopranos who are not properly equipped or trained to sing it keep launching into it prematurely. This is a shame, since Verdi made it the ideal length, with an ideal distribution of voices and a carefully wrought orchestration. Above all, it has "good tunes," as Beecham would say, that keep one wanting to see and hear it. But it requires the vocal conditions of its own era, the nineteenth century, to be well, or even adequately, done, and in our frenetic times these conditions are unlikely to return. We are thus left with our splendid exemplars on recordings of a now bygone age to remind us how *Aida* once was so well performed – and of what we no longer have.