

Attention & Imagination

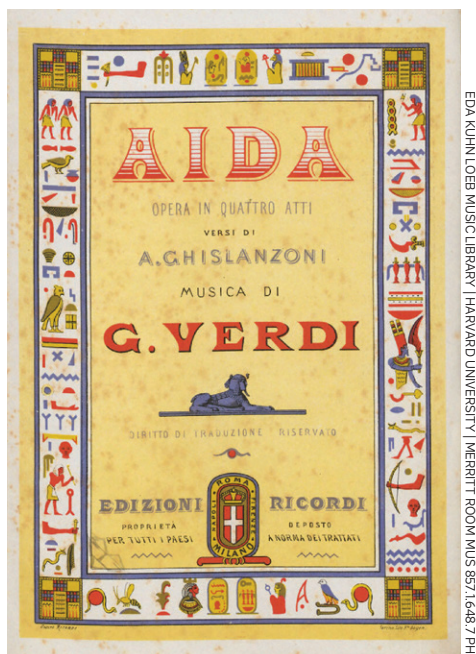
by Anne Bogart, BLO Artistic Associate

Opera is an art form that demands constant reimagining and resurrection. We directors are meant to bring a fresh point of view to what is often called a “warhorse,” or a well-known canonical opera. But what happens when the piece is performed in concert, without a director and design team insisting upon one context or point of view? To experience an opera as grand and iconic as Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* without the accompaniment of visual pageantry offers us the chance to reassess the merits of this cherished opera, one that bears the weight of its own complex legacy.

Aida exemplifies the grandiose 19th-century operatic tradition, characterized by lavish spectacle and dramatic intensity. Audiences traditionally expect large-scale grand display, powerful music, military might, religious rituals, a love-triangle, an Egyptian setting, exotic costumes, live horses and camels, perhaps an elephant or two, strong vocal performances, a large chorus, and a tragic ending with the entombed lovers.

However, we live in a cultural and political moment in which we are reconsidering our basic tenets and assumptions. Arts institutions are seriously reexamining their mission and asking how to best serve, intersect with, and grow their audiences. They are asking basic questions. Who are we making art for? What should the art be about and for whom? How can we excavate new and useful meanings from our inherited past? What new significance can contemporary viewers find in a work that feels overly ornate or melodramatic? Viewed through the prism of contemporary cultural awareness, *Aida*’s depiction of ancient civilizations can strike a discordant note.

Staging *Aida* in its traditional form risks creating a time capsule of outdated theatrical conventions rather than a living, breathing work of art. The opera’s trademark of extravagance now feels out of step with current sensibilities, especially



Title page to a vocal score of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*, c. 1872, Fratelli Doyen Company, Milano.

in the wake of the pandemic. The portrayal of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, created through a 19th century European lens, can feel stereotypical, inaccurate, reductive, and misrepresentative to today’s discerning viewers who are increasingly cognizant of cultural nuances and authenticity. The opera’s inherent insensitivities have historically included the use of blackface and erroneous Orientalist portrayals of ancient Egypt. The grand scale can overwhelm the more personal, intimate moments and might appear sentimental to a modern audience.

And yet, the music soars. The full orchestra, the eight principals, the expanded chorus, and the on- and off-stage brass instruments all conspire to form a massive musical force that creates a powerful and spectacular sound world and a visceral experience. The singers climb a proverbial Mount Everest to deliver resonant performances to attentive audiences. *Aida* without the visual grandeur offers each audience member the opportunity to listen deeply to the music, let go of preconceived ideas, and apply their heightened attention and imagination,

bringing an inquisitive attitude to the unfolding drama. We can receive the direct impact of Verdi's vision through the intensity of the music and the sung words. Perhaps, for now, performing the music is enough.

Michael Billington, a distinguished British author and arts critic, is renowned for his vast knowledge of the stage and for his incisive observations about all kinds of performance. In 2019, after a long and illustrious career, Billington stepped down from his role as the lead critic for the prestigious UK newspaper *The Guardian*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he graciously accepted my invitation to participate in a Zoom discussion with graduate students in directing, playwriting, and dramaturgy at Columbia University. During our conversation, I asked him about his post-retirement theatergoing experiences, and Billington offered an intriguing perspective. Rather than feeling more relaxed when attending productions without the obligation to write a review, he felt that his former role as a critic had actually enhanced his engagement with performances. He explained that as a professional reviewer, his senses were more finely tuned, allowing him to be more attentive and responsive to every nuance of a production. In essence, Billington felt that his critical faculties made him a more perceptive and engaged audience member.

A concert performance of Verdi's *Aida* invites us to engage deeply, bringing our most attentive and discerning selves into play. Such experiences encourage us not simply to passively consume, but to listen actively and imagine collectively. The imagination is engaged to envision the story, the characters, and the world. This can lead to a more personal and intimate experience of the opera.

Attention and imagination are powerful cognitive tools uniquely bestowed upon us humans. The imagination, much like a muscle, requires regular exercise to maintain its strength and agility. Without consistent use, our imaginative abilities can atrophy, much as physical muscles weaken without activity. This analogy extends to our capacity for attention as well. When attention and imagination converge, they produce meaning and insight. However, in the modern world, the imagination lies increasingly dormant and

underutilized. Over recent decades, corporate interests and the entertainment industry have gradually filled in the spaces once reserved for independent thought and creativity. The constant bombardment of advertisements, social media, film, and television present us with pre-packaged emotions and ideas, encouraging us to think in absolutes. This trend towards rigid thinking can lead to a sort of mental ossification, limiting our cognitive flexibility and — by extension — our freedom.

Imagination allows us to navigate through space, envision our journey on conceptual maps and explore various routes or possibilities. It plays a crucial role in forming new ideas based upon external stimuli. We can creatively integrate past experiences, learning, and information. Attention is the concentration of energy that "makes reality" wherever that focus is directed. What we pay attention to shapes our perception of reality. The creative process involves both imagination and attention bringing ideas into tangible forms. This combination enables us to bridge what is present with what lies below the surface. We use imagination to gain new knowledge, and then use that knowledge to imagine new possibilities. These fundamentally human tools allow us not only to understand our current reality, but also to conceive of new ones. We do this by exercising our capacity to continuously create new meanings.

Experiences that demand our active participation, like listening to Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, can serve as potent exercises for both attention and imagination. When received with sufficient attention and imagination, opera can be one of the most exciting art forms imaginable. Start by paying attention.

To encounter an opera like *Aida* requires an act of resurrection. Perhaps this is true for all kinds of creation. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is the ultimate expression of this idea of resurrection and even failure. Orpheus descends into the world of the dead to resurrect his love. Ultimately, the journey is a failure. But what a spectacular attempt to storm the citadel. We attempt to rethink the past through the lens of the present. We can try.