PATHWAYS FOR UNDERSTANDING

Aida by Giuseppe Verdi

The Metropolitan Opera Guild
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An Introduction to
Pathways for Understanding Study Materials

The goal of Pathways for Understanding materials is to provide multiple “pathways” for learning about a specific opera as well as the operatic art form, and to allow teachers to create lessons that work best for their particular teaching style, subject area, and class of students.

Meet the Characters / The Story/ Resources
Fostering familiarity with specific operas as well as the operatic art form, these sections describe characters and story, and provide historical context. Guiding questions are included to suggest connections to other subject areas, encourage higher-order thinking, and promote a broader understanding of the opera and its potential significance to other areas of learning.

Guided Listening
The Guided Listening section highlights key musical moments from the opera and provides areas of focus for listening to each musical excerpt. Main topics and questions are introduced, giving teachers of all musical backgrounds (or none at all) the means to discuss the music of the opera with their students. A complimentary CD of the full opera, as well as the full libretto (with English translation), are provided as part of the Guided Listening resources and are sent via mail.

Guiding Questions / Discussion Points
Guiding Questions or Discussion Points appear within several sections of these materials to spark discussion in your classroom and facilitate student exploration. Note that these questions are not intended to serve as “official” learning outcomes for the opera experience; rather, we hope that they act as a point of departure for prompting meaningful analysis and conversation amongst students. We are aware that teachers incorporate the study of opera into their classrooms in many ways and to address a variety of student outcomes, and we expect that individual teachers will adapt these materials to best serve their specific curriculum and instructional goals.

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- Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro alla Scala
- Lorin Maazel (Conductor)
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- Music by Giuseppe Verdi
- Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni
- English Translation by Walter Ducloux
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Production Information

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Text (English): Antonio Ghislanzoni
World Premiere: Cairo, Egypt
December 24, 1871

Meet the Characters

Aida (soprano): A beautiful Ethiopian princess, Aida is enslaved in service to the Egyptian princess Amneris. Aida is in love with Radamès, but must keep their love a secret. She is torn between her love for him and her loyalty to her homeland.

Radamès (tenor): A warrior. In war with Ethiopia, he wins a victory for Egypt. Although he is in love with Aida, Radamès is to be married to Amneris, whose affections he does not return.

Amneris (mezzo-soprano): The King’s daughter, Amneris is in love with Radamès and is incredibly jealous of Aida when she learns the truth about their hidden romance.

Amonasro (baritone): The king of Ethiopia and father to the princess Aida. Captured by the Egyptians, he hides his identity so as to discover the Egyptian army’s plans.

Ramfis (bass-baritone): The powerful high priest of Egypt.

The King (bass): King of Egypt and father to Amneris.
The Story of Aida: Synopsis

Act I

Egypt, during the reign of the pharaohs. At the royal palace in Memphis, the high priest Ramfis tells the warrior Radamès that Ethiopia is preparing another attack against Egypt. Radamès hopes to command his army. He is in love with Aida, the Ethiopian slave of Princess Amneris, the king’s daughter, and he believes that victory in the war would enable him to free her and marry her. But Amneris loves Radamès, and when the three meet, she jealously senses his feelings for Aida. A messenger tells the king of Egypt and the assembled priests and soldiers that the Ethiopians are advancing. The king names Radamès to lead the army, and all join in a patriotic anthem. Left alone, Aida is torn between her love for Radamès and loyalty to her native country, where her father, Amonasro, is king. She prays to the gods for mercy. In the temple of Vulcan, the priests consecrate Radamès to the service of the god. Ramfis orders him to protect the homeland.

Act II

Ethiopia has been defeated, and Amneris waits for the triumphant return of Radamès. When Aida approaches, the princess sends away her other attendants so that she can learn her slave’s private feelings. She first pretends that Radamès has fallen in battle, then says he is still alive. Aida’s reactions leave no doubt that she loves Radamès. Amneris, certain she will be victorious over her rival, leaves for the triumphal procession.

At the city gates the king and Amneris observe the celebrations and crown Radamès with a victor’s wreath. Captured Ethiopians are led in. Among them is Amonasro, Aida’s father, who signals his daughter not to reveal his identity as king. Radamès is impressed by Amonasro’s eloquent plea for mercy and asks for the death sentence on the prisoners to be overruled and for them to be freed. The king grants his request but keeps Amonasro in custody. The king declares that as a victor’s reward, Radamès will have Amneris’s hand in marriage.
Act III
On the eve of Amneris’s wedding, Ramfis and Amneris enter a temple on the banks of the Nile to pray. Aida, who is waiting for Radamès, is lost in thoughts of her homeland. Amonasro suddenly appears. Invoking Aida’s sense of duty, he makes her agree to find out from Radamès which route the Egyptian army will take to invade Ethiopia. Amonasro hides as Radamès arrives and assures Aida of his love. They dream about their future life together, and Radamès agrees to run away with her. Aida asks him about his army’s route, and just as he reveals the secret, Amonasro emerges from his hiding place. When he realizes that Amonasro is the Ethiopian king, Radamès is horrified by what he has done. While Aida and Amonasro try to calm him, Ramfis and Amneris step out of the temple. Father and daughter are able to escape, but Radamès surrenders to the priests.

Act IV
Radamès awaits trial as a traitor, believing Aida to be dead. Even after he learns that she has survived, he rejects an offer by Amneris to save him if he renounces Aida. When he is brought before the priests, he refuses to answer their accusations and is condemned to be buried alive. Amneris begs for mercy, but the judges will not change their verdict. She curses the priests. Aida has hidden in the vault to share Radamès’s fate. They express their love for the last time while Amneris, in the temple above, prays for Radamès’s soul.

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA
The Story of *Aida*: Guiding Questions

**Act I – Love and War**
In the first act of *Aida*, we meet the lovers Radamès and Aida, and see Egypt prepare for war with Ethiopia.

- Aida loves Radamès; Amneris loves him too. What are some other instances—in literature, history or other musical works—of a love triangle?
- Aida is torn between her love for Radamès and her loyalty to her country, Ethiopia, at war with his. Torn between love and family, which would you pick, if you were in her situation?

**Act II – Unwelcome Celebrations**
In the second act, the Egyptian army returns victorious. Radamès is honored with the hand of Amneris, a gift he does not want. Aida’s father, King Amonasro, appears disguised as a slave.

- Amneris tricks Aida into revealing her feelings for Radamès. However, once the truth is revealed, Amneris is still confident about her chances with Radamès. What does this say about her character? How are the two princesses, Aida and Amneris, different? Are they similar in any way?
- Why does Amonasro disguise his identity? What is his motivation?

**Act III – Tricks and Treason**
In the temple on the banks of the Nile, the characters question their various loyalties and duties.

- Why do you suppose all this action takes place at the temple? What is the significance of a place like the temple in ancient Egypt?
- Do you think Aida betrays Radamès? Does she mean to? Did she have a choice?
Act IV – Buried Alive

With a dramatic and tragic end for Aida and Radamès, Aida comes to a close.

• Why does Radamès refuse to answer the accusations of the priests during his trial?
• Aida hides in the vault to die with Radamès. What are some other instances—in literature, history, or other musical works—of lovers who would rather die than be parted from each other?
Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) wrote his first opera at the age of twenty-five and continued writing operas at a relatively steady pace throughout his life. By 1869, he had written twenty-five full-length operas, and he was beginning to run out of topics that interested him. Camille du Locle, a French director and impresario, had worked with Verdi in 1867 to complete the French libretto to *Don Carlos* after Verdi’s original librettist, Joseph Méry, had died. Du Locle began sending Verdi topics that he hoped would inspire him to compose. Verdi took issue with all of them, comedies and dramas, until du Locle sent him an original story based in ancient Egypt and written by the archaeologist and Egyptologist Auguste Mariette. The story interested Verdi, and he and du Locle drew up a prose synopsis of an opera based on Mariette’s scenario. As his librettist for the project, Verdi chose Antonio Ghislanzoni, with whom he had recently worked on his revision of *La Forza del Destino*.

The discovery of an Egyptian subject came at the perfect time for Verdi. The year before he had been asked to write a hymn to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal in Egypt, but he had refused. The Cairo Opera House was scheduled to open soon, and Verdi agreed that *Aida* could be performed to inaugurate the house. Verdi and Ghislanzoni worked hard to finish the opera in time for the opening of the Opera House. Verdi, as usual, had many ideas for the libretto, from major plot points to minor details like poetic meter and word choice, so he and Ghislanzoni collaborated closely. The sets and costumes for the production, designed by Auguste Mariette himself, were set to be shipped to Cairo from Paris, but they were not allowed to leave the city, owing to the German siege of Paris from September 1870 to January 1871. *Aida* could not be performed in Cairo without costumes or scenery, and since it seemed that these integral pieces would not reach Cairo for some time, the Opera House’s opening was delayed and a contingency plan was created. On November 1, 1871, instead of the premiere performance of *Aida*, the Cairo Opera House opened with a performance of Verdi’s earlier work, *Rigoletto*. Once *Aida* could be rehearsed with the materials from Paris, it finally premiered in the Cairo Opera House on December 24, 1871.
Verdi did not travel to Egypt for *Aida*’s premiere, but he heard of its success and sought to have a production up and running in Italy. He worked personally on the Italian production, rehearsing the singers and making minor changes to the score. He wrote a longer overture to the opera, but when he heard it, he decided that his short prelude was better and did not include the overture in performance. *Aida* premiered in Milan at La Scala on February 8, 1872, and the Italian audience loved it as well.

Some critics thought that *Aida* was old fashioned as compared to other recent Verdi compositions. It expanded old eighteenth-century styles rather than trying to break away toward something new. True as this may be, it did not stop audiences from enjoying *Aida*, and it began to be performed all over the world to great acclaim.

*Aida* is structured in a style typical of traditional opera repertoire. It has long duets with multiple parts as the characters’ emotions change. Most of the arias are beautifully constructed but do not have much forward momentum—the character sings of a particular state of mind. In addition, the characters themselves do not develop throughout the opera as do Alfredo and Violetta of Verdi’s 1853 *La Traviata*, for example. Amneris’s character changes perceptibly, but the others remain as they were from the start. There are not many hints in *Aida*’s score of the Verdi who would write *Falstaff* in 1893, with its ever-flowing wave of sound rarely interrupted by conventional arias or ensembles.

One way in which Verdi’s *Aida* is forward-thinking is in its use of “local color”—it is impossible to hear the priestess’s music in *Aida* and think that it is set in Italy or any other Western locale. A strong example of *Aida*’s exoticism can be found in the priestess’s prayer to Phtah in Act I, scene 2, with its chromatic vocal line. The integration of Eastern-sounding melodies into this Italian opera inspired other Italian composers to incorporate exotic music. Puccini certainly followed in Verdi’s footsteps with his operas *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*. The foreign locale of *Aida*, emphasized by its music, also allows for spectacular scenery and costumes—pyramids and headdresses for example. The combination of these factors contributes greatly to
Aida’s popularity throughout the world and at the Metropolitan Opera House, where it is the second-most performed opera in the repertory after Puccini’s La Bohème.
Guided Listening: “Se quell guerrier io fossi!...Celeste Aida”
CD 1, Track 3 | Libretto pg. 1

Radamès, alone in Pharaoh’s palace, sings of his love for Aida.

Discussion Points

- Who is Radamès? How might the music at the beginning of this aria serve as an introduction to his character?
  - Pay close attention to the instruments being used in Radamès recitative section. What instruments do you hear?
  - How might these instruments exemplify Radamès as a character?
  - What mood or feeling does this orchestral section invoke in you as a listener? Explain.

- How might you describe the language that Radamès uses to describe Aida? Is it purely representational, or more poetic in nature?
  - What literary figures of speech (such as similes, metaphors, etc.) does Radamès use in this section?
  - How do these figures of speech help to communicate Radamès’ feelings to the audience?

- How does the music change at 0:57?
  - What musical section of the orchestra takes over at this point in the music? How has the mood changed in this section?
  - Review the libretto. Why might this shift occur at this specific point in the aria? Use the text to support your answer.

- Do you sense some uneasiness in Radamès’ singing or words?
  - Does he feel confident in his ability to free Aida and her people?
  - What challenges might Radamès face?
  - Do you think Radamès will be successful?

continued on next page
Discussion Points (*continued from previous page*)

- Can you map out the form of this aria? Listen to the track again while keeping the musical structure in mind.
Guided Listening: “Ritorna vincitor!”
CD 1, Track 6 | Libretto pg. 3

Aida struggles to come to terms with her opposing loyalties.

Discussion Points

• What are the conflicting feelings with which Aida is struggling?

• Does the music correspond with the words Aida is singing? If so, point out a specific moment in the piece as evidence.

• Are there two distinct sections of this aria?
  o Compare and contrast the two sections, paying close attention to the mood/tone (how each section makes you feel), as well as musical elements used (dynamics, tempo, etc.).
  o Does Aida’s own mood change throughout the piece? How does her change in mood match the different sections of the piece?

• Listen to the musical shift at 1:26.
  o What is Aida singing about in this moment? How does her music change in tone and sentiment?
  o After reading the libretto for this section, does your perception of the tone change? If so, how?

• From what does Aida wish to be freed in death? Do you think she truly wants to die? Explain your reasoning.

• How would you describe the tone of the postlude music following the aria?
  o What instrumental sections do you hear playing in the orchestra?
  o What does the music sound like? Do you believe this postlude music foreshadows scenes to come? If so, what might these scenes include?
Guided Listening: “Possente Fthà”  
CD 1, Track 7 | Libretto pp. 3-4

Priests and priestesses chant in the temple of Phtah at Memphis.

Discussion Points

• What are the priests and priestesses praying for in this scene?
  o Is it significant that this scene appears immediately following Aida’s aria during which she prays as well?
  o Are Aida and the priests and priestesses praying to the same god(s)? If you are unsure, make an educated guess based on the plot of the opera.

• Does the music in this scene sound like the rest of the music that you’ve heard so far, or does it sound more exotic? If so, how?
  o Why might the composer have used different-sounding music in this scene?
  o How does the music help you visualize what might be happening on stage? What do you “see” in your mind?

• There is a musical shift at 3:58.
  o How does the music change at 3:58? Does the mood alter in any way? How are you able to tell?
  o Is there a modification in tonality? Do you hear more or less chromatism in this section?
  o What do you think is happening on stage at this point? Is everyone singing present on the stage structure? How are you able to tell from the track where all of the characters are located on stage? Explain.

• If you were directing this production, how would you stage this scene?
  o What would the set look like? The lighting?
  o How would the priests and priestesses be clothed?
Guided Listening: “Fu la sorte dell’armi a’tuoi funesta”  
CD 2, Track 2 | Libretto pp. 4-5

Aida joins Amneris in her apartments where servants are dressing her for the triumphal celebrations.

Discussion Points

• Who is Amneris? Do you think she is sincere in her sentiments toward Aida at the beginning of this scene? Explain.

• Is Amneris ignorant of Radamès and Aida’s relationship?
  o If not, how can you tell?
  o Does Amneris have ulterior motives in encouraging Aida to confide in her?
  o How does Amneris feel about Radamès?

• Does Aida trust Amneris?
  o Pinpoint a line in the libretto to support your reasoning.
  o Do you think it was wise of Aida to reveal to Amneris her true feelings? Explain.

• Listen to the music, paying close attention to Aida’s singing.
  o How does Aida’s singing change when she begins to question Amneris’s motives? Does she get softer or louder? Are her notes longer or shorter? Does she seem calmer or more insistent?
  o How does Aida’s singing emulate her feelings? Do we get the sense that she’s worried or relaxed? Anxious or relieved? Something else?

• Why does Amneris lie to Aida about Radamès’ death? Why does Amneris trick Aida?

• What do Amneris’s words at the end of the duet tell us about her character? Do you believe she will take pity on Aida, as Aida pleads with her to do? Explain your reasoning.
Guided Listening: “Gloria all’Egitto, ad Iside” and “Marcia e Ballabile/Marche triomphale et Ballet”
CD 2, Tracks 4 - 5 | Libretto pg. 5

The King and his subjects participate in an elaborate, triumphal march.

Discussion Points

Track 4

• Do you recognize this tune, or parts of it?
  o What is recognizable about the piece?
  o Where might you expect to hear a piece like this?

• What is the community celebrating?
  o Are they proud of their country? How can you tell?
  o Who, in particular, are they honoring? Why?

Track 5

• What instruments are most prominent in this piece? Is it the strings (e.g. violins), brass (e.g. trumpets), percussion (e.g. drums), a combination of these, or something else?
  o Consider the setting of this scene. Why might these instruments be most prominent?

• The piece changes dramatically around 1:36. How is this section different from the rest of the piece?
  o What might this section symbolize? What musical elements provide clues?
  o What picture comes to mind, given that the community is rejoicing after having won a battle?

• What might you expect to see at a “triumphal march?” Think of objects or scenes of grandeur and opulence. Who, in particular, would be in attendance?
Guided Listening: “Qui Radamès verrà!...O patria mia”  
CD 3, Track 2 | Libretto pg. 8

Aida, having entered the temple to pray, bids farewell to her native land.

**Discussion Points**

- How would you describe the mood of the prelude music to this aria?  
  - Is it happy, sad, foreboding, or relaxed? What elements of the music give you this impression?

- This aria is full of descriptive words and phrases. Which words or phrases are most successful in helping you visualize Aida’s homeland?

- The primary instrument in this aria, aside from the voice, is the oboe.  
  - What mood or feeling does the oboe add? Is it a sense of wonder, nostalgia, anguish, joy, or something else?  
  - How does the oboe complement Aida’s singing? What feelings is she communicating? Are these feelings similar to the feelings that the oboe conveys?

- There is a musical change heard at 2:02.  
  - What happens in the aria at this point? What musical textures or gestures are added in this moment?  
  - Review the libretto. What is Aida singing about? How do the words highlight this shift? Explain.

- Have you ever been away from home for a long period of time? How did you feel while you were away? How did you feel when you returned?

- Imagine you are a refugee from a war-torn country. How might you reminisce about your native land? Do you imagine that you would want to return? Why or why not?
Guided Listening: “Ciel mio padre...Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate”
CD 3, Track 3 | Libretto pg. 8 – 9

Amosaro enters the temple while Aida is praying.

Discussion Points

• Who is Amosaro? Is he a significant figure in his homeland?
  o Who is he to Aida?
  o Does Aida care for Amosaro? How are you able to tell?

• What choice is Aida forced to make?
  o Is this an easy choice? Why or why not?
  o What would you do if you were in Aida’s situation? How and what would you choose?

• How does the singing change when Amosaro and Aida talk of their native land?
  o Do they sound hopeful, sorrowful, excited, or something else? Explain your reasoning.

• Listen to Aida’s reaction to Amosaro’s request at 3:53.
  o How would you describe Aida’s reaction? Does she seem happy, sad, surprised, or reserved? How can you tell?
    ▪ What specific musical gestures are used in this section that might imitate Aida’s feelings? Describe these gestures.
  o Read the libretto at this point. What is Aida saying?
  o What is Amosaro’s reaction to Aida’s pleas?

• Do you think Amosaro’s demand is in Aida’s best interests? Do you think a happy ending is possible for all characters involved? Explain.
Guided Listening: “Fuggiam gli ardori inospiti”  
CD 3, Track 5 | Libretto pp. 10

Aida and Radamès, reunited, dream of living a happy life together.

Discussion Points

- What is the contour of the melody line when Aida first begins this excerpt?  
  - What does this melody sound like? Have you heard a similar musical structure at any other time in the opera?  
  - Would you describe this as similar or dissimilar to chanting? Explain.

- What is Aida’s idea of bliss with Radamès? Where would they go? Use the libretto for clues.

- What must Radamès sacrifice to be with Aida? Is this similar or dissimilar to what Aida must sacrifice?

- Do you believe that Aida and Radamès’ feelings for one another are equally strong? Why or why not?

- Listen to the music, and describe Aida and Radamès’ singing when they are imagining their life together. Then describe Aida and Radamès singing when Aida accuses Radamès of not loving her.  
  - Are their voices higher or lower? Are they singing lightly or heavy? Faster or slower?  
  - What is the significance of the difference in the lovers’ singing in these two sections? When do you hear happiness in their voices? When do you hear anxiety?  
  - How does the difference in their voices connect with their own, internal struggles?

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Discussion Points (continued from previous page)

• What do you think will happen to these two lovers? Explore possible endings to this opera with your classmates!
Aida Resources: About the Composer
Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

The son of innkeepers in Roncole, Italy, Giuseppe Verdi is thought to have been born sometime between October 9th and October 11th, 1813 (the records of the exact date are unclear). Although Verdi did not come from a family of notable wealth, his parents were able to afford to arrange for their son to apprentice to the town’s organist, with whom he showed enough aptitude to pursue studies in the nearby town of Busseto. Confident in his musical potential, and with the financial assistance of a fatherly benefactor (a greengrocer by the name of Antonio Barezzi), Verdi traveled to the Milan Conservatory for further study at the age of nineteen.

Upon arrival in Milan, Verdi was considered to have neither the youth nor the proficiency at the keyboard to succeed at the conservatory, and he was refused enrollment. Despite this rejection, Verdi studied privately with an accompanist at La Scala, who encouraged him regularly to attend the opera. As his musical career began to take shape, Verdi married Margherita Barezzi, the daughter of his financial benefactor, at the age of twenty-three. Only three years later, he completed his first opera—Oberto—which promptly premiered at La Scala in 1839.

Following the success of his first opera, Verdi encountered a series of tragedies that nearly caused him to abandon music. In April 1840, Verdi’s young son fell ill and died, followed by his daughter only two days later. In June, his wife Margherita had an attack of acute encephalitis and also died. Verdi’s life was shattered; he left Milan and returned to the town of Busseto in grief.

It wasn’t until two years later, when he discovered the libretto Nabucco (a tale of the plight of the biblical Hebrews), that his interest in opera was revived. Nabucco became a great success, and its portrayal of oppression was understood as a political statement in Italy, where citizens often felt oppressed by the reigning Austrian Empire.

1 La Scala (or, Teatro alla Scala) is one of the world’s most famous opera houses, and has premiered famous works by composers such as Giacomo Puccini, Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, and of course, Giuseppe Verdi.
Verdi’s name became synonymous with the political movement to free and unify Italy, and his public stature continued to grow.

With the success of Nabucco still ringing throughout Italy, the reinvigorated Verdi went on to compose some of the most important (and successful) operas in all of opera history, including Rigoletto, La Traviata, Il Trovatore, and Aida. But Verdi did not complete such masterpieces alone, and as early as 1843 (one year after Nabucco), he began correspondence with the poet Francesco Maria Piave, who would eventually write ten librettos for him between 1843 and 1862.

Verdi played a major role during the Risorgimento (Reunification), the movement to free Italy from foreign rule and to unify the Italian Peninsula into a single nation. In 1848, while Verdi was working at the Paris Opera House, revolts broke out across Europe. Verdi promptly returned to Italy upon hearing the revolution had broken out in Milan, a city ruled by the Austrian government. Throughout this time, Verdi supported the Risorgimento through various deeds and compositions. Eventually, the movement paid off and Italy gained its unification. Verdi was recognized as a leader of the Risorgimento and became a member of the first national parliament in 1861.

In addition to his political exploits in Italy, Verdi was fascinated by the political landscape of Spain. Four of his operas, Ernani (1844), Il Trovatore (1853), La Forza del Destino (1863), and Don Carlo (1867) are set in Spain or written on Spanish themes and stories. These operas reveal opinions Verdi and his contemporaries held about Spain, a country where race, passion and politics were intertwined. Verdi’s treatment of each of these themes was innovative during his day. We see Moors and Gypsies mistreated by fiery Spaniards, and shadows of the Inquisition. Of the three “Spanish” operas, only Don Carlo was written after the composer’s trip to Spain.

Though his career was by no means finished, Verdi retired at the age of 58 to his estate, Sant’Agata, with his second wife, the well-known soprano Giuseppina
Strepponi. Over the next several years he wrote his famous Requiem Mass, as well as a string quartet.

In 1887, at the surprising age of 74, Verdi shook the opera world with his masterpiece Otello, based on William Shakespeare’s Othello. Six years later the 80-year-old composer produced another masterpiece, yet again from Shakespeare. The opera was Falstaff, based on the play The Merry Wives of Windsor.

In the winter of 1901, after the loss of his wife Giuseppina and many of his friends, Verdi suffered a stroke in his hotel suite in Milan. After the simple funeral he requested, he was given a public funeral of the size and scope usually reserved for chiefs of state. He was 88 years old.
Exoticism, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is the “tendency to adopt something foreign.” Music exhibits exoticism when it is used to evoke a place, people, or culture that is different from that of the composer or the perceived audience. Therefore, music written by a traditional Japanese composer that contained American-flavored music would exhibit exoticism, and music written by a traditional American composer that displayed signs of Japanese traditional music would be exotic as well. Music has long been used to display the foreign, and opera, with its costumes and scenery, has the ability to evoke other cultures in both the aural and visual spheres at once.

During the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, composers had the will to compose exotic music but, with very little contact with the musical world outside of their home countries, they had no means by which to evoke it. Early "exotic" music is therefore often signaled by the title of a piece, indicating the culture that inspired the work or a specific dance rhythm used. In operas or other dramatic works for the stage, the inspiring culture was often represented through stereotypes. In Rameau’s 1735 opera *Les Indes Galantes*, there are four different exotic locations – a Turkish garden, a Peruvian desert, a Persian market, and a North American forest. The native people are shown performing rituals such as praying to the Incan sun god or taking part in a Persian flower festival. Foreign men are often portrayed as womanizers and the women as sirens. However, the musical content of these 16th through 18th century pieces is almost indistinguishable from other non-exotic music of the time. When composers wanted to create exotic musical effects, they fabricated melodies, harmonies, or instrumentation that sounded strange or different to their ears. However, these imagined sounds had no basis in the actual culture they were trying to evoke.

Many composers in the late 18th century wrote music they called *alla Turca*, or in the Turkish style. This music did sound different from other Western music – it had a more percussive quality and also emphasized woodwinds – but it was still based only
vaguely on actual Turkish music. Ottoman military music, called Janissary music, had made brief appearances in Europe, and composers built their compositions on memories of this music or on other people’s writings about it. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote several pieces in this style, including the third movement of his piano sonata in A and his 1782 singspiel Die Entführung aus dem Serail, or The Abduction from the Seraglio, which showcases interactions between Europeans and Turks.

The 19th century was an era of European colonialization. There were better travel routes and methods of transportation from Europe to the Middle and Far East, and there were therefore more opportunities for Westerners to hear music of other cultures firsthand. If composers did not travel to these foreign realms themselves, they could at least read accounts of other European travelers. The early 19th century therefore saw the rise of the exotic throughout European culture – from visual art, fashion, and decorative style to written literature and music. The increase in exotic music was also brought about by the growing popularity of programmatic music – music meant to evoke a specific time, place, event, or object – and nationalism, or pride in one’s country. Once again, dances were especially important in denoting the exotic. Southern Spain, the Middle East, and East Asia were especially popular locales in which to set operas. Spain was obviously a European country and not as remote as the Far East, but Georges Bizet in his 1875 opera Carmen demonstrated the charm of Spanish gypsy music. Carmen seduces Don José with her gypsy airs and dances, and Bizet similarly seduced his audience with this taste of the exotic.

Verdi’s 1871 opera Aida has mostly traditional western music, but in his scenes for the Egyptian priests and priestesses, the music suddenly sounds foreign. Puccini, writing a bit later, integrated Japanese traditional music in Madama Butterfly and Chinese traditional music in Turandot into his personal style. There are not simply Japanese or Chinese scenes; rather, the entire opera is flavored with Eastern music, seamlessly blending with Puccini’s Italianate style.

As borrowing from other cultures became easier and Western music became less tied to traditional musical conventions, such as standard scales and Classical tonalities,
exotic music became less exotic. Composers took aspects of exotic music and used them to expand their personal musical language without specifically evoking another culture. This is known as "submerged" exoticism and can be found in Claude Debussy's work, specifically. In Pelléas et Mélisande, which takes place in a mythical land in a mythical time and makes no reference to the Far East, Debussy sometimes uses pentatonic scales, which are traditionally associated with Eastern music. This is simply a part of his personal musical expression.

Today both exoticism and submerged exoticism are still prevalent in operas and other musical works. However, in today's global melting pot, it is often difficult to determine what is "ours" and what is "others'." John Adam's 1987 opera Nixon in China is about the carefully diplomatic meeting of two cultures – Chinese and American. The music subsumes both American and Chinese characters in Adams' minimalist idiom, and Chinese-sounding music is used only as often as American music like jazz. It is unclear in the opera which culture and its music is more exotic. Tan Dun, a Chinese composer whose opera The First Emperor premiered at the Met in 2006, grew up in a musical environment that had become very westernized. With his opera he attempted to reintroduce elements of traditional Chinese music into the westernized musical idiom. In his opera he hoped that his "Eastern opera kind of experience and the Western opera knowledge would be melted together very chemically, become something new." It is possible that, in our new international community, musical exoticism will no longer look to foreign lands but to the past or to the future for its new material.
**Aida Resources: Online Resources**

Note: click on the blue link below the description to visit the corresponding page.

**Video Clips**

- **Watch as mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung becomes Amneris for Cincinnati Opera’s AIDA**
  Educational Video, Cincinnati Opera (2013)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=on-O1YI5_JQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=on-O1YI5_JQ)

- **Aida - Graeme Murphy and Latonia Moore - Opera Australia**
  Educational Video, Opera Australia (2012)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnHGwWE2aDM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnHGwWE2aDM)

- **Aida: "I sacri nomi di padre, d'amante" -- Liudmyla Monastyrska**
  Opera Excerpt, Metropolitan Opera (2012)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Zbhwu6nU30](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Zbhwu6nU30)

- **Anthony Freud on AIDA at Lyric Opera**
  Interview, Lyric Opera Chicago (2012)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdVejQZCmVQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdVejQZCmVQ)

- **Aida**
  Production Preview, Teatro alla Scala (2011)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRa1ReiTjtM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRa1ReiTjtM)

- **Backstage: Aida - Backstage Rehearsal**
  Educational Video, Royal Opera House (2011)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyinBVQ3U_c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyinBVQ3U_c)

- **Interview: Zandra Rhodes, Aida Production Designer**
  San Francisco Opera (2010)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j1WsoplxBU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3j1WsoplxBU)

- **Latvian National Opera - Giuseppe Verdi "Aida"**
  Production Preview, Latvian National Opera (2010)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L88sF5YLxWo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L88sF5YLxWo)

- **Production Preview: Aida**
  San Francisco Opera (2010)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2QBP6EhJxw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2QBP6EhJxw)

- **Act I: “Alta cagion v’aduna”**
  The Metropolitan Opera (2009)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2xnK9zU8vU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2xnK9zU8vU)

- **Act II: “Gloria all’Egitto”**
  The Metropolitan Opera (2009)
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czEfHr8YGPA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czEfHr8YGPA)
• **Act III: “Oh Patria Mia”**  
  Violeta Urmana (Aida), The Metropolitan Opera (2009)  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbXzsp8SJF4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbXzsp8SJF4)

• **Tamara Wilson in Opera Australia's Aida**  
  Artist Interview, Opera Australia (2009)  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh2TGS42orw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh2TGS42orw)

• **Production Trailer: Aida**  
  Los Angeles Opera (2008)  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ8moqyT1y4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ8moqyT1y4)

**Articles**

• **“Aida (Program Notes)” by John Mangum for the Los Angeles Philharmonic**  
  *During the 19th century, Europe and North America were enthralled by all things foreign and exotic, and Giuseppe Verdi’s Aida was both.*  

• **“Love Triangles and Pyramids: Verdi’s Aida” by Bruce Scott for NPR Music's World of Opera (June 3, 2011)**  
  *The exotic aura of ancient Egypt has been the magic ingredient in all kinds of entertainment, and in just about every genre the choices seem to run the gamut.*  
Additional Resources: Reflections after the Opera

After every opera performance, the director, conductor, and performers reflect and evaluate the different aspects of their production, so that they can improve it for the next night. In a similar way, these Guiding Questions encourage active reflection, both individually and collectively, on your student’s opera experience.

Think about the portrayal of the characters in the production at the Met.

- How were the characters similar or different from what you expected? Try to identify specific qualities or actions that had an impact on your ideas and thinking.
- Did the performers’ voices match the character they were playing? Why or why not?
- Did any characters gain prominence in live performance? If so, how was this achieved? (Consider the impact of specific staging.)
- What did the performers do to depict the nature of the relationships between characters? In other words, how did you know from the characters’ actions (not just their words) how they felt about the other characters in the story?
- Stereotypically, most opera performers are considered singers first, and actors second. Was this the case? How did each performer’s portrayal affect your understanding of (or connection with) their character?

Consider the production elements of the performance.

- How did the director choose to portray the story visually? Did the production have a consistent tone? How did the tone and style of each performer’s actions (movement, characterization, staging) compare with the tone and style of the visual elements (set design, costume design, lighting design)?
- How did the set designer’s work affect the production? Did the style of the setting help you understand the characters in a new way?
- How did different costume elements impact the portrayal of each character?
- How did the lighting designer’s work affect the production?
- Did you agree with the artistic choices made by the directors and designers? If you think changes should be made, explain specifically what you’d change and why.
The origins of opera stretch back to ancient Greece, where playwrights used music and dance to augment moments of action in their stories. At this time, it was popular to write plays in Attic, a sing-song language, where half the words were sung and half were spoken. Dance was also a pivotal part of Greek drama; a chorus danced throughout scenes in an effort to highlight the play’s themes.

The philosopher Aristotle, in ‘The Poetics,’ outlined the first guidelines for drama, known as the Six Elements of Drama. Aristotle suggested that a play’s action should take place in one day, portray only one chain of events, and be set in one general location. Over the centuries, playwrights and composers took Aristotle’s advice more seriously. The tradition of including music and dance as an integral part of theatre continued through Roman times and into the Middle Ages. Liturgical drama, as well as vernacular plays, often combined incidental music with acting.

Opera can also be traced to the Gregorian chants of the early Christian Church. Music was an integral part of worship, and incorporated ancient melodies from Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine cultures. The Church’s organization of music throughout the early Middle Ages gave it structure, codifying scales, modes, and notation to indicate pitch and rhythm. The chants were originally sung in single-line melodies (monophony), but over time more voices were added to complement the main melody, resulting in the beginning of polyphony (many independent voices or parts sung simultaneously).

However, the Church objected polyphony, worried that the intricate weaving of melodies and words obscured the liturgical text. Since conveying the meaning of the text was the primary reason for singing in church, polyphony was viewed as too secular by Church leaders, and was banished from the Liturgy by Pope John XXII in 1322. Harmonic music followed, which developed as songs with one-line melodies, accompanied by instruments. Then, in 1364, during the pontificate of Pope Urban V, a composer and priest named Guillaume de Machaut composed a polyphonic setting of
the mass entitled *La Messe de Notre Dame*. This was the first time that the Church officially sanctioned polyphony in sacred music.

Another early contributor to the emergence of opera was Alfonso the Wise, ruler of Castile, Spain, in the 13th century. Also known as the Emperor of Culture, he was a great troubadour and made noted contributions to music’s development. First, he dedicated his musical poems, the “Cantigas de Santa Maria,” to Saint Mary, which helped end the church’s objection to the musical style. His “Cantigas” are one of the largest collections of monophonic songs from the Middle Ages. Secondly, he played a crucial role in the introduction of instruments from the Moorish kingdoms in southern Spain. These instruments, from the timpani to lute, came from Persia and the Arabic culture of the Middle East. Throughout the European Renaissance (14th – 16th centuries), minstrels and troubadours continued to compose harmonic folk songs which informed and entertained. Some songs were mere gossip; others were songs of love and heroes. These contained a one-line melody accompanied by guitars, lutes, or pipes.

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) continued to reform church music by composing music in his native tongue (German) for use in services. He also simplified the style so that average people in the congregation could sing it. Luther turned to the one-line melodies and folk tunes of the troubadours and minstrels and adapted them to religious texts. His reforms had great impact upon the music of Europe: the common people began to read and sing music.

From the church at this time also emerged the motet, a vocal composition in polyphonic style, with Biblical or similar text which was intended for use in religious services. Several voices sang sacred text accompanied by instruments, and this format laid the groundwork for the madrigal – one of the last steps in preparing the way for opera. Sung in the native language of the people in their homes, taverns, and village squares, madrigals were written for a small number of voices, between two and eight, and used secular (rather than biblical or liturgical) texts.
When refugee scholars from the fall of Constantinople (1453) flooded Italy and Europe, their knowledge of the classics of Rome and Greece added to the development of European musical traditions. Into this world of renewed interest in learning and culture came a group of men from Florence who formed a club, the Camerata, for the advancement of music and Greek theater. Their goal was to recreate Greek drama as they imagined it must have been presented. The Camerata struggled to solve problems that confronted composers, and were interested in investigating the theory and philosophy of music. The Camerata also experimented with the solo song, a forerunner of the opera aria.

Not surprisingly, Greek and Roman mythology and tragedies provided the subject matter of the first librettists. The presence of immortals and heroes made singing seem natural to the characters. Composers used instrumental accompaniment to help establish harmony, which freed them to experiment with instrumental music for preludes or overtures. Development of the recitative and the instrumental bridge enabled writers to connect the song, dance, and scene of the drama into the spectacle which was to become opera. This connector-recitative later evolved into a form of religious drama known as oratorio, a large concert piece which includes an orchestra, a choir, and soloists.

Members of the Camerata – Jacopo Peri, Ottavio Rinnuccini, and Jacopo Corsi – are credited with writing the first opera, *Dafne*, based on the Greek myth. Their early efforts were crucial in establishing the musical styles of the new genre in the early 17th century. A sizeable orchestra was used and singers were in costume. *Dafne* became famous across Europe.

The Camerata set the scene, and onto the budding operatic stage came Claudio Monteverdi. He is considered the last great composer of madrigals and the first great composer of Italian opera. He was revolutionary in developing the orchestra’s tone-color and instrumentation. He developed two techniques to heighten dramatic tension: *pizzicato* – plucking strings instead of bowing them; and *tremolo* – rapid repetition of a single note. Modern orchestration owes him as much gratitude as does
opera. In his operas, such as *Orfeo* (1607), the music was more than a vehicle for the words; it expressed and interpreted the poetry of the libretto. His orchestral combinations for *Orfeo* were considered to be the beginning of the golden age of Baroque instrumental music.

Monteverdi’s experimentation with instruments and his willingness to break the rules of the past enabled him to breathe life into opera. He was far ahead of his time, freeing instruments to communicate emotion, and his orchestration was valued not only for the sounds instruments created but also for the emotional effects they could convey. In his work, music blended with the poetry of the libretto to create an emotional spectacle. His audiences were moved to an understanding of the possibilities of music’s role in drama.
Additional Resources:  
A Guide to Voice Parts and Families of the Orchestra

Voice Parts

SOPRANO
Sopranos have the highest voices, and usually play the heroines of an opera. This means they often sing many arias, and fall in love and/or die more often than other female voice types.

MEZZO-SOPRANO, or MEZZO
This is the middle female voice, and has a darker, warmer sound than the soprano. Mezzos often play mothers and villainesses, although sometimes they are cast as seductive heroines. Mezzos also play young men on occasion, aptly called “pants roles” or “trouser roles.”

CONTRALTO, or ALTO
Contralto, or alto, is the lowest female voice. Contralto is a rare voice type. Altos usually portray older females, witches and old gypsies.

COUNTERTENOR
Also often known as alto, this is the highest male voice, and another vocal rarity. Countertenors sing in a similar range as a contralto. Countertenor roles are most common in baroque opera, but some contemporary composers also write parts for countertenors.

TENOR
If there are no countertenors on stage, then the highest male voice in opera is the tenor. Tenors are usually the heroes who “get the girl” or die horribly in the attempt.

BARITONE
The middle male voice. In comic opera, the baritone is often a schemer, but in tragic opera, he is more likely to play the villain.

BASS
The lowest male voice. Low voices usually suggest age and wisdom in serious opera, and basses usually play kings, fathers, and grandfathers. In comic opera, basses often portray old characters that are foolish or laughable.

Families of the Orchestra

STRINGS  
violins, violas, cellos, double bass

WOODWIND  
piccolos, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons

BRASS  
trumpets, trombones, French horns, baritones, tubas

PERCUSSION  
bass drums, kettle drums, timpani, xylophones, piano, bells, gongs, cymbals, chimes
## Additional Resources: Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adagio</td>
<td>Indication that the music is to be performed at a slow, relaxed pace. A movement for a piece of music with this marking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allegro</td>
<td>Indicates a fairly fast tempo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aria</td>
<td>A song for solo voice in an opera, with a clear, formal structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arioso</td>
<td>An operatic passage for solo voice, melodic but with no clearly defined form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baritone</td>
<td>A man’s voice, with a range between that of bass and tenor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ballad opera</td>
<td>A type of opera in which dialogue is interspersed with songs set to popular tunes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>bel canto</td>
<td>Refers to the style cultivated in the 18th and 19th centuries in Italian opera. This demanded precise intonation, clarity of tone and enunciation, and a virtuoso mastery of the most florid passages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cabaletta</td>
<td>The final short, fast section of a type of aria in 19th-century Italian opera.</td>
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<tr>
<td>cadenza</td>
<td>A passage in which the solo instrument or voice performs without the orchestra, usually of an improvisatory nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chorus</td>
<td>A body of singers who sing and act as a group, either in unison or in harmony; any musical number written for such a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coloratura</td>
<td>An elaborate and highly ornamented part for soprano voice, usually written for the upper notes of the voice. The term is also applied to those singers who specialize in the demanding technique required for such parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conductor</td>
<td>The director of a musical performance for any sizable body of performers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>contralto</td>
<td>Low-pitched woman’s voice, lower than soprano or mezzo-soprano.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crescendo</td>
<td>Meaning “growing,” used as a musical direction to indicate that the music is to get gradually louder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diatonic scale</td>
<td>Notes proper to a key that does not involve accidentals (sharps or flats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>From the French word for “together,” this term is used when discussing the degree of effective teamwork among a body of performers; in opera, a set piece for a group of soloists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>finale</td>
<td>The final number of an act, when sung by an ensemble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fortissimo (ff)</td>
<td>Very loud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forte (f)</td>
<td>Italian for “strong” or “loud.” An indication to perform at a loud volume.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harmony</td>
<td>A simultaneous sounding of notes that usually serves to support a melody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intermezzo</td>
<td>A piece of music played between the acts of an opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intermission</td>
<td>A break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>legato</td>
<td>A direction for smooth performance without detached notes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leitmotif</td>
<td>Melodic element first used by Richard Wagner in his operas to musically represent characters, events, ideas, or emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>libretto</td>
<td>The text of an opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maestro</td>
<td>Literally “master”; used as a courtesy title for the conductor, whether a man or woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>melody</td>
<td>A succession of musical tones (i.e., notes not sounded at the same time), often prominent and singable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mezzo-soprano</td>
<td>Female voice in the middle range, between that of soprano and contralto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>octave</td>
<td>The interval between the first and eighth notes of the diatonic scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opera buffa</td>
<td>An Italian form that uses comedic elements. The French term “opera bouffe” describes a similar type, although it may have an explicitly satirical intent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opera seria</td>
<td>Italian for “serious opera.” Used to signify Italian opera of a heroic or dramatic quality during the 18th and early 19th centuries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>operetta</td>
<td>A light opera, whether full-length or not, often using spoken dialogue. The plots are romantic and improbable, even farcical, and the music tuneful and undemanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overture</td>
<td>A piece of music preceding an opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pentatonic scale</td>
<td>Typical of Japanese, Chinese, and other Far Eastern and folk music, the pentatonic scale divides the octave into five tones and may be played on the piano by striking only the black keys.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pianissimo \((pp)\)  Very softly.
piano \((p)\)  Meaning “flat,” or “low”. Softly, or quietly.
pitch  The location of a musical sound in the tonal scale; the quality that makes “A” different from “D.”
prima donna  The leading woman singer in an operatic cast or company.
prelude  A piece of music that precedes another.
recitative  A style of sung declamation used in opera. It may be either accompanied or unaccompanied except for punctuating chords from the harpsichord.
reprise  A direct repetition of an earlier section in a piece of music, or the repeat of a song.
score  The written or printed book containing all the parts of a piece of music.
serenade  A song by a lover, sung outside the window of his mistress.
singspiel  A German opera with spoken dialogue.
solo  A part for unaccompanied instrument or for an instrument or voice with the dominant role in a work.
soprano  The high female voice; the high, often highest, member of a family of instruments.
tempo  The pace of a piece of music; how fast or how slow it is played.
tenor  A high male voice.
theme  The main idea of a piece of music; analogous to the topic of a written paper, subject to exploration and changes.
timbre  Quality of a tone, also an alternative term for “tone-color.”
tone-color  The characteristic quality of tone of an instrument or voice.
trill  Musical ornament consisting of the rapid alternation between the note and the note above it.
trio  A sustained musical passage for three voices.
verismo  A type of “realism” in Italian opera during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in which the plot was on a contemporary, often violent, theme.
| **vocalise** | A musical composition consisting of the singing of melody with vowel sounds or nonsense syllables rather than text, as for special effect in classical compositions, in polyphonic jazz singing by special groups, or in virtuoso vocal exercises. |
| **volume** | A description of how loud or soft a sound is. |
References: Works Consulted

The History of Verdi’s Aida


Aida Resources: Exoticism in Opera


Additional Resources: The Emergence of Opera


