

Verdi's Aida

By Art Axelrod

What do Verdi, the Suez Canal, a French Egyptologist, the Franco-Prussian War and Indiana Jones have in common?

In 1869, at the age of 56, Giuseppe Verdi was an internationally famous composer, an Italian national hero and a successful gentleman farmer. By 1853 he had already completed his most celebrated and successful “big three” operas, *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*, and then had recently enjoyed acclaim with *La forza del destino* in 1862 and *Don Carlos* in 1867. Verdi had often referred to his earlier period, when he was struggling to establish his reputation, as his “years in the galley,” churning out work after work, composing and directing, sometimes two works in one year. Now, at the height of his fame, he could afford to relax; he retired to his farm in Sant’Agata, in the Province of Parma near his childhood hometown of Le Roncole. At this point, he could concentrate on only those works that interested him.

In 1869, the ruler of Egypt, the Khedive, was named Isma'il Pasha. Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire whose capital was Istanbul, Turkey. The title “Khedive” can be translated as “Viceroy,” that is, one who rules in place of the King. Isma'il Pasha was a westernized ruler. He had been educated in Paris and was eager to lead his country in Western ways. He was quoted as saying, “My country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe. It is therefore natural for us to abandon our former ways and to adopt a new system adapted to our social conditions.” He traveled frequently to Britain and France where he cut a dashing figure. He made many influential contacts in both capitals.

In 1869, the Suez Canal opened for navigation. Work on it had begun in 1859. The French engineer, Ferdinand de Lesseps was brought in by Said Pasha, Isma'il's predecessor. A canal, an international resource, was exactly the kind of thing that Isma'il wanted for his modern Egypt. He wanted to celebrate its opening with an opera, to be premiered in Cairo in an opera house he had just built, and he sought to have the premiere of the opera as the house's first production. Accordingly, he offered Verdi a commission to write such an opera. At first, Verdi declined.

Auguste Mariette was a French scholar, archaeologist and Egyptologist. He was born in 1821 in Boulogne-sur-Mer in northern France. He was a prodigy at languages and history and soon distinguished himself as a linguist and epigrapher (a student of inscriptions, especially ancient ones). In 1839, at the age of 19, he received a post at the Louvre and was sent to Egypt to collect manuscripts. But instead, he became infatuated with Egypt and began a career as an archeologist. Mariette was a swash-buckling figure. He firmly believed that Egyptian artifacts should remain in Egypt, and so, on one occasion, when he learned that a local chieftain had stolen some artifacts and was sailing down the Nile to sell them, he organized a group of armed men and took off on a boat in pursuit. He captured the man, recovered the artifacts and presented them to the Khedive. (It has been suggested that Mariette might have been a model for Indiana Jones.) The Khedive appointed him as the first Director of Ancient Monuments in Egypt and then head of a new National Museum of Antiquities in Cairo.

While in Egypt, Mariette wrote a short story set in Pharaonic Egypt which he entitled *La Fiancée du Nil (The Bride of the Nile)*. It was never published, but in 1869, he accompanied Isma'il Pasha to Paris; Isma'il introduced him to Camille Du Locle, a distinguished Parisian playwright and impresario. Du Locle had written several librettos for Verdi: *Simon Boccanegra*, *Forza del destino* and *Otello*, and had collaborated on the French version of *Don Carlos*. He went on to write a libretto in French based on Mariette's story and presented it to Verdi, persuading him to accept it. The French libretto was passed to another of Verdi's librettists, Antonio Ghislanzoni, who wrote the Italian libretto, and the show was on!

But things did not go as planned. *Aida* was scheduled to premiere as the first production of the new Cairo Royal Opera early in 1871. Sets and costumes were being designed by Du Locle in Paris. But along came the Franco-Prussian War, waged from July 1870 –January 1871. Paris was under siege and Du Locle's sets were trapped. The Cairo Opera House had to open with *Rigoletto*. *Aida* finally had its premiere in Cairo in December of that year.

Aida was a resounding success. Its Italian premiere was in Milan in 1872 and its US premiere in New York in 1873. It has been a staple of the opera canon ever since.

And so this unlikely conjunction of circumstance resulted in one of the most beloved operas in the repertoire. Enjoy!



Giuseppe Verdi



Isma'il Pasha



Auguste Mariette