

REVIEW:

‘Aida’ a visual spectacle; singing a mixed bag



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Cincinnati Opera's 2022 production of Giuseppe Verdi's "Aida."

PHILIP GROSHONG

By [Janelle Gelfand](#) – Courier contributor
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Verdi's "Aida" is one of the most popular operas of all time for good reason. It has all the trappings of grand opera – spectacular sets and lavish costumes, pageantry, ballet, beautiful music, and at its center, a love story.

On Friday, Cincinnati Opera mounted its 134th performance of the operatic standard. The elements of grandeur were sumptuous and entertaining, starting with the Triumphal March featuring two beautiful Clydesdale horses. The cast treated us to some rewarding performances. Unfortunately, there was uneven singing, as well.

In the role of the Egyptian army captain Radamès, tenor [Gregory Kunde](#) was consistently terrific. His famous aria, "Celeste Aida" combined sweetness of tone, impassioned phrasing and thrilling high notes. His voice remained fresh all evening, and in Act 3, he conveyed believable horror upon discovering that he had betrayed his country.

Making her company debut in the title role, soprano Mary Elizabeth Williams sang with a steely, sometimes harsh sound in her upper range. Her control and beauty of sound impressed when her singing was unforced. "O patria mia" was exquisitely sung and deeply affecting. Some of the magic of that moment was due to the lovely oboe obbligato by Mark Ostoich in the orchestra. Williams' acting ability offered a more convincing portrait of the enslaved Ethiopian princess, who is torn between her love for Radamès and her love for her country.



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Tichina Vaughn as Amneris.

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As Amneris, the Egyptian princess who also loves Radamès, mezzo-soprano Tichina Vaughn sang with heft and a big vibrato. If uneven at first, her singing grew in richness as the evening progressed. She was harrowing as she tricked Aida into revealing her love for Radamès. Her confrontation with Radamès riveted in Act 4, as she desperately tried to convince him to save himself by marrying her.

I doubt there could be a more formidable Ramfis, the high priest of Isis, than that of bass Morris Robinson. He sent Radamès off to fight with a voice of sheer splendor. Later, the darkness of his tone was chilling as he pronounced Radamès a traitor. He consistently displayed the power of his position, whether vehemently exhorting the crowd to war or leading his priests into trial.

[Baritone Gordon Hawkins](#) offered a fine portrayal of the aging Ethiopian king Amonasro, who persuades his daughter Aida that her patriotic duty to her country is more important than love. His chilling accusation that she was not his daughter and nothing but a slave was one of the evening's most powerful moments.

As the regally attired King of Egypt, Peixin Chen performed admirably and with a firm bass. Soprano Jennifer Cherest, evoking the Egyptian god Ptah as the High Priestess, was strikingly expressive. Houston Tyrrell was miscast as the Messenger.

Dancers from Cincinnati Ballet provided many entertaining moments and danced wonderfully. Michael Pappalardo's choreography was fluid and interesting, with a few puzzling choices. The Cincinnati Opera Chorus, prepared by Henri Venanzi, sang gloriously during the Triumphal March, and throughout the opera. They made magical contributions, including the charming chorus of female slaves in Amneris' apartments, and the chorus of priests intoning prayers.



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Dancers from Cincinnati Ballet.

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Staging by Crystal Manich tended to be traditional, often stand-and-sing. However, the pomp and grandeur of the Triumphal March, with its sheer numbers of soldiers, townspeople, slaves, Ethiopian prisoners, priests and priestesses was managed well. Herald trumpeters played from a high wall, and the well-behaved horses were a big hit.

Under the baton of Christopher Allen, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra performed superbly, whether in trumpet fanfares or in intimate moments. Besides Ostoich's solo, there were expressive contributions from clarinetist Joseph Morris and flutist Henrik Heide. Allen's direction was nuanced, balanced and well-paced throughout. The overture was notably refined.

The characters were dwarfed by the large pillars and statues of the imposing set design by Claude Girard and Bernard Uzan, a co-production of Pittsburgh Opera, Opéra de Montréal and Utah Opera. **Set against a full moon, the Act 3 scene on the banks of the Nile as the boat glided up to the temple, was breathtaking.**

"Aida" continues July 26, 29 and 31 in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-241-2742, cincinnatiopera.org

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