

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

AN IRREVERENT GUIDE TO
THE PLOTS, THE SINGERS,
THE COMPOSERS, THE RECORDINGS

MODERN



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Sir Denis Forman

SIR DENIS FORMAN

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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
How to use this guide

THE OPERAS

ADRIANA LECOUVREUR	<i>Cilea</i>
AIDA	<i>Verdi</i>
ANDREA CHENIER	<i>Giordano</i>
ANGELICA, SUOR (Sister Angelica)	<i>Puccini</i>
ARIADNE ON NAXOS	<i>Richard Strauss</i>
ATTILA	<i>Verdi</i>
UN BALLO IN MASCHERA (A Masked Ball)	<i>Verdi</i>
THE BARBER OF SEVILLE	<i>Rossini</i>
BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE	<i>Bartok</i>
BOCCANEGRA, SIMON	<i>Verdi</i>
LE BOHÈME	<i>Puccini</i>
BORIS GODUNOV	<i>Musorgsky</i>
BUTTERFLY, MADAM	<i>Puccini</i>
CARLOS, DON	<i>Verdi</i>
CARMEN	<i>Bizet</i>
CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA (A matter of honour)	<i>Mascagni</i>
LA CENERENTOLA (Cinderella)	<i>Rossini</i>
CESARE, GIULIO	<i>Handel</i>
CHENIER, ANDREA	<i>Giordano</i>
CINDERELLA	<i>Rossini</i>

LA CLEMENZA DI TITO	<i>Mozart</i>
(Tito the Magnanimous)	
COSÌ FAN TUTTE	<i>Mozart</i>
(Never trust a woman)	
DIDO AND AENEAS	<i>Purcell</i>
DON CARLOS	<i>Verdi</i>
DON GIOVANNI	<i>Mozart</i>
DON PASQUALE	<i>Donizetti</i>
DREIGROSCHENOPER, DIE	
(The Threepenny Opera)	<i>Weill</i>
DUTCHMAN, THE FLYING	<i>Wagner</i>
ELEKTRA	<i>Richard Strauss</i>
L'ELISIR D'AMORE	
(The love potion)	<i>Donizetti</i>
ENTFUHRUNG AUS DEM SERAIL, DIE	
(The Escape from the Seraglio)	<i>Mozart</i>
ERNANI	<i>Verdi</i>
EUGENE ONEGIN	<i>Tchaikovsky</i>
FALSTAFF	<i>Verdi</i>
LA FANCIULLA DEL WEST	
(The Girl of the Golden West)	<i>Puccini</i>
FAUST	<i>Gounod</i>
FIDELIO	<i>Beethoven</i>
FIGARO	<i>Mozart</i>
DIE FLEDERMAUS	<i>Johann Strauss</i>
THE FLYING DUTCHMAN	<i>Wagner</i>
LA FORZA DEL DESTINO	
(The Force of Destiny)	<i>Verdi</i>
FREISCHUTZ	<i>Weber</i>
GIANNI SCHICCHI	<i>Puccini</i>

LA GIOCONDA (The Street Singer)

Ponchielli

GIOVANNI, DON	<i>Mozart</i>
GIULIO CESARE	<i>Handel</i>
GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST, THE	<i>Puccini</i>
GODUNOV, BORIS	<i>Musorgsky</i>
GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG (The Twilight of the Gods)	<i>Wagner</i>
HÄNSEL AND GRETEL	<i>Humperdinck</i>
IDOMENEO	<i>Mozart</i>
IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS	<i>Gluck</i>
L'ITALIANA IN ALGERI (The Italian Girl)	<i>Rossini</i>
JULIUS CAESAR	<i>Handel</i>
KHOVANSCHINA	<i>Musorgsky</i>
LAKMÉ	<i>Delibes</i>
LECOUVREUR, ADRIANA	<i>Cilea</i>
LESCAUT, MANON	<i>Puccini</i>
I LOMBARDI	<i>Verdi</i>
LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR	<i>Donizetti</i>
LUISA MILLER	<i>Verdi</i>
MACBETH	<i>Verdi</i>
MADAM BUTTERFLY	<i>Puccini</i>
THE MAGIC FLUTE	<i>Mozart</i>
MANON LESCAUT	<i>Puccini</i>
MARIA STUARDA (Mary Stuart)	<i>Donizetti</i>
THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO	<i>Mozart</i>
A MASKED BALL	<i>Verdi</i>
MILLER, LUISA	<i>Verdi</i>
MEISTERSINGER	<i>Wagner</i>

NORMA	<i>Bellini</i>
ONEGIN, EUGENE	<i>Tchaikovsky</i>
ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE	<i>Gluck</i>
OTELLO	<i>Verdi</i>
I PAGLIACCI (The Comedians)	<i>Leoncavallo</i>
PARSIFAL	<i>Wagner</i>
THE PEARL FISHERS	<i>Bizet</i>
PÊCHEURS DE PERLES, LES (The Pearl Fishers)	<i>Bizet</i>
PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE	<i>Debussy</i>
PORGY AND BESS	<i>Gershwin</i>
I PURITANI (The Puritans)	<i>Bellini</i>
RIGOLETTO	<i>Verdi</i>
THE RING Rhinegold Valkyrie Siegfried Götterdämmerung (The Twilight of the Gods)	<i>Wagner</i>
LA RONDINE (The Swallow)	<i>Puccini</i>
RHINEGOLD	<i>Wagner</i>
ROSENKAVALIER	<i>Richard Strauss</i>
SALOME	<i>Richard Strauss</i>
SCHICCHI, GIANNI	<i>Puccini</i>
SICILIAN VESPERS, THE	<i>Verdi</i>
SIEGFRIED	<i>Wagner</i>
IL SERAGLIO (The Escape from the Seraglio)	<i>Mozart</i>
SIMON BOCCANEGRA	<i>Verdi</i>

LA SONNAMBULA (The Sleepwalker)	<i>Bellini</i>
STUARDA, MARIA	<i>Donizetti</i>
SUOR ANGELICA (Sister Angelica)	<i>Puccini</i>
IL TABARRO (The Cloak)	<i>Puccini</i>
TANNHÄUSER	<i>Wagner</i>
TELL, WILLIAM	<i>Rossini</i>
THE THREEPENNY OPERA	<i>Weill</i>
TITO, LA CLEMENZA DI (Tito the Magnanimous)	<i>Mozart</i>
TOSCA	<i>Puccini</i>
LA TRAVIATA (The Fallen Woman)	<i>Verdi</i>
TRISTAN AND ISOLDE	<i>Wagner</i>
IL TROVATORE (The Troubadour)	<i>Verdi</i>
TURANDOT	<i>Puccini</i>
THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS	<i>Wagner</i>
VALKYRIE	<i>Wagner</i>
I VESPRI SICILIANI (The Sicilian Vespers)	<i>Verdi</i>
WERTHER	<i>Massenet</i>
WILLIAM TELL	<i>Rossini</i>
WOZZECK	<i>Berg</i>
ZAUBERFLÖTE, DIE (The Magic Flute)	<i>Mozart</i>

Operatica

The Composers

Artists—conductors

—singers

Words words words

Acknowledgments

About the Author

How to use this guide

- The operas in this guide are those that have passed the simple popularity test of having three or more versions listed in the *Gramophone* CD catalogue of December 1992. The temptation to let in some outstanding outsiders (*Peter Grimes*) and to chuck out some of the weaker qualifiers (*Lakmé*) has been resisted, with difficulty. Every one of the 83 operas is guaranteed three-entry item.
- Proper names are used in the form that comes most naturally. Opera people tend to talk of *Meistersinger*, *The Flute*, *Lucia*, not *The Mas-tersingers*, *Zauberflöte* or *Lucy*. Every opera has its proper title in its own language at the head of each entry.
- The same principle spreads far and wide throughout the guide. In some operas the names of some of the cast are anglicized, others are left in German, Italian or whatever. This may seem odd but it is done to fall in with common usage and anyway consistency is ‘the hobgoblin of small minds’. In the cast list after the title on the first page the names are given in both languages except in those operas—2 out of 83!—where the opera is in English anyway. Accents, umlauts, circumflexes and cedillas are commonly done away with unless they are needed as a guide to pronunciation. A good deal of dog-Italian occurs and even the English language is treated with scant respect.
- Throughout the guide Acts are Acts–I, II, III, IV and in extreme cases V. After Scene 1 (Sc 1) scenes are only newly numbered as scenes (Sc 2) where there is a change of scenery. This may seem arbitrary and sometimes goes against the book. But when you get at one end of the spectrum an early opera giving every aria a fresh scene number and at the other end 2 hours 40 minutes of continuous music in *Rhinegold* broken into only four scenes, you have to give the word ‘scene’ some sort of common meaning. Anyway that’s it.
- The LOOK OUT FOR section which comes after the telling of the story in the opera section is designed for the armchair listener (or for the listener who sits at a table or lies on the floor, and why should all listeners’ chairs have arms anyway?) in order to alert them to look out for the best bits, to give them some idea of what is going on simultaneously both in the music and on stage, and thereby take them an inch or two nearer to the experience of actually being in the opera house. Timings are approximate and must be since they can vary greatly between different performances. The slowest *Tristan* in the records at Bayreuth played for THIRTY MINUTES longer than the most speedy.
- Stars are awarded at the whim of the author as follows:
 - * Worth looking out for
 - ** This is really good
 - *** Stunning. Brilliant
- At the end of the COMMENT in the opera section each opera is given a rating from alpha-plus to gamma. Author’s whim again, and whereas no reader is likely to want to swap any of the

gammas with the alphas, these ratings are susceptible to a wide range of disagreement. But what the hell. Everyone their own opera critic.

- The aim of the guide is to avoid every technical term in music that can be described in plain English, but there are some basic truths which have to be tackled by anyone who wants to get a fix on certain musical forms (aria) or on basic musical structure (tonality). These are dealt with in a summary fashion in the *Words* list and more fully in the *Operatic* section. Would true musicologists please look the other way.
- The *Artists* section includes some sixty conductors and singers, again selected on whim, but with three criteria in mind:
 1. They must be world class.
 2. They must be household names. (At least in households that are opera-prone.)
 3. They must be well represented on disc.

THE OPERAS

Adriana Lecouvreur

Backstage traged

Cilea

The one about the star of stage and screen whose rival sends her a bouquet of poison g violets. She sniffs it: snuffs it.

CAST

Adriana Lecouvreur , star of the Comédie-Française	Soprano
Michonnet , stage manager of the Comédie	Baritone
Prince of Bouillon , opera-going prince	Bass
Princess of Bouillon , his wife	Mezzo
Abbé of Chazeuil , his companion and social fixer	Tenor
Maurizio , Count of Saxony	Tenor
Actors, servants, etc.	

4 acts: running time 2 hrs 5 mins

STORY

Act I Backstage in the Comédie-Française

We are waiting for curtain up on one of Racine's smash hits in Paris France 1730. Backstage is all go: final touches to costume and make-up: a heavy demand for beauty spots etc distracted stage manager Michonnet urges everyone to hurry up: the Prince arrives plus his sidekick the Abbé seeking his good friend star actress Duclos: Duclos is not available. Rival star Adriana comes on spouting Racine like mad. Poncey pair offer her fatuous compliments. She says come off it I am a humble working actress and the only good guy here amongst you phoney is Michonnet (M. is very chuffed). All go on stage.

The Prince asks why Duclos is not available: she is busy writing a letter says Michonnet the Prince orders the creepy Abbé to get the letter using bribery or whatever. Exit the poncey pair. Michonnet is moonstruck by Adriana. There is some roundabout talk about marriage. Adriana has no idea what the hell Michonnet is going on about. I'm in love too! she says Whizzo! My lover's in the front of house tonight. Michonnet (hopes dashed) exits: Maurizio (really the Count of Saxony) comes in. Big hellos. How's your career? asks Adriana. Have you

been promoted Company Commander yet? My boss the Count of Saxony (ho ho) keeps promising but never delivers says he: bastard. I am seated in Box 3 let's meet after the show Adriana gives him a posy of violets. Both exit.

The poncey pair come on. I got the letter says the Abbé. He reads: 'Meet me at 42 rue Rouge tonight.' Zut! says the Prince: 42 RR is the house I use for assignations with Duclos double-crossing whore and Zut! again. The letter is addressed to Box 3 says the Abbé. It's the Maurizio says the Prince. What to do? Invite all the cast to a party at 42 RR says the Abbé give 'em a surprise. Ha ha and very good says the Prince go ahead. Send on the letter to Box 3: exits.

Actors rush off stage. All is chatter scandal and gossip: they say Duclos meets many lovers at 42 RR and also gives the key to the Princess who indulges in adulterous fancies there. 42 RR will be busy tonight for sure. Who will meet whom? Buzz buzz. Michonnet left alone watches Adriana on stage adoringly. He holds a property letter for Adriana's next scene.

Maurizio comes on. (The letter he received in Box 3 was not from Duclos but written by her on instructions from the Princess who demands an immediate meeting at 42 RR to discuss an urgent political crisis.) Maurizio writes a message on the property letter: 'Tonight's meeting is not on. I have to see a man about a dog': Adriana reads the message on stage. Shock and anger greatly improve her performance: she gets a standing ovation. Offstage she receives an invitation to a midnight party to meet the Count of Saxony (our Maurizio!). All thinks Adriana I'll get after that Duke to make my Maurizio a Company Commander.

Act II A room in maison 42 rue Rouge with French windows and garden beyond

The Princess awaits Maurizio with anxiety: will he come? He comes. There is an incomprehensible discussion. Maurizio is interested in politics not sex: the Princess in sex but not in politics. Have you gone off me or something? she asks. Well he says hum haw we shall always be good friends. Good friends! Pshaw! she says. She sees the violets. There must be another woman she says: who is she? They're for you he says.

A coach draws up. The Princess panics. Quick jump into the fridge says Maurizio. She jumps. (As he opens the fridge door he drops the violets.) The Prince plus the Abbé come in. Got you Maurizio! they cry. Where's the lady old boy? What lady? says Maurizio. Duclos they reply (a mistake, of course). I was going off her myself you can take her over old boy says the Prince. (Maurizio twigs the mistake.)

Enter Adriana: surprise all round. I thought you were seeing a man about a dog she says. So I came to meet the Count of Saxony to plead your cause. Go ahead for I am he! says Maurizio. Another surprise. Well fancy that she says I always thought you were official material. The poncey pair plus Michonnet come on. Michonnet says he must go and see Duclos.

She's here says the Abbé. Eh? What? says Michonnet. She's in that fridge there says the Abbé. Is she hell I'll soon see says Adriana (jealous). No! says Maurizio it's not Duclos: I came here to talk politics. It's a serious matter. There is a person in the fridge true enough but it's not Duclos but a political contact. Do you believe me? I believe you says Adriana. We must keep the poncey pair away from the fridge says he. It would be politically disastrous if the person were exposed. You must release the occupant in the dark: and the person must not be seen even by you. OK says the trusting Adriana. Take this secret key says Maurizio. Exits.

Meanwhile Michonnet goes and opens the fridge but it's too dark to recognize the occupant. He closes the fridge. Now the Abbé proposes getting candles and opening the fridge. Adriana interposes, as instructed. The Abbé goes off to get the Prince: Michonnet stands guard. Adriana blows out the candles and opens the fridge and the Princess jumps out. What now? she says. Escape! says Adriana. All exits are blocked says the Princess. Here's a secret key says Adriana. Get out.

Who are you? asks the Princess. Mind your own business says Adriana. Do you know Maurizio? asks the Princess. By the way I love him. He's mine. Rubbish he's mine says Adriana. A big argument is terminated by the Prince and helpers appearing in the garden with torches etc. The Princess scarpers. The search party enters: Michonnet finds the Princess's specs on the floor. He hands them to Adriana.

Act III A large room in the Bouillon palace prepared as private theatre

The Abbé fusses around fixing furniture and sucking up to the Princess. The Princess is perplexed about the identity of the woman who rescued her the night before. The Prince and Princess receive their guests. Adriana arrives. The Princess thinks hello-oo didn't I hear that voice last night perhaps?

Let's get started says the tiresome Abbé. We must wait for Maurizio says the Prince. He's not coming says the Princess (watching Adriana like a stoat) because of the duel ... What duel? asks Adriana. The Abbé told me about this duel says the Princess. He saw Maurizio covered in blood ... Adriana passes out (Oho oho thinks the Princess) but revives as Maurizio is announced.

Are you wounded? asks the Prince. Not so the other fellow was totally outduelled says Maurizio [What the hell is this duel? Ed.]. Maurizio whispers thanks to the Princess for springing him from prison [Whazzat? First we've heard of prison? Ed.] and greets Adriana coolly (why?). He tells of a boring military exploit won by his bravery daring sagacity (load of bull: generally behaves quite out of character and confuses an already nearly incomprehensible plot).

The Prince announces the ballet: it is the Judgement of Paris (allegory, geddit?): the Princess and Adriana start to row: you were the woman last night says the Princess: proof these violets. You were the woman last night says Adriana: proof these specs. Certainly they look very like the wife's specs says the Prince.

Meanwhile the poor sods are struggling on with the ballet. Paris presents the prize to the Princess. She asks Adriana to do a party piece. Adriana delivers a chunk of drama concerning a guilty adulterous wife clearly aimed at the Princess. The Princess is as mad as hell. Adriana having avenged herself exits to a big ovation.

Act IV The drawing room in Adriana's home

Maurizio is apparently off the picture: Adriana pines for him: she has jacked in her acting career. She is sad and ill. Michonnet (still in love with Adriana) comes on a visit and writes a note to Maurizio 'You must come' while waiting: Adriana enters very low: Michonnet tries to comfort her. It's no good – Adriana remains suicidal.

A group of friendly actors arrive bringing birthday presies chockies etc. There is a lot of

jokey gossip. Michonnet gives Adriana her own diamond necklace redeemed from the pawnbroker. It has cost him his life's savings. But seriously they all say you are a great star and must make a comeback. Yes OK says Adriana (smell of greasepaint or something).

A parcel arrives 'from Maurizio'. The guests exit into the dining room seeking bubbly. Adriana opens the parcel (actually from the jilted Princess): she looks in the box and sees the same old violets (soaked in phosgene): Maurizio is a beastly cruel cad she cries and chuckles. She throws the violets on to the fire (but not before one long last lethal sniff). She bombs out. Steady! says Michonnet I'm sure Maurizio will explain everything.

Hey presto! Maurizio arrives. Hugs and kisses. Why did you abandon me? asks Adriana. I was wrongly informed you were fixed up with another guy says he. [Weak: Ed.] What about that other woman? asks Adriana. She is a lying bitch and also a slagheap says he anyway how about marriage? Gosh! he must love me thinks Adriana. They clinch in mutual ecstasy. Adriana totters. Are you ill? he asks. It's these stinking flowers you sent me says she. I never sent you no flowers says he: he smells shoe box (phosgene): Adriana has convulsion and hallucinates.

Maurizio phones for a doctor. He calls Michonnet. Tries medication. It's no good Adriana is raving mad and declaims unsuitable lines from plays she has performed. She writhes in agony and carries on something terrible but in the tradition of all mad dying operatic heroines she enjoys a short burst of sanity to deliver a touching last aria. Expires.

LOOK OUT FOR

Act I

MINUTES FROM THE START

4: *Dell' augei di Leda* *

6: *Troppo signori, troppo* **

13: *Adriana!* *

18: *La dolcissima effigie* **

23 : *Or dunque Abate* **

27: *Ecco il monologo* **

The show-biz clatter of the opening scenes abates only slightly when the poncey pair, the Prince and the Abbé, start their backstage rounds. They send themselves up in a pastiche duet⁴ with highflown sentiments, loads of classical references and tongue-in-cheek music. We know where we are: in the pretend never-never land actors inhabit when not acting. Chatter continues.

Adriana's entry (impressive); she rejects the hype of the poncey pair and sings sweetly and humbly about her vocation as an actress.⁶ Not a number to stop the show, but fortunately the show does stop for it. The feverish pace is halted to let her do her stuff. So we learn the opera is going to be a little serious too.

Michonnet moves stealthily towards the topic of marriage with Adriana¹³ (inconceivable of course). His oblique approaches and her ripostes – she hasn't the faintest idea what he's on about – are married skilfully to a tender melody flowing along in the strings – which puts his case more persuasively than he could do himself – poor sod.

This is Maurizio's first chance and he grabs it with both hands. A stirring tenor aria¹⁸ with big tune in a style nearer to a Mario Lanza movie than Rossini but, boy, does it go well. Develops into a duet with Adriana in which the big tune surfaces again.

A quick-fire two-hander²³ leading to a racy ensemble as the poncey pair get excited about the letter from la Duclos. The actors' quartet sings against rather than with the main melody which comes from the pit. The whole scene is a little marvel of speed and wit and the ensemble quite delicious.

The serious sentimental Michonnet watches from the wings. He thrills to Adriana's performance. Two great bursts of melody here,²⁷ the first from the orchestra and the second vocal when poor Michonnet finds in her performance something to compensate him for his disappointment.

Act II

MINUTES FROM THE START

2: *O vagabonda stella* ***

15: *Ma, dunque è vero?* *

27: *Ho capito* *

The Princess's vigil: she describes (very accurately) what it's like to wait for a lover. She finishes strongly in a noble melody² (which we will hear again) addressed to the star of the East (for some reason or other).

The duet Adriana/Maurizio:¹⁵ she adjusts to his new status but not easily: another helping of the warm sentiment of their earlier duet: different tune: lower voltage.

As Adriana prepares to release the mysterious woman the Princess's star melody wells up in the orchestra²⁷ and lingers on beautifully calm and quite inappropriate as the two rivals grope about in the dark.

Act III

MINUTES FROM THE START

6: *Commosa io sono* *

11: *Il russo Mencikoff* *

23: *Giusto cielo!* *

A refined sort of hornpipe sets the ballroom scene spinning. It crops up pretty often like a punctuation mark over the next ten minutes.

Adriana is introduced to the Princess who wonders uncertainly – is she isn't she the lady groped with last night? – whilst Adriana's How Dos are set to the sweetest melody⁶ with (regrettably) a whiff of schmaltz about it – but only a smidgin.

The Prince asks Maurizio for an account of his recent battle.¹¹ Which he won by dint of outstanding courage, daring skill and by blowing up a houseful of Cossacks with a keg of gunpowder. An enjoyable tongue-in-cheek number.

The music of the ballet is joined by distant and rather magical voices: this is followed by some brassy military music that has a touch of the Finlandias, but then it falls away and although the double act (Paris judging away on stage and the Princess and Adriana face to face just off it) may work dramatically the music is disappointing.

The bizarre end to the act – a chunk of declaimed *Phèdre*²³ from Adriana (a second play within-a-play, hammering home the Princess/Adriana situation): it moves from something near to parlando (spoken: no accompaniment) to melodrama (spoken against dramatic musical accompaniment) and finally a moment of real singing. A stirring finish.

Act IV

MINUTES FROM THE START

12: *Una volta c'era un principe**

20: *No, non fuinvano **

33: *Respira ***

The posse of actors who visit Adriana on her birthday to persuade her back on the boards sing a neat little stanza¹² about the Prince who is doing the rounds of the pubs and clubs.

Maurizio's proposal and duet with Adriana²⁰ is urgent and dramatic and OK but Cilea seems to have run out of big tunes or surely he would have given us one here.

Without making any big deal of it the death scene³³ is strangely effective. Adriana's short 'Save me! I don't want to die' strikes home with more power than the traditional leading ladies' deathbed arias of sweet resignation. Her last whispered vision as she is in the act of dying is spooky, and the earth trembles a little. Note the preemptive harp. On its second appearance it is punctually posthumous.

NOTES

Adriana Lecouvreur	Cilea's fourth
First night	Teatro Lirico, Milan, 6 November 1902
Reception	Terrific (Caruso as Maurizio)
Libretto	Colautti
Source	Play of the same name by Legouvé and Scribe

NEWS AND GOSSIP

Cilea had a success with his third opera *L'Arlesiana* and the publisher Sonzogno (by now a good a talent-spotter as his older rival Ricordi) commissioned *Adriana* with high hopes. It was a good bet. *Adriana* is a wonderful vehicle for an experienced actress/soprano who can be getting on a little but who can hold the stage and has enough voice to carry the part. A great actress who can sing will make a better fist of *Adriana* than a great singer who can't act. *Adriana* got off to a flying start and soon spread across the opera No. 1 circuit and has remained in the repertory ever since, but more as a standby and as a vehicle for a slightly fading star than as a popular piece in its own right. This is a mistake. See below.

COMMENT

Perhaps the most underrated opera in the book. Cilea is an inventive composer, can write

tune, orchestrate brilliantly and has great musicality and absolute certainty of touch. Just occasionally we skate along the frontiers of schmaltz, but never cross them. Because his music is so wonderfully easy and mellifluous – he is a sort of Rakhmaninov of the opera house – the super musicals are a bit sniffy. Let them sniff.

Scribe's play is said to have an 'intricate' plot which usually means you can't follow it. In cutting the play and tidying it up for the opera, Colautti did a sloppy job. Maurizio's behaviour in Act II is strange. Why doesn't he tell Adriana of his true relationship with the Princess? He asks her for a carte blanche vote of confidence, which he gets. To ask her to believe the true story would have been less demanding. The silly business of neither recognizing the other in the dark does not help the plot. Maurizio's political problems (the danger of his life, the duel, prison) are totally incomprehensible. Again in Act III why is he so cool to Adriana? There seems to be no motive for this nor for his desertion of Adriana after the party, except that he heard some gossip about her. Not good enough: neither Verdi nor Puccini would have tolerated this sort of thing.

On the credit side, Adriana herself is adorable, one of the great credibles amongst prima donnas, a part fit for Ellen Terry or Peggy Ashcroft (had they been able to sing). The backstage atmosphere is true to life, the ballroom act has its appropriate shock. And the surprise, surprise, this light-hearted opera, so far almost a light opera, suddenly takes a downward twist into a tragedy with the simple and affecting last act. Despite the amazingly lethal violets, there is true verismo in Adriana's death scene. To see her struggling with hallucinations and with death itself is frightening – a million miles away from the melodrama of the deaths by stabbing in *Cav* and *Pag*, and the sweet pathos of Mimi, Butterfly and Violetta. But to return to the music, the great joy of *Adriana* lies in the score. Never before had anyone written page on page of witty one-liners floating on a sea of orchestral froth. There are lots of musical mottos and tags of identity which crop up from time to time, but there is no need for them to bother the listener at all. For those with a quick ear they have the advantage of alerting our subconscious to anticipate a person, an emotion (Hello again, Adriana!). But we are free to relax and enjoy the music as it comes without any struggle. Then there is the orchestration, as clear as spring water, for to hear *Adriana* after one of the other late Italians – *Gioconda*, *Cav* or *Chénier* – is like clearing the palate with a Rimsky-Korsakov sorbet after a big helping of brown stew from Brahms. A glorious orchestrator who can also, when called upon, write the big tune. Although melodic inspiration does not irrigate the whole system all the time, as it does with Puccini, there is enough to give satisfaction. Adriana's piece about acting, Maurizio's first act solo and duet with Adriana, the Prince singing to the star of the East, all of these are – if you measured arias as you count oysters – Colchester Number Ones, that is large, juicy and with the authentic native flavour. In this case, Italian. *Adriana*, we love you. An unexpected alpha.

Verdi

The one where the four-star Egyptian general loves a slave girl named Celestial Aida, when there is a Grand March and a terminal entombment for two.

CAST

The King of Egypt (unnamed)	Bass
Amneris , his daughter	Mezzo
Aida , one of Amneris' slave girls	Soprano
Amonasro , Aida's father	Baritone
Radames , an Egyptian general	Tenor
Ramfis , the High Priest	Bass
A messenger, a priestess	

4 acts: running time 2 hrs 33 mins

STORY**Act I Sc 1 The Royal Palace, Memphis**

We are in Memphis not Tennessee but Ancient Egypt. News agencies report that despite the recent defeat the Ethiopians are on the march again. Radames, a two-star general, hopes to be C-in-C. The High Priest is enigmatic – he won't forecast promotion. Radames announces his (socially unacceptable) love for the slave girl Aida. But the King's daughter Amneris is quite crazy about Radames: she suspects something is going on between Radames and Aida. The King enters plus priests, guards, all sorts. He calls on a messenger to read the latest fax. Bad news: rapid advance of Ethiops under gallant General Amonasro (my Dad! exclaims Aida). The King nominates Radames C-in-C (no surprise): we hear pep talk, warlike songs etc. Aida (now alone) has a problem: either Dad wins and Radames is killed or vice versa.

Act I Sc 2 Interior of the temple of Vulcan, Memphis

In the temple there is prayer and ritual, so that Radames' leadership will be endorsed by deity Phtha (!). Sacred dance etc.: all impressive (no plot advancement).

Act II Sc 1 Amneris' suite in the palace

Amneris is dressing for her official engagements (triumphal pageant to celebrate the Ethiop

being licked): chorus sings songs of praise for Radames: Moorish slaves dance. Amneris, dead
jealous, tells Aida that Radames has been killed in action (a lie): Aida very upset. Aha says
crafty Amneris: so you do love him – he's not dead at all. Good-o! says Aida thus annoying
Amneris yet more: Amneris gives Aida a hard time for presuming love above her station
sorry I couldn't help myself says Aida. There is noise of the returning army without.

Act II Sc 2 Triumphal arch. City of Thebes

The royals take up their station for the big parade. Parade occurs: Ethiop prisoners are led
on: Aida spies her Dad!: he says don't let on it's me they think I'm just a common soldier. He
requests the King to show mercy on the prisoners: the priests say no: everyone else yes: bell
ding-dong. Radames says since their leader Amonasro is dead (ho ho) Ethiopians are no longer
threat, I vote for releasing them. The King says OK but I will keep Aida's Dad as a hostage
What's more you can marry Amneris. Whoops of joy from all but the secret lovers Radames
and Aida.

Act III Banks of the Nile. Another temple in view

Priests and priestesses sing anthems of joy for the forthcoming royal wedding. A boatload of
VIPs sails in with Amneris and Radames aboard. Aida (alone) sings of her love for Radames
and of nostalgia for her homeland. Her father Amonasro joins in with praises and love for
their homeland. He suggests Aida prise out of Radames the Egyptians' secret battle plans: the
Ethiops are ready to strike again (quick regrouping): Aida is first shocked then agrees to try.
Amonasro jumps into the bushes.

Radames comes on: he proposes marriage after his next victory: he will persuade the King
What about Amneris? she says, powerful threat there: much better fly with me. Radames
hums and haws but at last agrees. Our route must avoid the Egyptian army says she – which
way will they go? By M11-A120 says he. Amonasro jumps out of the bushes: I'm the Ethiopian
King he cries I have now got decisive intelligence. My God says Radames Aida's shopped me
and I've shopped my country. Amneris exits temple with ears aflap: I heard all she cries, you
traitorous dog. Amonasro assaults Amneris: Radames interposes. Amonasro and Aida exit fast
and Radames surrenders to the clergy.

Act IV Sc 1 Judgement Chamber. Also Radames' cell

Amneris is in psychological shock: she loves Radames but he is now a traitor. She sends for
him: she says let's get top QC for your defence. I want no defence says he. I want to die now
that Aida is dead (who told him that?). She is not dead says Amneris; her Dad is dead, Aida
has gone missing. Good news says he. Give her up, boy, marry me and save your life says
she. Nothing doing says he: my eternal love for Aida makes death preferable. O come on
says she. Not on your life says he. He is led off to the condemned cell. The charges are read
by the priests: they are met by dumb insolence: Radames is convicted as a traitor.

Act IV Sc 2 Split screen (horizontally): temple of Vulcan above, tomb/vault below

Clergy close the tomb exit with a mighty stone. Radames' spirits are understandably low

suddenly he sees Aida: ghost? vision? No, it's the real Aida who has crept in to share death throes with her beloved Radames (simultaneous suttee). Priests and priestesses chant: Aida and Radames face up to death: they bid earth farewell: the repentant Amneris in the temple prays for Radames' soul. Slow curtain.

LOOK OUT FOR

Act I Sc 1

MINUTES FROM THE START

7: *Celeste Aida* **

15: *Trema, o rea* ***

17: *Alta cagion* **

20: *Su! del Nilo* ***

24: *Ritorna vincitor!* **

Dignified exchanges between Ramfis and Radames (latter hopes to get the top job) lead to Radames' famous opening aria⁷ – If I'm C-in-C and we lick the Ethiops, what a VE Day hero I'll be, and I'll make Aida, my secret love, queen. A great tenor piece.

Guarded exchanges between the jealous Amneris and the cautious Radames (very tuneful) lead to the arrival of Aida and a magic trio¹⁵ (Amneris: Watch it Aida I believe you're the one he fancies, Radames: I hope to God she doesn't suspect, could be nasty, Aida: My tears are not because I'm exiled, I carry a torch for Radames). Aida takes the lead in a clear soprano line whilst the other two chunter on below. But none of the three can hear what the other two are saying.

The first big razzmatazz ensemble¹⁷ – trumpets, chorus, soloists, great occasional stuff leading to a foot-tapping military march²⁰ started off by the King solus and spreading irresistibly to one and all.

Aida ponders the problem of her father leading one army and her lover the other, in a fine range arioso²⁴ piece ending with a concise little prayer, delicate and heartfelt.

Act I Sc 2

MINUTES FROM THE START

30: *Possente Fhthà* **

38: *La mano tua distendi* ***

A wonderfully ingenious extended choral scene:³⁰ first the slightly spooky priestesses addressing the god Phtha in un-Verdian modal tones – harps twanging away below like crazy – then the sombre priests make their pitch: next solos addressed from Ramfis and Radames and suddenly the chorus swells into a mighty song of war³⁸ swaying and lurching towards battle, only to die away again and end with echoes of the opening spooky bit. Terrific!

Act II Sc 1

MINUTES FROM THE START

0: *Chi mai fra gl'inni* ***

6: *Fu la sorte* **

12: *Pietà ti prenda* *

The act opens with one of the most beguiling scenes in all opera:⁰ the slave girls sing hopefully of glory for Radames – harps and little bursts of trumpet – Amneris floats in with a passionate aside – how she loves him, how much she longs for him to love her – interrupted by a (mercifully short) rumbustious Moorish dance. But the slaves' chorus and Amneris' magic aside return again to haunt the ear.

The second half of the scene is taken up by the duet of confrontation between Amneris and Aida.⁶ Amneris cons Aida into admitting she loves Radames: high dramatic stuff: then Aida asks for pity in a duet¹² first with a bassoon then with an absolutely relentless Amneris who threatens death: the choral march of Act I is heard outside: Amneris says Aida will be humiliated in the triumphal bonanza about to take place: Aida is left alone onstage to make her last pathetic prayer to the gods for mercy.

Act II Sc 2

MINUTES FROM THE START

17: *Gloria all' Egitto* ***

27: *Che veggo!* **

29: *Gloria all' Egitto etc. (again)* ***

The great choral triumph of the Egyptians¹⁷ (and of Verdi). The mighty opening stanza (and the citizens) is answered by the women only with a quieter section which has an upward spiral to the end: then some vigorous counterpoint from the men and back into the big tune once again. Followed by the grandest and best-known march in the business. Nothing like it before or since.

The majestic scene rolls on: after the ballets** – Verdi's Class I ballet music here – and Amonasro's plea for mercy, look out especially for:

1. The ensemble²⁷ which debates the matter of to kill or not to kill the prisoners (in favour of Ramfis and priests, against: slaves and prisoners, populace – big majority): meanwhile Radames 'thinks' (Doesn't my Aida look just lovely when she's sad), also Amneris (He's eyeing her in a very disturbing fashion): two threads in a mighty ensemble which ebbs and flows in elegant counterpoint, but mainly flows.

2. The final ensemble²⁹ after the King has made the unfortunate suggestion that Radames should marry Amneris. The populace just love the idea and bang on about the glory of Egypt once again, but Aida is shattered while Amneris (the fool) thinks her dreamboat has come in. Another sensational ensemble: a final race to the tape with a brief repeat of the Grand March.

Act III

MINUTES FROM THE START

5: *Qui Radames* *

21: *Pur ti riveggo* **

23: *Là...tra foreste* **

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