



# THE NEW JERSEY ITALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION



## AIDA

**Grade Level:** Fourth and Fifth Grade

**Subjects:** Music / Language Arts / Character Education

**Categories:** Arts and Sciences / History and Society

**Standards:**

Please see page 4 of the lesson plan for complete New Jersey Student Learning Standards alignment.

**Objectives:**

The students will be able to:

1. determine whether individual affection should surmount national loyalty and national duty.
2. extrapolate their determinations and apply them to a modern setting.

**Abstract:**

Students will examine Verdi's opera *Aida*. They will examine the torn loyalties *Aida* must confront as she chooses between her love of nation and family and her love for the Egyptian general, Radames.

**Background:**

*Aida*, by Giuseppe Verdi, is written in the style of grand opera, which is different than Verdi's previous works. According to the *Bloomsberg Dictionary of Music*, a grand opera has plots which are serious and heroic and is chosen from history rather than mythology. *Aida's* plot presents the question of love versus duty during a time of war. An important point of this opera is that the hero and heroine willingly go to their deaths for love and are not overcome by the closed values of the societies to which they belong. Contrast this with an opera like *La Traviata*, where Violetta, the protagonist, gives up her ability to be with Alfredo the man she loves, to allow Alfredo's sister to marry, thus "doing the right thing" and ultimately dying.

The opera is also different from Verdi's previous works in that it is not divided into recognizable pieces (e.g., solos, duets, ensembles, etc.) with recitative that connects them. *Aida* is an opera where the music and singing flows through continuously and is all connected to the drama that is unfolding. Though we have arias, trios and duets they all flow within the context of the story and all singing is continuous.

Aida was written in conjunction with a request from the Khedive of Egypt. It was premiered in Cairo, Egypt in December of 1871. After this it was performed at La Scala in Milan, Italy in 1872. Some recounts of the origin of the opera say it was started as part of the opening of the Suez Canal ceremonies. Verdi, however, rejected the request to create a composition for this event. It was only after Verdi was inspired by a sketch of a story by the Egyptian archeologist, Mariette Bey, that the composer was interested in composing the opera. This sketch was supposedly based on an episode in Egyptian history. The story had everything that Verdi found valuable and important: love, patriotism, devotion, steadfastness and courage – elements that had significance in his own life. Of all these elements two were definitely in the foreground: love of country, where his homeland Italia was embroiled in the question of independence from Austria, and the desire for love over the wishes of society, a theme that reflected Verdi's own marriage. Thus the opera *Aida* was born.

A very important element in this opera is leitmotif, where Verdi sets up each character as well as a number of groups with their own musical themes. These are heard when the characters appear, and what makes this interesting is that each motif changes, depending on what the character feels or the drama dictates. This in itself is a perfect demonstration of the power of opera to communicate the feelings of the characters through music, and Verdi actually creates a lot of depth by contrasting different motifs against each other. According to the Harvard Dictionary of Music, "Leitmotifs combine both dramatic and musical functions, often in complex ways. They may simply emphasize aurally what is on stage, or suggest to the listener something unseen that is being thought by one of the characters..." Thus when *Aida* appears, we always hear her theme; the same holds true for the other characters as well as the priests. When these motifs combine together, as in the first act when Amneris, Aida and Radames are together, it provides a depth of drama that is hard to achieve in any other manner.

The voices that Verdi used for each character also add to the nature of the story. Aida is almost always sung by a heavy-voiced soprano, also known as a spinto. This not only allows for more depth in expressing the contrasting emotions Aida feels, but it also serves to make sure her voice is heard over the heavy orchestral accompaniment Verdi provides, true to the grand opera style. Amneris, the Egyptian princess who wants to foil the love between Aida and Radames, is a heavier mezzo soprano, mezzo soprano being a deeper female voice. This deeper voice serves among other things to communicate Amneris' dark and ominous determination to have Radames for herself. Radames is the tenor lead and is almost always a spinto tenor, with a more dramatic tone and heavier voice to complement Aida. It also gives him the heroic quality necessary for this type of grand opera. The father, Amonasro, is a heavier baritone voice as well, sometimes called a Verdi baritone. Verdi created music that required a new kind of singing from his baritones, and even created leading roles for them, something not common in the regular course opera before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A Verdi baritone can provide more drama and emotion, basically because Verdi wrote his music for them slightly higher than conventional baritone roles. This gives the baritone the opportunity to display more emotions and display more intensity when they are singing (an example of this kind of baritone is recognizably seen in *Rigoletto*, the lead title role of the opera of the same name).

*Aida* has become one of the most frequently performed operas in history. At the

Metropolitan Opera house alone, it has been performed over 1049 times. This tale of love and war captures the hearts of many people. As in many operas, the drama is filled with passion and emotion, which is brilliantly represented by the music and the singing. Verdi made sure that each musical motif, each orchestration, reflected the drama at hand. Everything in the opera lifts all factors of Italian opera to their highest heights – spectacular singing, gorgeous stage settings, masterful orchestration and a ballet –all blended in perfect unity.

### **Procedures:**

- I. Have students listen to the story about Giuseppe Verdi’s life at [https://kids.kiddle.co/Giuseppe\\_Verdi](https://kids.kiddle.co/Giuseppe_Verdi).
- II. Go over the background piece with the students and help them to understand “opera” as a type of music and a type of performance.
- III. Allow students to listen to Verdi’s Triumphal March from *Aida* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3w4I-KEIxQ>; [https://www.classicsforkids.com/composers/composer\\_profile.php?id=78](https://www.classicsforkids.com/composers/composer_profile.php?id=78)
  - a. Have students listen to the story of *Aida* at <https://www.liveabout.com/verdis-aida-synopsis-723733>.
  - b. Have students answer the questions on *Aida*.
    - i. Should *Aida* and *Radames* have had a relationship even though their peoples were at war? Explain.
    - ii. Did *Radames* have a duty to put his nation and the Egyptian people before his personal feelings? Explain.
    - iii. Did *Aida* have a duty to betray her boyfriend to save her country?
      1. Or, should *Aida* have betrayed her country and the Ethiopian people to protect her boyfriend? Explain.
    - iv. Would you ever let a personal relationship come before your duty to your country? Explain.
      1. Do you believe you have a duty to your country and to the American people? Explain.
- IV. Have students discuss their answers with the class.
  - a. Give each student a chance to explain at least one of his or her answer.
  - b. Ask students to offer comments on their classmates’ answers.
- V. Explain to the students why *Aida* is a tragedy.
  - a. Show students that sometimes choices are very difficult.
  - b. Have students examine what factors they considered when making the decisions above.

### **Assessment:**

Ask students to write a paragraph explaining when they would put the good of their country or the good of others above their own personal feelings and pleasure.

# **New Jersey Student Learning Standards**

## **Visual and Performing Arts**

- 1.2.5.A.3 Determine the impact of significant contributions of individual artists in dance, music, theater, and visual art.

## **Social Studies**

- 6.2.8.A.2.c Determine the role of slavery in the economic and social structures of ancient river valley civilizations.

## **English Language Arts**

RL.4.2 Determine the key details to identify theme in a story, drama, or poem and summarize the text.

### RL 4.3

Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

### RL 5.2

Determine the key details in a story, drama or poem to identify the theme and to summarize the text.

### RL 5.3

Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).