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**Ritorna vincitor!**

Interpretation of an aria in the opera *Aida* by Verdi

The recorded element of this thesis is available at the library of the Royal College of Music in Stockholm.
Summary

This examination essay is a study of the aria Ritorna vincitor! from the opera *Aida* by composer Giuseppe Verdi. The aim of this study is to address the vocal and interpretational questions that may arise while learning the aria. My work with this essay has included searching for information about Verdi, the opera *Aida* and the cultural, political and musical climate wherein the opera was born. I have also watched the opera and listened to several versions of the aria. I concentrated especially on the interpretations of Mirella Freni, Leontyne Price and Maria Callas. I also created a musical analysis of the aria. Throughout the process of writing this essay I have kept in my mind my own perspective as a singer. I have formed my study from the information I find useful in the process of approaching a new piece of music. The process of writing this essay has provided me with a lot of insight into the musical ideals and ideas behind Verdi’s work. Writing this essay made me aware of the dilemma of fulfilling the vocal expectations of the tradition and at the same time interpreting the drama convincingly. I have found a lot of useful material for a singer’s artistic development and all that I have learned will certainly come into use in my future vocal studies.

Keywords: Romantic opera, Italian opera, Giuseppe Verdi, Aida, Ritorna vincitor!, aria
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1 Introduction

1.1 Why *Aida*?

I heard the aria Ritorna vincitor! for the first time several years ago. The dramatic intensity of the aria captured me immediately. Back then I was under the impression that I am a lyric coloratura soprano. Aida most definitely is not a role for lyric coloraturas, but it didn’t stop me from dreaming of performing this magnificent piece of music one day. I got to know the opera *Aida* better when I was working as a chorister in the Savonlinna Opera Festival Choir in 2012. *Aida* was one of the three operas I sang in that summer. I loved the soloists of *Aida*, especially the two sopranos who sang the main role. The setting and the whole story of the opera where enchanting. The epic triumphal scene in the second act just blew my mind. Last year I found out that the main role might suit me vocally, so I thought it would be an investment for my future to do my examination essay about this aria.

1.2 The aim of the study

The aria presents several technical difficulties, where the abrupt dramatic changes are not the easiest ones to tackle. One of the reasons why I chose to do my examination essay about this aria is the way it challenges singers. I want to develop as an artist and find ways to dig deeper as an interpreter. I want to know what Verdi was looking for and tried to describe when he wrote *Aida* and the aria Ritorna vincitor! in particular. Since Verdi was a master at combining drama and music, there are many aspects in his music that serve the drama and which I as a performer can use as tools to my interpretation. I also want to find out about the musical ideals behind the opera and especially Verdi’s opinion about singing. The aesthetic ideals of opera where under a great turmoil during the nineteenth century, and I believe that we singers owe it to composers to make sure that we understand their minds and pursuits. That requires knowledge of the cultural climate in which the composers lived and of the musical and artistic debates and changes that took place during their lifetime. I hope that this study can also serve as an example of how much background information can help in learning and understanding a musical piece.
1.3 Methods

The main methods that I have used in creating this essay have been reading the source material and listening to the opera, especially different versions of the aria. I have watched the opera on DVD. I have also listened to several recordings of the aria on YouTube and on CD’s. I composed a theoretical analysis of the aria. The analysis included studying the harmony and the structure of the piece, the orchestration and its relationship with the vocal melody. The theoretical analysis also included a short study, which I did with the composition and notation software Sibelius. I have also been looking for information of the voice type that is supposed to perform the role of Aida, and what is expected of that voice type.

1.4 Overview of literature

I’ve used four main literary resources. The most important one has been The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. The book is edited by Stanley Sadie, and the part about Verdi is written by René Bernard Lenaerts and Kristine Forney. The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians is a very comprehensive and detailed opus, and in the few instances where there where confusion or even clear contradictions found in the information provided by different books, I chose to rely on The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. One of the contradictions that I came across concerned Verdi’s return to Busseto from Milan after having been rejected by the Milan Conservatory. When I studied the details of the opera Aida, I used The New Grove Dictionary of Opera as my main source. It is edited by Stanley Sadie. The chapter about Aida is written by Roger Parker. Both dictionaries are very elaborate. I also used books called Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe by Leon Plantinga and Concise History of Western Music by Barbara Russano Hanning. Those two provided me with an overview of Verdi’s life, works and the cultural context of the nineteenth century. I found a good translation of the aria Ritorna vincitor! in Ellen Bleiler’s book AÏDA by Giuseppe Verdi and used the translation in my musical analysis.

The sheet music that I used for the musical analysis is from a libretto published by G. Ricordi & Company, which is the original publisher of the opera. I also searched for the aria in the web database of International Music Score Library Project and found the score of the aria as an excerpt from Matmati's edition. When I compared the two scores I noticed that they
weren't exactly similar. They differed in the keys of four instruments, which were the clarinet, two types of horns and the bassoon. In the Matmati’s edition the instruments were clarinet in C, horn in E, horn in A and trumpet in E. In the Ricordi’s libretto the instruments were clarinet in B♭, both horns were in E♭, and trumpet in C. I decided to use the score by Ricordi, since Ricordi is the original publisher of *Aida*.

I also used Internet based sources. I looked for information at Stanford University’s web sites. I have listened to two CD’s of *Aida*. The first one is a recording by Decca that was originally published in 1962. The conductor on that recording is Sir Georg Solti. Leontyne Price performs the role of Aida. The second CD is a recording by EMI Classics that was originally released in 1980. The conductor on that recording is Herbert von Karajan. Mirella Freni sings the main role. I found my favourite interpretation by Maria Callas on YouTube.

### 2 Background

#### 2.1 Giuseppe Verdi

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi (1813-1901) is generally considered the most prestigious and famous Italian musical dramatist in history. Many of his operas such as *Otello*, *La traviata*, *Un ballo in maschera* and *Rigoletto* are among the most frequently performed operas in the world until this day (Dornic 2014; Lenaerts & Forney 2001). In my opinion, the Italian Romanticism is crystallized in Verdi’s highly dramatic and catchy composing style.

Despite Verdi’s tendency to depreciate his background and education, he had a fair start to his life. Verdi was born to middle-class parents in the village of Le Roncole in Parma, Italy. The date of his birth is not certain. He was born on either 9th or 10th of October in 1813. Giuseppe's father Carlo was an innkeeper and his mother Luigia Uttini was a spinner. Verdi was only four years old when he began his musical studies under the supervision of local priests, and already at the age of nine Verdi took the position of an organist at a local church. Verdi moved to a nearby town called Busseto when he was eleven years old and entered a school where he studied Latin, Italian, rhetoric and humanities. He also started taking music lessons from Ferdinando Provesi. Provesi worked as a maestro di cappella and as a
director at a local music school and Philharmonic Society (Lenaerts & Forney 2001).

Between the ages thirteen and eighteen Verdi wrote a lot of music for various occasions and ensembles, but unfortunately none of those pieces were preserved. In 1831 Verdi moved to live in the house of Antonio Barezzi, and that event turned out to have great effect on Verdi’s life. Barezzi became Verdi’s patron and a few years later Giuseppe married Barezzi’s daughter, Margherita. With Barezzi sponsoring his studies, Verdi applied to the Milan Conservatory in 1832. Despite receiving credit for being a promising composer Verdi wasn’t accepted due to mostly bureaucratic reasons and the Conservatory’s age limit. The rejection was a big blow to his self-esteem, but with the financial support from Barezzi he stayed in Milan and studied there three years privately with Vincenzo Lavigna. Although Verdi later expressed that Lavigna taught him only counterpoint and thus didn’t contribute much to his composing skills or career, Lavigna also taught Verdi free composition and introduced him to Milan’s cultural society (Hanning 2010; Lenaerts & Forney 2001).

After finishing his studies with Lavigna, Verdi moved back to Busseto and in 1836 he filled Provesi’s working position partly. The same year he married Margherita and they soon had two children. But the small circles of Busseto weren’t enough for Verdi, and in 1839 he moved back to Milan with his wife. During his last stay in Milan Verdi had become acquainted with the director of Milanese Philharmonic Society, a man named Pietro Massini, and with the help of Massini Verdi managed to organize for his first opera Oberto to be performed in La Scala. Thanks to the good reviews of the opera, La Scala ordered three more operas from Verdi. The next opera Un giorno di regno failed, and it is possible that after that Verdi considered quitting composing, also for the tragic losses he had suffered in his private life. Both his children had died before reaching two years of age, and his wife passed away in 1840, only a few months before the premiere of Un giorno di regno. In any case there was a significant gap of eighteen months before Verdi’s next opera Nabucco came out in 1842. Nabucco turned out to be a huge success, mainly because of its political agenda. In the nineteenth century Italy went through a long struggle towards national unification and independence, and the Biblical story of oppressed Hebrews ignited feelings of nationalism in the Italian audience (Lenaerts & Forney 2001; Plantinga 1984).

Nabucco was only the beginning in the series of Verdi’s politically inflammatory operas. It was largely due to the political aspect and nationalistic agendas of his operas that Verdi had such great success.
*Nabucco* also marked the beginning of the most industrious composing period in Verdi’s life, in the next 11 years he composed 16 operas. In 1844 Verdi for the first time composed an opera for another theatre than La Scala in Milan. *Ernani* was written for La Venice theatre in Venice, and this time Verdi had much more authority and artistic freedom in choosing the subject, the singers and the librettist. Verdi chose to work with librettist Francesco Maria Piave, and the opera was the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration between the two. Verdi was very careful when choosing the subjects for his operas. He contributed to the librettos of many of his operas, and was particularly demanding when working with Piave. Together they created ten operas, which are *I due Foscari, Il corsaro, Stiffelio, La forza del destino, La traviata, Simon Boccanegra, Attila, Ernani, Macbeth* and *Rigoletto*. Verdi wanted to bring great drama to stage and supervised the productions of his operas from the beginning all the way to performances (Lenaerts & Forney 2001; Parker 2014; Plantinga 1984).

When working with Nabucco Verdi had met soprano Giuseppina Strepponi. The two of them became lovers and stirred controversy with their relationship, since they lived together as lovers several years before marrying in 1859. The couple didn’t care about the scandal they caused, and they stayed together till Strepponi’s death in 1897 (Hanning 2010; Lenaerts & Forney 2001).

Verdi’s work began to gain recognition abroad in the 1850’s. In his homeland Italy Verdi had succeeded thanks to the political dimension in his operas, but his musical talent and the intense drama of his works opened doors to other countries as well. Apart from a short visit to Austria Verdi had stayed in Italy his whole life, but in 1847 he ventured on the first of his many travels abroad. The success abroad was the beginning of a new international life for Verdi and he spent several years abroad in cities such as Vienna, London, Paris and Madrid. He wrote operas to several theatres, oversaw their execution and conducted them. However, the most productive phase of Verdi’s composing career came to an end in 1853 with *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*. During the next two decades Verdi wrote only six operas. Financial security allowed Verdi to concentrate on taking care of his villa, which he had bought near his birthplace. The unification of Italy in the latter part of the nineteenth century had also dispelled Verdi’s need to affect politics through composing. He received a political post in the first Italian parliament, but wasn’t particularly keen on fulfilling his political duties. He’s operas had already affected the political situation of Italy and given him a notable status (Hanning 2010; Lenaerts & Forney 2001; Plantinga 1984).
Despite having an international career in the important cultural cities of the time, Verdi was very suspicious of the international influences on Italian music. The changes in the Italian culture scene and new musical ideas were some of the reasons why Verdi stopped composing after the major success of *Aida* in 1871. Verdi retreated to his villa, and although he composed his *Requiem* in 1874, it seemed that he had retired from writing operas. However, Verdi’s publisher Ricordi managed to persuade Verdi to write two more operas. Verdi had always admired Shakespeare’s plays, and Ricordi suggested he’d return to that source of inspiration. It took seven years from Ricordi’s initiative before *Othello* was finished, and it premiered sixteen years after Aida. Taking that much time to evaluate the changes in the field of music and to find his own way to reply to the changes is a great example of Verdi’s devotion to his work and musical drama. After *Othello* Verdi composed one more opera, *Falstaff*, and that too was based on one of Shakespeare’s plays (Lenaerts & Forney 2001, Plantinga 1984).

Verdi passed away on 27th of January in 1901 at the honourable age of 87. He had become a national institution already in his lifetime, and his death was mourned accordingly (Hanning 2010; Lenaerts & Forney 2001).

2.2 Verdi’s composing style

Stylistically Verdi was an obvious successor to the previous nineteenth century Italian opera composers such as Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti and Gioachino Rossini. He carried on the strong traditions of Italian opera, and the influence of his predecessors is evident especially in the operas of his so-called first period, which lasted till 1855. The forms of different numbers in opera Verdi inherited most clearly from Rossini, and the appreciation for vocal melody from Bellini and Donizetti, although apparently Verdi found Bellini’s arias tiresome and too long. Verdi was also a great admirer of Beethoven. Verdi used all the musical influences that he had taken in while forging his own signature touch (Hanning 2010; Plantinga 1984).

The topics of Verdi’s earliest operas were human dramas, much like the topics of the operas by Donizetti. Verdi had a very clear view that his operas were musical dramas above all else. When choosing a topic for a new opera he searched for bold and interesting characters and noble stories where the main characters would face great conflicts. Strong emotions, struggles larger than life, death, love; all the ingredients of a passionate melodrama are present in his early operas. The passion for great drama seems to have had a significant effect on Verdi’s composing style. Verdi’s energetic approach to
action and the way he compressed arias and shortened recitatives all served the continuity of drama. Verdi didn't scorn simplicity, quite the contrary. He used brisk, marchlike rhythms, catchy melodies and *unisonos* combined with a few musical twists to create emotional climaxes. Verdi became particularly famous for his vocal melodies. He even tried to keep his new melodies in secret from the public during the rehearsal period of a new opera, for he didn't want any outsider hearing them before the premiere. Verdi also placed more dramatic importance on the choir than his predecessors, and the choir got to perform highly emotional parts. Still, the ostensible simplicity wasn't a sign of lack of skills. Verdi was capable of playing with chromaticism and musical complexity, but he used it for decoration and stirring things up, not as main means of musical expression. Harmonically speaking his music was clearly diatonic. Verdi didn't have a clear goal for the harmonic development in his works, but occasionally he connected certain harmonic features to certain characters. The most interesting aspect about Verdi’s composing style was the structure of his music. He had adopted the forms of the so-called number opera as a part of his Italian legacy, but already in his first operas he began to speed the action up and create a new kind of flow in drama. That strive for the continuity of action is what labelled his development as a composer (Hanning 2010; Lenaerts & Forney 2001; Plantinga 1984).

Verdi held the human voice in great value and one can argue that he had a special relationship with that instrument. He wanted to be involved in the productions of his operas as much as possible, and that included choosing the singers. In the beginning of his career Verdi was particularly careful when choosing the singers for his premiers, for they had a great impact on whether the opera would be a success or not. Verdi even waited to hear the singers practice in the theatre where the premiere was held before he completed the orchestral score, making sure that the music would fit the vocals. With his early operas Verdi also tailored many characters for certain singers and their unique abilities. In some operas Verdi experiments with the possibilities of human voice, demanding great skills and diversity from the singers. He expressed the characters' development through vocal expressions especially in the earlier part of his career. The growing demands that the Late Romantic music placed on the human voice shifted the ideals of vocal aesthetics further away from the ideals of the bel canto tradition. Verdi adjusted to the transition successfully. During his career Verdi also created a vocal concept of the so-called Verdian baritone, and he gave the basses more serious roles than they had had in the earlier opera literature (Lenaerts & Forney 2001; Plantinga 1984).
In 1847 Verdi moved to Paris and stayed there for two years. During those years he was in close contact with the French grand opera, which had a great influence on his work during the middle period of his composing career. The middle period is considered to have begun in 1855, and that period can be seen as a time of multidimensional artistic growth for him. Verdi's operas grew both in size and volume and the technological development of the time made it possible to create more complex staging in operas. The influence of the French grand opera and especially the works of Giacomo Meyerbeer encouraged Verdi to explore more diverse and sophisticated orchestral colours. The harmonic intensity in his operas increased, but the overall harmonic approach continued to be diatonic. During the middle period Verdi chose different topics that were a step away from the melodramatic approach of his earlier operas. He also combined both comic and tragic elements in his operas. In the 1860's the Italian music scene opened up to foreign influences. Verdi accepted the musical development, but was already then reluctant to freely mix the musical traditions of different countries together. Verdi's stand on the structures of music seemed to be under a great upheaval; although he didn't totally disengage himself from the traditional Italian forms he continued to search for a greater continuity of drama. Verdi didn't cast away the structure but more like wove the different scenes and acts together musically. The musical unification happened for example through a use of recurring musical elements. The culmination of his development during the middle period can be seen and heard in Aida, which is the last work of Verdi’s middle period. The magnificent marriage between Italian traditions and the French grand opera floods Aida with scenic, harmonic and melodic abundance (Hanning 2010; Lenaerts & Forney 2001).

It is curious that even though Verdi opposed German music’s influence on Italian opera, he shared very similar views with Richard Wagner when it came to the symbiosis of music and drama. In his last two operas Verdi reached a whole new level in his attempt to serve the drama in musical terms, and the traditional divide between action and reflection is absent in them. The greatest challenge of the nineteenth century opera was breaking free from the traditional forms and finding an organic way to carry on the story, and this was Verdi’s mission too. In his second-to-last opera Otello Verdi harnessed his music to serve the story in a way that was exceptionally reactive and expressive. The way that Verdi treated the libretto was similar to that of theatrical melodrama. Otello wasn’t just a series of musical numbers anymore. It was more of an opera consisting of theatrical acts. One could say that Verdi’s struggle between maintaining the Italian operatic tradition and absorbing new influences that come with the inevitable
development of music are clearly audible in *Otello*. The evil character Jago sings in a declamatory and robust manner, as does the main character Otello when in the possession of his inner demons. The only good and pure character is Desdemona and she expresses herself in the graceful manner of bel canto. The different singing styles can be seen as a symbolic collision of the old traditions and the new musical ideals. In any case, Verdi’s mature style brought new enrichment and definition to his music. Even though Verdi’s last opera was only the second comic opera he wrote, it was nothing less than a splendid successor to the operas of Rossini, the master of opera buffa. However, the very last works that Verdi wrote were not operas but religious choral works. Perhaps it was Verdi’s way of making a final statement about the integration of different cultural traditions when he used the texts of Dante in the pieces and draw the musical inspiration from Palestrina, both iconic figures in Italian art and culture (Hanning 2010; Lenaerts & Forney 2001, Plantinga 1984).

2.3 *Aida*

*Aida* is Verdi’s 24th opera and the last one he composed before retreating to a long break from writing operas. Prior to composing *Aida* Verdi was struggling to find a suitable topic for a new opera. Although he received many suggestions for a new libretto, he wasn’t pleased with any of them until he was sent a scenario by Auguste Mariette in 1870. Mariette was a French Egyptologist and his scenario was situated in ancient Egypt. Verdi grasped the idea and the librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni began adapting the scenario into a libretto with the help of librettist Camille Du Locle and Verdi himself (Hanning 2010; Parker 1992).

The previous year Verdi had refused to write a hymn to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal, but the new opera was conveniently set in Egypt and Verdi wrote it for the grand opening of Cairo’s Opera House. The production of the opera was delayed by the Franco-Prussian War, since all the costumes and sets were in Paris. *Aida* premiered in Cairo in 1871, and was immediately a great success. Verdi made some alterations to the score before the opera had its Italian premiere in La Scala in 1872. Again it was an enormous success. Soon after its premiere *Aida* entered the general repertoire and has stayed there to this day (Parker 1992).

In the previous decades Verdi had immersed himself in interpersonal drama and the development of characters in his operas. During the 1850’s he started to become interested in more ambitious and showy subjects. *Aida* depicted his interest in the larger than life drama. Despite living in the
Romantic period, Verdi didn’t present Romantic ideals excessively in his works. Still, the exoticism of *Aida* associated Verdi with the so-called musical Orientalism, which was a musical movement inside Romanticism. Set in Memphis and Thebes in the time of Pharaohs, *Aida* depicts the conflict between love and honour, and the struggles of the main characters serve as allegories to the struggles that individual people and nations have to face (Hanning 2010; Plantinga 1984).

The main character is Aida, a captured Ethiopian princess who is kept as a slave in Egypt. She’s in love with Egyptian Radames, the Captain of the Guards. Radames shares Aida’s romantic feelings, but the social hierarchy is in the way of their love. Egypt is on the verge of war with Ethiopia. Radames is appointed as the commander of Egyptian troops and is sent out to battle against Ethiopian forces. Aida finds herself torn between the love for her own father, the king of Ethiopia, and the love for Radames. The excruciating inner conflict causes her to sing out the famous aria *Ritorna vincitor!* which ends with Aida pleading with the gods to pity her. Aida is not the only one in love with Radames, for the princess of Egypt, Amneris, desires Radames too. Amneris anticipates Aida’s feelings and manages to get Aida to involuntarily reveal her affection by falsely claiming that Radames has died. Radames is nevertheless alive and has beaten the Ethiopian troops. When he arrives in Thebes, Aida sees her father Amonasro among the prisoners of war. The King of Egypt promises to fulfil any desire Radames has for the prize of winning the battle and Radames asks for clemency for the prisoners. The King of Egypt grants Radames his wish and as a final prize he promises his daughter Amneris for his wife. On the eve of Radames and Amneris’ wedding, Aida sets out for a secret meeting with Radames. Amonasro appears and persuades Aida into asking Radames about the route of the Egyptian troops to help the Ethiopians in setting a trap for the Egyptians. Amonasro goes into hiding, and when Radames appears he reveals the army’s plans out of Aida’s request. They are all discovered by Amneris and the Chief Priest, but Aida and her father manage to escape, Radames being the only one to get caught. Despite Amneris’ attempts to save Radames he is condemned to death by being buried alive below an altar. Aida sneaks into the vault where Radames is buried and they embrace death together (Parker 1992).

Verdi’s operas can roughly be divided into two groups, one consisting of more conservative works and the other including more experimental operas. *Aida* belongs to the conservative group for its conventional divisions in form. In a manner of grand opera *Aida* has for example multi-sectional duets and a grand ceremonial scene. At the time of *Aida’s* premiere the formality of the opera’s structure caused some criticism as it seemed out-of-date, but
within the seemingly old-fashioned form Verdi expresses the sort of continuity of drama that was new to his works. It can be argued that this was due to Richard Wagner’s influence. The harmonic language and orchestration are complex and elaborate. Still, the most outstanding feature of *Aida* was the use of local colour in music. The exoticism in Verdi’s operas reached its height in *Aida*, and *Aida* was the first Italian opera to have its settings play such an irreplaceable role in the drama. Thanks to the local colour in the music, *Aida* can also be seen as Verdi’s most modern opera, and it most certainly is a majestic result of Verdi’s lengthy pursuit of combining the best of the French grand opera and the Italian tradition (Lenaerts & Forney 2001; Parker 1992; Plantinga 1984).

### 3 Musical analysis

3.1 Overview of the aria Ritorna vincitor!

The orchestra in the aria requires the following instruments; two flutes, a piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets in B♭, two bassoons, four horns in E♭, two trumpets in C, three trombones, a cimbasso, a timpani, a bass drum, four violins, two violas, a cello and a double bass. All of these instruments are used in the overture of the aria, and all except the bass drum are needed in the rest of the aria as well.

Ritorna vincitor! starts with a short overture which is a repetition of the musical theme that is used in the previous scene just before Aida's aria. In the previous scene the Egyptians had received news of the invasion of Ethiopian troops and the crowd had received the news with a zealous hunger for war. Aida had become ecstatic from all the tension and fanaticism and joined in the cry "Ritorna vincitor!" The cry means “May he return a victor!” (Bleiler 1962) During the overture of the aria everyone except for Aida exits the stage leaving Aida all alone with the realization of what she has just said. A short pause follows the overture and the vocal part of the aria starts with Aida repeating the cry, a chromatic ascending phrase, in disbelief and shock. The entire aria is then a representation of Aida's inner turmoil. In some way the aria can be considered as a summary of the entire opera, for in it Aida unravels how she is torn between the loyalty for her father and the love for her lover, fears losing her loved ones in battle, remembers the sweetness of Radames' love and is utterly incapable of deciding who's side she's on. As it is clear that Verdi loved passionate drama, writing this aria must have been a great joy for him.
A couple of typical characteristics of Romantic music are found in the aria. Verdi used plenty of dissonance in the form of chromatics and diminished chords to create feelings of conflict and distress. It is worth noticing that in the highlight of the entire aria, which is Aida’s cry in bars 54-55, the orchestra plays a diminished chord. Harmonically speaking the most stable section is section E with Aida praying to gods to release her from her suffering. Verdi uses abrupt changes in dynamics especially at the beginning of the aria, and throughout the aria he uses alternating crescendo and diminuendo to imitate Aida's emotional reactions. The changes in tempi and sometimes in keys too are articulate.

Ritorna vincitor! is not a traditional aria in form. Excluding the overture the aria consists of five different sections, which differ from each other significantly. Let us call these sections A, B, C, D and E. Section A consists of bars 10-36, section B of bars 37-55, section C of bars 56-75, section D of bars 76-92 and section E of bars 93-126. Due to the periodic nature of the aria, I’ve searched for the individual dramatic climaxes inside every section instead of formulating a continuous line of dramatic development of the entire piece. The biggest culmination in the entire aria is still very clear, and that is in part B.

Section A is a peculiar combination of alternating recitative and melodic phrases. This dynamic solution is understandable since Verdi was always striving for continuity and often skipped recitatives completely. I’ve analysed the alterations of melody and recitative using the notation software Sibelius.

Example 1: The aria begins with an ascending melodic phrase.

Example 2: The aria then continues with a recitative phrase.

The text in part A is Aida's shocked declaration of what horrible things she has wished to happen for her family when she hoped for Radames' victory. The strings provide a static yet charged background for the vocal melody in
section A, occasionally bursting out into musical replies to recitative parts. The tempo in part A is allegro agitato, and the dynamics of the orchestra vary from forte to pianissimo and back to forte again. The oboe and the bassoon come in at bar 25 and start raising the tension with the cello through chromatic motion and altering crescendos and diminuendos. There is a dramatic climax in bar 31 and the harmonically unstable section ends aggressively at bar 36.

The section B begins in E minor and in a faster tempo with the viola's quiet yet nervous staccatos. The vocals come in simultaneously with the bassoon and the rest of the strings. Immediately, the strings and the bassoon take a more melodic role than in section A and start supporting the vocal melody with long wavelike motions. Aida moves on to pleading with the gods to wipe out her wish for Radames' victory. She begs to be reunited with her father and shouts for the destruction of Egyptian troops. The dramatic tension starts to rise considerably around bar 46 where oboe, clarinet, horn, and timpani join in. In bars 54-55 the aria comes to its biggest climax, which is on an E diminished chord. There the vocal melody reaches its highest point, which is B♭2. For the climax the orchestra joins in with the largest number of instruments in the aria, excluding the overture. This dramatic climax is the very spot where Aida realizes that now the love for her father has caused her to pray for the destruction of Radames instead. She cries out in terror.

Immediately after the culmination a sudden change in dramatic intensity, volume and tempo occurs. The orchestra quiets down totally and the vocal melody leads the way to the short section C, which is very different from sections A and B. The clarinet has a short dialog with the vocals at the beginning of section C. Aida calms down as she remembers the tender love of Radames, and how it has made her happy despite her slavery. The beginning of section C is in F major but in bar 66 the key changes to A♭ major. The highlight of the section comes in bar 69. At the same point the key changes to A♭ minor. In bar 70 comes an interesting rhythmic theme, descending triplets, during which Aida laments her cruel fate.

Section D continues in A♭ minor, but it starts immediately in a new and faster tempo. A hasty flow and restlessness are what describe section D where woodwinds create wavelike musical lines with the vocal melody. The dynamics are relatively low. Aida becomes more and more confused, uttering how she can't even weep or pray for neither Radames nor her father. The section ends with Aida wishing for her own death. There is no
clear point of dramatic climax in section D, instead the dramatics grow gradually and the section ends with a crescendo leading to section E.

Despite the crescendo and ascending melodies of the orchestra at the end of section D, section E starts very peacefully. It is like Aida finally finds clarity in her thoughts by turning to gods for help. The whole section is in A♭ major. The melody is very simple yet beautiful and hymn-like. The aria ends with Aida praying to the gods to pity her in her misery and torment, hence the sensitive yet ardent atmosphere of the whole section. The strings support the vocal melody delicately and it is noteworthy that the cello and the double bass stay in a relatively high register, giving section E an airy feeling. The intensity starts to build up again at bar 109 and the dramatic climax of part E is clearly at bar 113, where the singer performs the note A♭. The dynamics is in forte. Immediately after, the dynamics are softened to piano pianissimo. Both the vocal melody and the orchestra bring the intensity down in descending triplets. The ending of the aria is a sigh-like dialogue between vocals and string instruments, and the vocal melody ends with a cadence. At first the harmony at the end of Aida’s melody seem to end in A♭ minor, but with the last syllable that Aida whispers she delivers an ethereal major third of the chord A♭. The diverse aria then ends in A♭ major when bassoon, the clarinet and the cello bring the aria to a very quiet and tender ending.

The English translation of the aria that I used in the analysis is by Ellen H. Bleiler (1962). I have divided the translation below according to musical sections. I arranged the lyrics in close accordance to phrasing in the score.

Part A

May he return a victor!
And the impious word came from my lips!
Victor over my father...
over him who bears arms for me..
in order to restore to me a country,
a palace, and the illustrious name that I am forced to hide here!
Victor over my brothers...
And I will see him, stained with beloved blood,
triumphing in the praises of Egypt's cohorts.
And behind his chariot,
a King, my father... bound in chains!

Part B

Oh gods, let the insane words vanish!
restore a daughter to her father's breast;
destroy,
destroy,
destroy the forces of our oppressors!
Ah!

Part C

Wretched woman! What did I say?
And my love?
Can I then forget the fervent love which like a sunbeam ...
has delighted me here,
oppressed and enslaved though I am?
Shall I pray for the death of Radames ...
even to him, whom I love so much!
Ah! never on earth was there a heart more burdened
by cruel sorrows!

Part D

I may neither mention nor recall
the sacred names of father ... of lover ...
Confused, trembling,
I would weep ... I would pray ...
for the one ... for the other.
But my prayer is turned into blasphemy ...
weeping is a crime for me ...
a sigh, guilt ... thought is lost in the dark night ...
and I would die in my cruel sorrow.

Part E

Gods, pity my suffering!
Is there no hope for my sorrow ...
Fatal love, boundless love,
break my heart ... make me die!
Gods, pity my suffering, ah! ...
gods, pity my suffering ...
gods, pity my suffering,
pity, pity my suffering!

(Bleiler 1962)

3.2 Singer’s perspective

It is clear that Ritorna vincitor! is not an aria for beginners. First of all, it is a quite long aria. Recordings of it vary approximately from six and a half minutes to seven and a half minutes in length. To the untrained eye it might not seem like such a demanding piece since the highest point of the vocal
The question of who should sing the role of Aida is interesting. It is labelled as a spinto soprano or a dramatic soprano role depending on source. Ideally it is best suited for the spinto soprano, whose voice possesses both lyric and dramatic qualities. Spinto sopranos lie in the middle of the lyric-dramatic scale of the singing voice, which makes the voice very interesting. There are many operatic roles written for the spinto soprano, but the voice type is not very common. Consequently spinto roles are often sung by other kinds of sopranos. *Aida* is a popular opera and many kinds of singers have sung the main role. When I was working in the opera choir in 2012 the role of Aida was sung by two very different kinds of sopranos. The first one was a spinto soprano with a full yet silky voice and the other one a dramatic soprano with a dark and extremely powerful voice. It is exceptional that a role can be sung by very varying kinds of singers. Some lighter sopranos that are somewhere between a full lyric soprano and a spinto soprano have sung it, and at the same time some of the heaviest kind of sopranos, the Wagnerian sopranos, include *Aida* in their repertoire. Aida is a desirable role. But it is obvious that the role requires at least some dramatic qualities from the voice. Singers with a too lyric voice might be in danger of damaging their instrument if they perform the role. Still, there are plenty of challenges left for the heavier sopranos as well. The dramatic sopranos must have a great control of their voice and be able to perform supple high notes in *piano* in addition to dramatic venting.

In my opinion the greatest technical difficulties in the aria arise from the combination of lyric and dramatic qualities of the role. Regardless of which end of the lyric-dramatic scale a singer is leaning towards, she must be in great control of her voice to be able to perform the aria. In the beginning of the aria, meaning parts A, B and C in my analysis, there is a danger of wearing out the voice by singing off body support in an effort to create dramatic intensity. The singer might be tempted to push the high notes in an unhealthy manner or press the voice too much in the lower register in order to deliver the intensity of the text. Proper body support and a healthy projection of the voice protect the singer from damaging her voice. It also
requires sangfroid to not become so carried away by the rapturing drama that it one forgets healthy singing technique.

The alteration between the recitative parts and the melodic phrases in part A challenges the singer right at the beginning of the aria. The rhythmical freedom that singers usually take in interpreting recitatives must be kept under control and the singer must not lose the tempo at any point. A lot of dramatic leverage depends on the rhythmic accuracy of the cooperation between the singer and the orchestra. The singer also faces the task of choosing what register to use in those recitative parts which are quite low but still require dramatic thrust. Should she strive for vocal integrity and stay in the so-called head voice all the time, or should she use her chest voice in order to deliver the text in a more intense and perhaps more audible manner? The fierceness of the beginning of the aria seems to demand the use of an ugly chest voice, but at the same time the melodic phrases invite the use of flawless legato and even registration established by the bel canto tradition. In parts C and E the melody visits shortly the lower register, and in those places the singer has the same choice to make whether to use the chest register or not. In my opinion the use of chest voice especially in part A is justifiable. The sudden changes in dynamics and the striking rhythmic answers from the orchestra seem to support the use of an edgy chest voice. However, I think that the registers should be blended as smoothly as possible, especially in parts C and E which are not as aggressive as part A.

The first two parts of the aria call for a dramatic manner of singing, but the more serene part C requires a whole different gear. After the long and horrified shout in B♭₂ in forte at the end of part B, the singer must immediately return to middle register and piano dynamics when entering to part C. Such a change demands great elasticity from the body. The typical dramatic development of Ritorna vincitor! is quite the opposite to that of a typical opera aria, which brings extra challenge to it. Ritorna vincitor! begins with the emotional and vocal intensity that is usually saved for the ending of an aria. On one hand it is difficult to start the aria with the power it requires, especially in a concert. On the other hand if the singer wastes all her energy or sings off body support in the beginning, she won’t be able to perform the rest of the aria as it should be delivered. The last three parts require singing in piano, occasionally even in a high register, which will reveal any vocal fatigue or damage the singer might suffer from.

Performing an aria with such a backward dramatic development presents also an interpretational difficulty. How does one keep the interest of the audience when the biggest dramatic stakes are already used at the beginning
of the aria? A comprehensive understanding of the text of an aria is always necessary, but in the case of Ritorna vincitor! it is exceptionally important. The whole aria contains a lot of dramatic material, which is relevant in revealing Aida's character and the inner and outer conflict she is living in. Throughout the aria it must be crystal clear for the singer what feelings and thoughts she is expressing and in her interpretation she must be articulate. If the singer is not interpreting the text and the drama clearly enough the whole aria might become an illogical mess due to Aida's extreme mood swings. Verdi was obviously aware of this challenge and used both the orchestra and the vocal melody strongly in endorsing the text. It is not a coincidence that the abrupt divisions between different parts of the aria always happen when the text comes to some kind of a turning point. The singer is not alone when interpreting the text since she gets enormous support from the orchestra.

3.3 Results of the analysis

Verdi didn't express some lofty philosophical or abstract ideas in his music. The music he wrote was very closely connected to the text. All the musical elements in the aria support the text one way or another. Aida's severe and surging feelings are backed up by the swelling dynamic and melodic motions in the orchestra. The orchestra strikes simultaneously with Aida's emotional outbreaks. The tempo and the key represent Aida's current sentiments in each part of the aria. One of the most interesting aspects of the piece is the harmonic development in parts D and E. The key in part D is A♭ minor and in part E it changes into A♭ major. This harmonic progression is a typical compositional technique of the Romantic period, and it represents a struggle. Since the entire aria ends in major, it is a clear signal that Aida finds solace when turning to gods for help. In general the singer receives great inspiration and support from the orchestra, and she doesn't have to carry the entire drama all by herself. It is useful for the singer to investigate the sheet music and study the bigger musical context, for it will provide her with a lot of musical insight. A great singer is not just a soloist but part of a musical ensemble. Fortunately Verdi made it very rewarding for the singer to immerse herself in the musical kaleidoscope of Aida.

3.4 Final discussion

Although I have sung the aria Ritorna vincitor! in the past for fun and the role of Aida will probably be a part of my future repertoire, I have not
rehearsed the aria while writing this essay. It is such a demanding piece that I want to save it for the future days when I can confidently and safely face all the challenges it presents. However, writing this essay has most definitely provided me with the keys to delve into the technical and artistic process of learning Ritorna vincitor! when the time comes.

A comparison between different types of sopranos singing Ritorna vincitor! is very revealing of the arias possibilities and difficulties. Having listened to several singers performing the aria, I have chosen to examine three of them more closely. Vocally speaking the lightest of them is Mirella Freni, who is typically labelled as a lyric soprano. Despite the brightness and edginess of her voice, which is unusual for a lyric soprano, her voice doesn't quite fit the aria. As with many lyric singers singing dramatic repertoire she has to use a lot of volume, instead of relying on natural vocal weight in dramatic passages, and the result sounds a bit pushed. An activity of that kind may cause vocal damage in the long run, but if the singer is very careful of her vocal hygiene then it is just a matter of taste whether a lighter voice should sing heavier repertoire or not. Casting a lyric voice as Aida doesn't serve the drama in my opinion. Still, the lyric quality of Freni's voice does give her an advantage in delivering a sensitive interpretation in the less dramatic parts, especially in part E. For a lyric singer Freni also handles her lower register decently. Freni works hard to deliver the text and uses her most piercing resonance for projecting her voice. The enthusiasm pays off and her interpretation pulls the listener's heartstrings despite the downside of her vocal type.

Leontyne Price's spinto voice is beautifully round and even in all registers. The very quality of her voice enables her to have both dramatic drive and sweetness in her interpretation. At some points Price uses her chest register, but for some reason her lower notes sound throaty and lack resonance. Did Price compromise the quality of the lowest notes for vocal evenness? Price might have lost some of the delicious roundness of her voice had she chosen to sing with a more penetrating resonance in the lower register. I would have enjoyed Price's version of the aria even more had she varied her singing more to serve the drama. Ritorna vincitor! suits her very well, and perhaps the vocal easiness has caused her to become a bit undetailed with the interpretation. Vocal challenges in an aria often force the singer to work harder and polish the whole aria more than they would with an easier piece. Price's interpretation, no matter how beautiful and complementing of her voice it is, is slightly dull compared to many other singers’ interpretation.

The heaviest soprano of the three is dramatic soprano Maria Callas, who chooses a totally different approach to the aria compared to Price. She does
her best in bringing out the agony and rage that possess Aida and sacrifices the consistency of vocal registration in doing so. Her chest register is unrefined at the beginning and her phrasing is very dynamic from the beginning till the very last note. The dramatic impact of the vocal roughness is immense, especially since that kind of vocal practice fits her dark and icy voice. But the very passionate singing does take its toll on Callas' voice, and it is audible in a few high notes when her vocal stability seems to shake. The balance between vocal smoothness and deviations from it for interpretative reasons is a subject for every singer to ponder. The dramatic nature of Callas' voice brings an extra thrill to the aria, and it is fascinating to observe how Callas chooses all the places in the aria where she shows off that quality, as she always does it in a way that intensifies the text.

Listening to different versions of Ritorna vincitor! has made it even clearer to me how important it is for a singer to know the assets and disadvantages of her own voice. One must always bring out the best in one's own voice, and it is a great challenge to be able to handle one's own instrument according to the vocal ideals of different musical eras and yet in a way that is the most advantageous for the unique qualities of the voice. When crafting an interpretation of an aria it is essential to keep in mind the limits of one's own voice, it would be hazardous to go for an interpretation that is vocally too difficult or even impossible to execute. But knowing one's own vocal abilities makes it possible to successfully deliver the roles that suit one's own vocal type and even some roles of relatively close vocal types.

It would be very interesting to hear what Verdi himself would have thought of the different singers and interpretations which I listened to. Would Verdi have encouraged the singer to give her everything to serve the musical drama even if it reduces the quality of her singing? Being so passionate about drama and at the same time relishing the ideals of Italian musical tradition including bel canto, what kind of a singer would he have favoured? We may never find out his exact opinions on the matter. Still, what is certain is that striving for a rich and convincing realization of a musical drama in the framework of the bel canto tradition is a challenging task, but the results of such a work can be breathtaking.
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