VERDI, AIDA, AIVAZOVSKY!

Posted on February 5, 2011 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Khatchatur I. Pilikian, London UK, 5 February 2011

THE INVENTED REALITY

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Verdi, "the only man capable of writing grand operas" (Rossini) genuinely believed that "to copy reality can be a good thing, but to invent reality is better, much better". Verdi is only echoing what his compatriot Leonardo da Vinci had succinctly expressed three centuries before him that "the painter contends with and rivals nature", a belief shared also by twentieth century's own Pablo Picasso who said emphatically: "Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand".

Yes, popular beliefs at their most poetic undergo Verdianic genesis. They become "better, much better" than reality. Who would like to believe that an opera about a frivolous duke, his accursed hunchback jester with a vengeance, an abducted daughter and a professional assassin with his sister acting as a decoy prostitute, would be suitable to inaugurate the opening of the waterway, some 110 miles long, connecting the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, through the Gulf of Suez and the red Sea? Thus a "better, much better" reality, a poetic one, was invented in the peoples' mind. *Aida* was 'joined' to the Suez Canal. By doing so it "contended with and rivalled" historical data.

Actually, even Verdi's patriarchal hunchback was absent then and there. Fifteen years after its première at Venice, *Rigoletto*, one of Verdi's most beautiful and "revolutionary" (Verdi's own description) musical dramas, was indeed the opera which inaugurated the opening of the Cairo Opera House on November 1st, 1869, conducted by Verdi's only pupil E. Muzio. But the official opening of The Grand Canal had to wait nearly another three weeks.

Thus, it was not Verdi's African queen-slave Aida, and neither for that matter his hunchback jester Rigoletto, but a real Queen, in fact an Empress, Eugenie of France who, in her Imperial vessel, opened the Suez Canal on November 17th 1869, with an international entourage including an Emperor, Franz-Joseph of Austria, and a great marine painter Ivan (Hovhannes) Aivazovsky (Aivazian) of Imperial Russia, all packed in more than sixty vessels. Nevertheless, the engineering *grand opus* of the time built by the distinguished *Saint-Simonian*—Ferdinand de Lesseps, had no opera to inaugurate its waterway premiere.

THE OPERA CANAL

It is a fact that Verdi had twice refused to compose an opera specifically for the inaugural ceremonies of the Suez Canal. The Khedive of Egypt had already invited him to compose an inaugural hymn for the new Italian Opera house in Cairo. It was only in mid-1870 that Verdi's engagement to compose an opera on an Egyptian subject for that opera house wassecured. The première for this opus/opera, *Aida* was planned for early in 1871, but the Franco-Prussian war of July 1870 delayed Aida's first performance which eventually took place at the Cairo Opera House on 24th of December 1871, a little more than two years after the *premiere* of de Lesseps' *grand opus* on Egyptian soil! Verdi himself was not present; he is quoted as saying that he was afraid of being "mummified"!

Now, notwithstanding all the pomp and circumstance of the actual opening of the Suez Canal, who would remember the Empress of France and perhaps her only grand and important regal act in the presence of Europe's Imperial VIPs, when the poetic image of the Ethiopian queen-slave *Aida* is so Verdianically real and Leonardesquely omnipotent in the hearts and minds of all opera lovers of the world?

Indeed, the popular belief in the poetic association Aida/Suez-Canal "makes us realize" and Picassoesquelly so "the truth that is given us to understand" that *Aida* is itself the Opera Canal connecting all that had been achieved in the Mediterranean "*melodramma in musica*" with the 'oceans' of the world of spectacular musical drama.

SONG OF THE EGYPTIAN *FELLAH*

In a documentary novel on the master marine painter Aivazovsky (L.Wagner and N. Grigorocich, *Hovhannes Aivazovsk*y. Hayastan, 1971), it is mentioned that the great painter and his young daughter Jeanna paid a visit to Verdi at the composer's villa in St. Agata. They were on their way back home, after attending the opening ceremonies of the Suez Canal, late in 1869. At St Agata, on Verdi's request Jeanna sings an Egyptian *Fellah*=Farmer song, one of the few she and her father had recently heard and learned in Egypt (op. cit., p. 252).

Obviously the above-mentioned visit occurred before Verdi had started writing music for *Aida*. As mentioned above, *Aida*'s *libretto* did not even exist by then. Hence the authors of *H. Aivazovsky* have created a fable-like tale when they write that Verdi had already written quite a number of areas and scenes for *Aida* (p. 253). That the visit did occur and Jeanna did sing an Egyptian Fellah song is highly probable. If the singing really occurred then there should be no doubt that Jeanna's Arabic song of the Egyptian *Fellah* ought to have registered an echo in *Aida* composed a few months later. Such a hypothesis might reward a worthwhile research.

Aivazovsky's other talent/fame as an amateur musician--folk violinist (oriental style) and singer-- is well documented .by the art historian Minas Sargsian, who has assembled ample memoirs from various musicians, writers and painters. They were all Aivazovsky's friends and colleagues, representing the artistic milieu of the time in St Petersburg. Their party gatherings nicknamed *Brotherhood (*inspired by *Freemasonary?)* played the role of an elitist *café milieu.* Music was an essential ingredient of their parties. They all recalled vividly Aivazovsky's performances of folk

music. Mikhail Glinka, who is sometimes regarded as the founder of Russian national opera with his *Ivan Susanin* of 1815, remembered with gratitude Aivazovsky's violin playing and singing of Crimean folk tunes and songs which he, as a composer, was fascinated with. So much so that Glinka was to transcribe and utilise few of those tunes in his last opera *Ruslan & Ludmila*of 1842, the year of Aivazovsky's Italian sojourn. (M. Sargsian, *Life of the Great Marine Painter*. Anahit,1990. p.31). In a letter dated July 22nd 1888, non other than the great playwright Anton Chekhov reminded his sister that Aivazovsky "with Glinka had composed *Ruslan & Ludmila"* (Sargsian, op. cit., p. 32).

Having in mind the above mentioned amateur musical background of Aivazovsky, plus the long-standing fame he was enjoying, also in Italy, as a master marine painter of Imperial Russia (Pope Gregory XVI had acquired his celebrated painting "Chaos" of 1841 for the Vatican) his encounter, in 1869, with Italy's Grand Opera's Maestro Verdi at the latter's villa in St Agata, might indeed be considered a credible event and not an "invented reality".

THE EARTHENWARE CHALICE

1871--when Aida first appeared at the Cairo Opera House--was the year when Rome became the capital of united Italy, eleven years after Garibaldi's Sicilian expedition of 1860, and a decade after the unification of Italy (except Rome and Venice) under Victor Emmanuel of Savoy, in 1861. With all his acknowledged sympathy for the French culture and radical politics, Verdi's internationalism was an extension of his deeply felt national politics of liberation, both from Austrian and French rule. Verdi always remained mistrustful of any foreign rule. Among many of his patriotic sentiments expressed in his letters, the following is the most Verdian: "Good Heavens! There are virtues and crimes in the history of every people and we are no worse than the others. At all events, I am Italian before all else and come what may will never be party to an insult offered to my country". That was in 1854, while he was in Paris working on *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*.

The distinguished Verdi scholar Julian Budden informs us that Verdi, while working in 1853 on a new opera (later to be *Les Vêpres Siciliennes).* had asked De Sanctis "for examples of Sicilian folk-music" (J. Budden, *VERDI*, dent, 1986. p. 67). In his Select Bibliography he mentions the work of M. Conati of 1982 as the only study, which deals with that fascinating subject of Verdi and folk music.

Massimo Mila, the renowned Italian musicologist, mentions a seemingly similar interest of Verdi concerning a vendor's chant and *Aida*. In his *Melodramma di Verdi* (Feltrinelli,1960. p.94), Mila tells us about a certain Barilli, a friend of Verdi, who had observed how the composer jutted down ecstatically "four approximative notes" in his notebook to transcribe a *ritornello* they all heard intoned by a vendor of earthenware. Barilli was at that time visiting Verdi who was in the company of Teresa Stolz (Aida, in Milan's premiere) at the Governor's Palace in Parma. Barilli then recalls how, when he first heard *Aida,* he recognised that same *ritornello* in the ritual invocation of the priests of the Temple chorus in the Nile scene, Act III. Although Massimo Mila the scholar had reservations about Barilli's tale, he nevertheless conceded that the story is indeed "very telling about the force and the originality of the Verdian exoticism" (M.Mila, op. cit., p. 94).

The ritual invocation of the opening of the Nile scene intones:

O tu, che sei d'Osiride madre immortale e sposa
O Thou which art of Osiride immortal mother and spouse.

Nearly the same tune is then smoothly chanted a minor third up by the High Priestess of Egypt:

Soccorri, soccorri a noi
Help, help us

I myself would point out that less than three years after *Aida*, Verdi astonishingly used that same tune in his *Messa da Requiem* (1874). In the *Offertorium*, the tenor solo sings in tempo *Adagio* the enchanting *Hostia*s, a fourth higher than the Temple priests of the ritual invocation and a major second higher than what the pagan Priestess intones in *Aida*:

Hostias et preces tibi, Domine
We offer Thee, Lord, sacrifices and prayers of praise

The pagan Temple Chorus and the High Priestess in *Aida* implore *Iside*, the mother-earth goddess of Egypt for help, chanting a pot-vendor's tune. In the Requiem, it is precisely this same 'chant of the pot-vendor' which has become a Christian offer to the Lord, especially, let us observe, in the most sublime moment of the Mass when a chalice (a glorified pot indeed) is raised in a gesture of offering. This visual-melodic image combined with the Pagan-Christian and the sacred-secular associations of an earthenware chalice raised high imploring help in *Aida* from the pagan mother-earth goddess, and offering sacrifice in the *Requiem* to the heavenly Christian Father, intoning the same pot-vendor's chant in both, is quite overwhelming. Such is I think "the force and the originality" of Verdian radicalism in musical action.

THEATRE-MELODY-WORD-PROCESSING

When Verdi was immersed in the genesis of the *libretto* of *Aida* with Ghislanzoni, he was trying to find a more radical approach towards the function of the libretto, as a kind of theatre-melody-word-processor. He formulated his concern in a nutshell, thus: *Parola Scenica* (ENO guide 2, AIDA, 1980, p. 36). The interaction of that "scenic utterance" with the voice is itself dramatic, because, as Verdi himself wrote to Ricordi: "The voice alone, no matter how beautiful … is not enough for that role … So called polished singing matters little to me" (ENO op. cit., p. 39). In other words parola scenica=scenic utterance in Verdi's mind, I think, could only mean the 'heuristic device' for the vocal utterance to create *dramma in musica*. As J. Budden has mentioned in his book (op.cit., p. 77) Verdi himself has gone on record saying; "there are times when both poets and musicians should renounce their calling in the interest of theatre".