

“Aida”--Leontyne Price, et.al. (1962)

Added to the National Registry: 2020

Essay by Leslie Dunton-Downer (guest post)*



1962 pressing

This studio recording of “Aida” so riveted listeners when it was released in 1962 that even seasoned music critics struggled to word its magnificence. Some reached for fresh adjectives, such as “massive” and “glittering,” while one simply began his review for the “Los Angeles Sentinel” by stating that he felt obligated to break from the newspaper’s policy of covering several releases and instead devote his entire column to the new “Aida.”

Around 300 recordings of Verdi’s “Aida,” in full or in part, have appeared since the American label Zonophone produced theirs on 15 hefty shellac 78s in 1906-07. Now, over a half-century after its fizzy reception in 1962, conductor Georg Solti’s recording remains for many the most exciting “Aida” to date. It captures the American soprano Leontyne Price singing the title role in exceptionally favorable recording circumstances, and at a momentous juncture in her 28 years as the world’s greatest Aida.

Over the course of her career, Price sang Aida for 13 recordings of the complete opera. Eleven document live performances, with the majority of these unfolding where Price led casts in 204 performances of operas composed by Verdi and others: at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Recordings of live performances include Price’s last in any role, her telecast farewell to the Met in 1985. Of her two studio recordings of “Aida,” Erich Leinsdorf conducted one in 1970, while Solti led the earliest of all. It was recorded in 1961. By then, Price was no newcomer to the part.

Price debuted as Aida at the San Francisco Opera in 1957. The following year, she was “Aida” in Vienna, London, and Verona. Then came the center of the operatic cosmos, La Scala. Milan’s opera house could be relied on to draw Earth’s most capricious and reactive audiences, and its most possessive when it came to Verdi, their revered national composer. Price’s Aida utterly vanquished them. Or rather, Price and “Aida” did, for by this point, in 1960, Price had begun the fusalional journey that would lead her in time to say “I am Aida.” This was the Leontyne Price who, in July of 1961, four months after her debut as Aida at the Met, joined Solti to record “Aida” in Rome.

With the Rome Opera as their venue, Solti and his production team used Decca’s legendary “full frequency range recording” (ffrr) system, augmented by Decca’s ground-breaking 1958 stereophonic

sound technology, to record “Aida” on magnetic tape. Decca Records of London had developed ffr during World War II to record submarine signals. After the war, the label deftly redeployed it in adapted forms to attain global domination of the classical music recording industry. No conductor played a greater role in Decca’s postwar story than Solti, and none was more familiar with the company’s innovative technology, or its revolutionary implications for recording operas.¹

Solti’s studio recording goal was not to simulate a live performance of “Aida.” On the contrary, it was to produce the best possible audio experience of the opera as a recording. In other words, Solti and his team saw opera recording as an art form. New technological possibilities, and an accompanying aesthetics, would allow producers to give integral expression to operas as purely sonic experiences. This radical rethink, pioneered by Decca producer John Culshaw, reached its zenith in recordings conducted by Solti from 1958 to 1965.²

Among the fruits of this remarkable period is Solti’s 1961 “Aida.” Throughout it, one detects the new technology and recording vision in play. For starters, numerous fleeting noises--they sound like dull snaps--signal where segments of tape were spliced into the master tape. These indicate that one recorded take was selected over others for inclusion in the master copy that would convey the opera as a whole. Each selected piece of tape contributed myriad qualities to the larger object, much the way fragments of stone or glass of specific color, form, or radiance are picked out from among many to forge a dazzling mosaic. The new technology expanded and improved the sonic variables that music producers could capture and shape.

Listen to the splice 31 minutes into the recording. Here, action moves from the royal palace of Act I Scene 1 to the temple of Vulcan in Act I Scene 2. Voices of Priestesses and Priests, accompanied by harp, suggest mysterious architectural pockets within the temple. Or consider the quivering, floating atmosphere and sense of expanse as Act III action begins under stars and moonlight on the banks of the Nile. Solti and his production team meticulously crafted these passages to stir nuanced feelings that are seldom if ever conjured by recordings of staged opera performances. Good recordings of live performances may offer listeners ‘a best seat in the house’ experience; but even from that optimal audio position, the opera’s music, no matter how fine or predominant, remains one of many facets of the unfolding performance. Solti’s studio recording of “Aida” rather transports listeners directly into the spatial and emotional worlds of sound suggested by Verdi’s score.

Beyond Solti’s Decca-fueled approach, there was also the natural advantage that studio recordings have over audio recordings of live performances: opera singers are free to give themselves entirely to the core of their art form, its music. In staged performances, vocalists don costumes and wigs that can interfere with breathwork; they must retain stage cues and blocking to navigate sets and props, not to mention other artists; and even experienced opera singers reserve some degree of mental bandwidth to track menaces like the orchestra pit below them, or lights and other components that are, in theory, solidly affixed to battens above. Studio recordings rarely call for much distraction.

At the Rome Opera in July of 1961, Solti gathered phenomenal talents for an “Aida” that would seize the Grammy for Best Opera Recording of the Year and go on to find its place as a work of historic stature. Joining from the Met were Leontyne Price to sing Aida, the enslaved Ethiopian princess; the American baritone Robert Merrill to deliver Amonasro, Aida’s father and Ethiopia’s king; and the American bass Giorgio Tozzi to be Ramfis, High Priest of Egypt. From the Covent Garden Opera Company in London came the Canadian tenor John Vickers to sing Radamès,

Captain of the Guard in Egypt, Aida's beloved, and her country's sworn enemy; and the Belgian mezzo-soprano Rita Gorr to be Amneris, the Egyptian princess and Aida's tireless rival. Remaining soloists were Italians, while the chorus and orchestra were 'of the house' at the Rome Opera.

Solti conducted the artists take by take until he, RCA-Victor producer Richard Mohr, sound engineer Lewis Layton, and stereophonic stage manager and engineer René Boux had the shapes and colors of materials they would draw from for their two-and-a-half-hour "sonic mosaic" of "Aida."

The convergence of so many fortunate factors provided ideal conditions for Leontyne Price's first full recording of the opera. Her voice glides gorgeously through Aida's much-loved Act III "O patria mia" to soar into the aria's high notes with exquisitely contoured intensity. No less thrilling is her "Ritorna vincitor" of Act I. As Aida is gradually filled with clashing insights and emotions, and overcome by their irresolution, Solti's sinewy tempi invite Price to interpret the aria with stunning shifts of delicacy and drive. The recording picks up Price using her entire instrument to express Aida's flinty thoughts and juicy passions; as these build and evolve, one hears Price's voice emanate by turns from precise parts of her throat, mouth, chest, face, and head, and all the while with her vocal phrasing and colorations creating sensational effects. A laser-etched trill on the first "r" of *soffrir* ("suffering") suddenly melts into the aria's remaining syllable on a note sustained at first as if possibly forever, but in the end with heartbreaking brevity.

Born in Laurel, Mississippi, Leontyne Price grew up there in a musical household and church community; she studied voice at Central State University in Ohio, and at Julliard.³ Then Price, and the sound of her voice, happened to enter America's opera scene at the dawn of the Civil Rights movement. Millions of Americans discovered her on TV sets in their living rooms in 1955, when Price starred in the first of four operas produced by NBC Opera Theatre for national broadcast.⁴ "Aida" was not among them. On January 27, 1961, she was the first African-American to perform a lead at the Met; she debuted as Leonora in Verdi's "Il Trovatore" and subsequently performed 15 other principal roles at the Met. One of them was Aida.

Much is missed about Price, whether as a timeless artist or as an artist of her time, when focus overly sharpens on her incarnations of the enslaved black princess of Ethiopia. Nevertheless, Aida became Price's signature role, just as Price has become Aida's signature interpreter. Solti's celebrated 1961 recording gives us Price and Aida at an arresting early moment in their dual story.

Leslie Dunton-Downer is a librettist and writer whose books include "Opera," co-authored with Alan Riding (Dorling Kindersley, 2022). For the French label Buda Musique, Dunton-Downer produced recordings of sacred and secular vocal music performed by musicians from Tajikistan.

Notes:

¹ On Solti as a recording conductor and his peerless body of work for Decca; and on the evolution of Decca's recording technology and production ideals, see David N.C. Patmore, "Sir Georg Solti and the Record Industry," *Association for Recorded Sound Collections Journal* 41 (2010): 200-232.

² Patmore frames this period in the years during which Solti conducted his legendary recording of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Patmore, 211-213.

³ Rosalyn M. Story presents an incisive biographical portrait of Leontyne Price in the context of notable African-American women singers of classical music and opera. See Rosalyn M. Story, *And So I Sing: African-American Divas of*

Opera and Concert (Warner Books, 1990), 100-114.

⁴The first of Price's NBC Opera Theatre roles was Floria Tosca in Puccini's *Tosca*. The role of Mario, Tosca's lover, was performed by David Poleri, a tenor from Philadelphia, and a white one. Danielle Ward-Griffin notes that NBC's casting was forward-looking in 1955, when many viewers lived in US jurisdictions where interracial marriage was illegal. NBC received some letters from concerned viewers, but by far most letters expressed enthusiasm for Price's Tosca. Danielle Ward-Griffin, "Integration without Identification: NBC TV, Leontyne Price, and Opera Casting in the Civil Rights Era," paper presented at the Library of Congress, May 29, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVGQPSQqO1Y&ab_channel=LibraryofCongress.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.