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# Aida

GIUSEPPE VERDI

## Study Guide

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# Background & Characters

## Historical Background

*Aida* was written for the two-year-old Cairo Opera House in 1871. Previously the composer Giuseppe Verdi had rejected the offer to write an inaugural hymn for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 but the Khedive (Ismail Pasha, the Viceroy of Egypt for the Ottoman Empire and a fan of all things European) was determined to commission a magnificent opera to open the new opera house in Cairo. Verdi wouldn't do this either, so the new opera house opened with Verdi's existing *Rigoletto* in 1869.

A director/librettist Camille du Locle persuaded Verdi to take on a future commission with a little psychology 101. He told him that if Verdi didn't want the job, German composer Richard Wagner might be interested and would probably do a very good job with it! He also told Verdi that the Khedive would be willing to give him almost anything: "*If you were to ask for a pyramid (the biggest one, of course) as a bonus, he's just the sort of person who might give it to you.*" Verdi wrote *Aida* for the Cairo Opera House and the opera premiered there on December 24, 1871.

## Main Characters

In order of vocal appearance

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Ramfis	High Priest of Egypt	Bass	RAHM-fiss
Radames	Captain of the Egyptian Guard	Tenor	rah-dah-MEZ
Amneris	Daughter of the King of Egypt	Mezzo-Soprano	ahm-NEH-riss
Aida	An Ethiopian Princess	Soprano	Ah-YEE-dah
King of Egypt		Bass	
Messenger		Tenor	
Priestess		Soprano	
Amonasro	King of Ethiopia	Baritone	ah-moh-NAHZ-roh



Verdi wrote *Aida* for the Cairo Opera House. The Opera premiered there in December, 1871.

# Synopsis

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## Act I

In a hall in the palace of the King of Memphis, Ramfis, the High Priest, tells the warrior Radames that Ethiopian forces might again be threatening Egypt. Radames dreams of victory in battle; returning to the woman he loves, the Ethiopian slave Aida; and bringing her to her native land with a crown on her head.

The Egyptian princess Amneris enters, followed by her slave Aida. Amneris sees Radames' reaction to Aida's arrival and realizes he loves her. She attempts to discover if Aida feels the same. The King and Ramfis enter with ministers, priests and captains. A messenger reports that Ethiopian forces have invaded Egypt. The King announces that Radames is to lead the Egyptian forces and he is sent to the Temple of Vulcan to prepare for battle. Aida bitterly grieves for her fate: to love a man who is the enemy of everything she loves.



## Act II

Radames and the Egyptian forces have triumphed. Amneris, in her apartments preparing for the celebrations, secretly prays that her love for Radames will be returned. When Aida enters, Amneris tells her that Radames has been killed in battle. Aida's reaction to this lie, and her relief when Amneris tells her that Radames is alive, is all the proof Amneris needs of Aida's love. She coldly tells Aida that they are romantic rivals. Aida begs for mercy, telling Amneris that her love will only be extinguished by death.

Radames, with his army, triumphantly enters an avenue at the gates of Thebes and greets the King. The King offers him anything he wants, and Radames asks that the Ethiopian prisoners be brought forth. Aida is overcome to see her father, Amonasro, amongst the prisoners, who instructs her not to reveal his identity as king. Amonasro tells the King that he witnessed the Ethiopian King's death. Radames asks that the Ethiopian captives be freed now that their king is dead. Ramfis convinces the Egyptian King to keep Aida and her father captive. The King agrees and gives Radames Amneris's hand in marriage. The Egyptians give praise to the goddess Isis, while Amonasro secretly swears vengeance, Amneris rejoices and Radames and Aida silently grieve over their fate.



# Synopsis

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## Act III

Ramfis enters the Temple of Isis with Amneris, who has come to pray for her wedding the next day. Aida approaches the Temple, having received a message from Radames to meet her. Amonasro meets Aida, telling her that he has recognized Aida's love for Radames. He urges her to use it to save their people: only she can discover the plans of the Egyptian army. Aida reluctantly agrees, and Amonasro takes cover as Radames approaches. Radames wants to seek favour with the King to win the right to marry Aida, but Aida convinces him to run away with her instead. As they formulate their plan, Radames inadvertently reveals the Egyptian army's plan. On hearing this, Amonasro reveals himself and his real identity to Radames. Having heard everything, Amneris and Ramfis appear from the temple. Amonasro and Aida flee. Damning himself as a traitor, Radames surrenders to Ramfis.

## Act IV

Amneris knows that Radames was planning to escape with Aida, and did not intend to reveal his battle plans. She has him brought to her and pleads with him to defend himself, promising to try to save him if he will renounce Aida. Radames refuses. Radames is taken to the judgment chamber where he is unwilling to defend himself to Ramfis and the priests. He is sentenced to the death of the disgraced, by being entombed alive.

Radames is entombed in a crypt under the Temple of Vulcan. He sees a shadow move towards him. It's Aida, who has slipped into the crypt to die alongside Radames. Radames unsuccessfully tries desperately to move the huge stone that has locked them into the crypt. They bid farewell to the earth, awaiting their entrance into the next world, while above the tomb, Amneris prays for peace.



# Giuseppe Verdi, A Brief Biography

## Giuseppe Verdi, Composer

(1813 – 1901)

Born in the small village of Roncole, in the Duchy of Parma, Giuseppe Verdi started music lessons early, around the age of four. At seven, he was given a spinet\* and, by the age of nine, was playing the organ at a local church. He was sent to school in Busseto just before his eleventh birthday, and here his musical training really began. He composed all through his teen years and from the ages of 18 to 22 Verdi studied composition formally in Milan, subsidized by his wealthy father-in-law to-be, Antonio Barezzi. He returned to Busseto in 1836 and married Margherita Barezzi, his benefactor's daughter, with whom he had two children. During the next few years Verdi conducted and composed for the local Philharmonic Society.

In 1839 Verdi's first opera, *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*, received its premiere at La Scala, Milan. *Oberto* was a success but its composition and premiere was surrounded by tragedy: at approximately one-year intervals, both of Verdi's children and his wife died. This was followed by the dismal reception for Verdi's comic opera, *Un giorno di regno* (1840). Verdi was shattered, but with the encouragement of colleagues, including the soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, he was persuaded to fling himself into his work.

Verdi then embarked on a stunningly prodigious phase of composition, starting with the triumph of his *Nabucco* (1842). By the 1850s, he had achieved fame and success as the foremost Italian opera composer in the world. He had also fallen in love with Giuseppina, who would become his life-long partner and then wife. After living in various cities, dependent on where his next premiere was occurring, Verdi and Giuseppina settled on a farm near Busseto in 1851, their home base for the rest of their lives.

After the premiere of *La Traviata* (1853), Verdi's operatic output slowed (by his own impressive standards). The following 18 years produced six new works. Two of those, *Les vêpres siciliennes* (1855) and *Don Carlos* (1867) were substantially longer operas, and Verdi was also reworking existing operas during this period, but he still took some

time away from the theatre. In 1859 Verdi finally married Giuseppina after being together for 10 years. His success and financial stability enabled him to choose only those commissions he wished to take. That same year Verdi's name was adopted as a slogan for Italian nationals of the Risorgimento\*\*: "Viva VERDI" stood for "Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia". As a powerful and beloved symbol of this movement, Verdi was persuaded in 1861 to become a member of the newly-formed Italian parliament. This intense period of composition and political turmoil ended with the premiere of *Aida* in 1871.

The remaining years of Verdi's life were spent building his financial strength\*\*\*, working on non-operatic works such as his Requiem (1874), and reworking his previous operas. Verdi completed just two operas in his last 30 years, *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893), but they are both masterpieces. Verdi died in 1900 and was buried beside his wife – who had predeceased him by three years – at Casa di Riposo, a home for retired musicians in Milan, which he had funded. His funeral procession was accompanied by tens of thousands of mourners, who sang "Va pensiero", the chorus of Hebrew slaves from *Nabucco*, a chorus which had come to symbolize the Italian Risorgimento.

\*A spinet is a term to describe a type of harpsichord (piano-like instrument) with strings at an angle of about 30 degrees to the keyboard, going toward the right.

\*\*il Risorgimento (the Resurgence)  
This was a 19th-century political and social movement that sought to unify the individual states of the Italian peninsula into a single Kingdom of Italy, which, after decades of struggle, occurred in 1861.

# The Life & Times of Giuseppe Verdi

1813	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi is born on October 10 in Parma, Italy.</li> <li>Americans capture York (Toronto) during the War of 1812.</li> </ul>	1851	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Rigoletto</i> premieres at La Scala, Milan. Verdi and Giuseppina Streponi, a gifted soprano, move into Sant'Agata together, much to the disapproval of the locals.</li> <li>The New York Times is founded.</li> </ul>
1836	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi marries Margherita Baressi and has two children in the next two years.</li> <li>The first Canadian railroad opens, between LaPrairie and St. Johns, Quebec.</li> <li>Hans Christian Andersen writes <i>The Little Mermaid</i>, on which Dvorák's opera <i>Rusalka</i> is later based.</li> </ul>	1854	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A year and half after its first, disastrous, outing, <i>La Traviata</i> triumphs in Venice.</li> <li>The electric light bulb is invented in Germany.</li> </ul>
1839	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi's opera <i>Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio</i> premieres at La Scala. He begins a life-long association with the publisher Ricordi.</li> <li>Verdi's two children die suddenly from illness.</li> <li>The bicycle is invented in Scotland.</li> </ul>	1859	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Un ballo in maschera</i> premieres in Napoli and is judged Verdi's biggest success since <i>Il Trovatore</i> (1853).</li> <li>Charles Darwin publishes <i>On the Origin of Species</i>.</li> </ul>
1840	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi's wife Margherita dies suddenly of encephalitis and <i>Un giorno di regno</i> is considered a failure at La Scala.</li> <li>Upper and Lower Canada are united by an act of parliament.</li> <li>The first recorded bowling match takes place in the U.S. in Knickerbocker Alleys, New York City.</li> </ul>	1867	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi's <i>Don Carlos</i> premieres in Paris.</li> <li>The Dominion of Canada is established by the British North America Act (The Canadian Constitution).</li> </ul>
1842	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi's third opera <i>Nabucco</i> opens in triumph. The chorus "Va pensiero" from this opera becomes the hymn of the Italian patriots and freedom fighters.</li> <li>The Canadian/U.S. border is defined in the Webster-Ashburton Treaty.</li> <li>Ether is used for the first time as a surgical anaesthesia.</li> </ul>	1871	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The premiere of <i>Aida</i> in Cairo is delayed because of the Franco-Prussian War. It finally opens on December 24.</li> </ul>
		1874	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi's <i>Messa da Requiem</i> is first performed in Milan. Verdi is nominated to the Italian Senate.</li> </ul>
		1887	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Otello</i> premieres at La Scala</li> <li>Fictional detective Sherlock Holmes appears in print for the first time.</li> </ul>
		1889	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi composes <i>Falstaff</i> and buys a site in Milan for a musicians' retirement home (Casa di Riposo).</li> <li>The Eiffel Tower is built for the Paris World Exhibition.</li> </ul>
		1901	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verdi suffers a serious stroke on January 21 and dies on January 27.</li> </ul>

# Verdi's Music

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Verdi's career spans over 50 years, from *Oberto* in 1839 to *Falstaff* in 1893. In all, he wrote 28 operas, some of which have multiple versions. With such an extensive career, it was inevitable that his music changed considerably from early to later years, although his work always reveals a strong melodic sense and a powerful rhythmic pulse. While much of Verdi's growth as a composer was due to his own tireless striving for perfection, many of the changes in his style were also influenced by advances in musical technology throughout his life. During the 19th century music grew louder as orchestras got bigger; brass instruments in particular developed well beyond their previous capacities. The development of musical instruments gave composers more options of sounds, dynamics and note ranges to heighten the emotion and drama in the music. Singers also had to cope with the challenges of increased dynamics and extended vocal ranges, however this also provided singers a strong dramatic foundation to create more believable characters. Verdi embraced these advances wholeheartedly, as evidenced by his powerful orchestral arrangements, dramatic stories and often vocally-demanding, emotionally-expressive characters.

Verdi became known as the Composer of the Revolution after performances of his opera *Nabucco*, the theme of which is a nation fighting for freedom. At the first performance the audience caused an uproar after hearing the chorus "Va, pensiero" ("Fly, thought"), in which Hebrew slaves in Babylon express their longing for freedom from tyranny. The audience correctly interpreted the Hebrew slaves as the Italian people and the Babylonians as their Austrian oppressors. This chorus remains an unofficial national anthem to this day. Many of Verdi's operas had controversial political overtones, and often times he needed to rewrite sections before they were allowed to be performed. One opera, *Le Roi s'amuse*, was prohibited after the first performance because of derogatory allusions to royalty.

This theme of political unrest is one of two major themes that runs through *Aida*, as Aida and Radames struggle to come to terms with a love that flies in the face of patriotic duty. Verdi's preoccupation with political ideals of a unified Italy during his lifetime recurs time and again in his operas. The other main theme in *Aida*, and one that also appears in many of his other operas, is that of the relationship between father and daughter, an interest that undoubtedly stems from the tragic death of his daughter and son as infants. Aida's love of Radames and love of her father means the certain betrayal of one or the other, no matter what she chooses, and provides a great dramatic tension that is pure Verdi.

Premiering in 1871, *Aida* was the last opera Verdi composed before his early retirement. He was coaxed back to composing over 15 years later when he began *Otello*, which shows a remarkable shift from his earlier styles. In *Aida*, we still see the use of a more traditional formula of arias\*, duets\*\* and ensembles\*\*\* separated by recitatives\*\*\*\* that he implemented earlier in his career. However, with *Aida* and the other operas of his "mature" period, Verdi was already starting to make attempts at moving away from "big number" opera, by composing smoother transitions between the individual solos and choruses and recitatives. He believed that dramatic expression should not be so strictly partitioned. In his final operas, especially *Otello*, this transformation is apparent: Verdi moved towards a continuous stream of music that flows almost undetectably from one form to the next.

**Aria\*** (Italian for "air"). An aria is a song for one singer performed with the orchestra that provides an opportunity for the singer to express his or her artistic skill. It allows a character to express emotions and reflect on the events of the drama.

**A duet\*\*** is a musical piece or a section of an opera written for two singers.

**An ensemble\*\*\*** is a large group of singers performing together.

**Recitative\*\*\*\*** A type of singing unique to opera when words are sung in a way that imitates speech. It has no recognizable melody and is meant to carry the action forward rather than express the emotions of the character.



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## Three Periods of Verdi

Musically, Verdi's great output is generally split into three periods, although there are some debates amongst Verdi scholars as to which opera fits in which period:

### 1 Early (1842 – 1853)

19 operas in 15 years, ending with *La traviata*. This period started with operas with thrilling choruses and big arias, but weaker plots; as his experience grew, Verdi's plots became increasingly important, sometimes finding inspiration from great literature, including Victor Hugo (*Rigoletto*), Schiller (*Luisa Miller*) and Shakespeare (*Macbeth*)

### 2 Middle (1854 – 1871)

6 operas, ending with *Aida*, and an early retirement from opera. As Verdi's fame and wealth grew, his need to write operas to make a living decreased, and he was freer to choose his projects. The operas of this period moved away from the formal musical division of recitative, aria and ensemble found in the earlier operas; Verdi began to explore more continuous musical expression, where these different forms flowed into one another more freely and allowed drama to take precedence over individual show-stopper numbers.

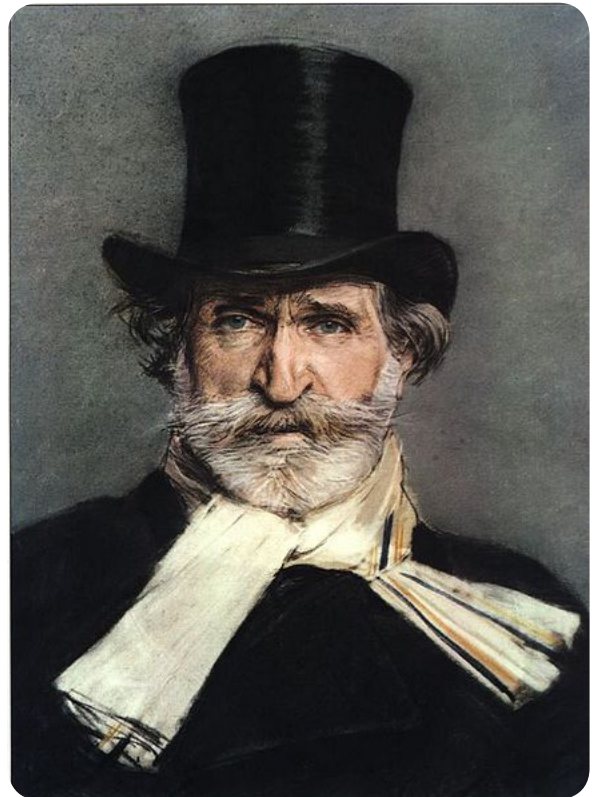
### 3 Late (1887 - 1893)

2 final operas: *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Lured back to opera after his early retirement from the art form, both of Verdi's final operas are based on Shakespearean plays (*Othello* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, respectively) and expand on the musical and dramatic continuity of his Middle period.

#### Verdi Checklist

If the music has the following traits, it's probably Verdi

- ✓ Serious topic
- ✓ Theme of love: father/daughter, man/country
- ✓ Memorable melodies
- ✓ Dramatic, emotional music
- ✓ Theatrical use of chorus
- ✓ Full-sounding orchestra that accompanies the singer and is not overpowering



# What to Look For

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At the first rehearsal with the soloists, the director presents his/her concept for the production providing all cast members the research that went into the creation of the concept and how the opera will be dramatically represented on stage.

## Concept

Traditionally, the stagings of *Aida* have included stereotypical ancient Egyptian visuals: pyramids, animals, palm trees, etc. What happens when you remove all these images and focus on the core themes of the story: the struggle between personal happiness and that of the greater good? the love triangle between Aida, Radames and Amneris? the complexities of fighting nations and oppressive regimes on societies?

In this interpretation of *Aida*, Tim Albery chooses to show the opera through Aida's eyes. One effective way to convey this is to highlight the horrors of war experienced by the victims (Aida) and not the glory experienced by the victors (Amneris, King of Egypt). The horror of war and the tragedy of falling in love with your enemy are at the forefront of a startlingly emotional and lavishly modern take on this most intimate of grand operas.

## Staging

- Aida is onstage for the start of every scene. In this way the opera becomes her story entirely, her narrative, told through her perspective.
- The war between Egypt and Ethiopia is seen to be more of a civil war instead of two countries at war: a fascist regime versus a guerilla faction.

## Set

*Aida* is set in an unspecified secular Middle-Eastern country. The entire opera takes place in one space: a palace, a pretentious building, and the home of the king of Egypt. As the story progresses the actions descend deeper into the palace, first in the great hall, then the temple of Vulcan, Amneris's room, a storage room, prison cells and finally the tomb. The look is contemporary and reflects the life of a wealthy society, with people with lots of money and vulgar taste. A large national flag of yellow and purple design with a large revolver in the middle is often shown throughout the production reminding the audience of the control and values of the authority.

### A hall in the palace

At the start of the opera we are in a large reception area: antiseptic and bureaucratic in feel. Blue/green tiled floors are matched by blue/green walls set off by garish gold pillars. This is a large reception space. As the scene starts, Aida will be standing with a mop. Otherwise Radames and Aida are never completely alone together until the end of the opera.

### Temple of Vulcan

This is where the warriors go to get ready to die or to kill. A small red-lit, set-back room is lined with shelves covered with helmets that offer an air of antiquity. The temple dancers entrance the warriors with their stylized movements. The ceremony becomes hypnotic and a bowl of blood is involved as the men dress themselves in their armour, almost seeking to appear like ancient heroic warriors.

*Continued on next page...*



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### **Amneris's Room**

As Amneris prepares for the celebrations around Radames's return, she is obviously having trouble deciding what to wear. A wall of shoes and a strewn room of clothing is completed with a large dressing-table covered with flashy accessories. A wheeled glass trolley carries champagne and chocolates for her to enjoy with her friends. Her friends are other powerful women, socialites, all fabulously dressed, all ready for the party, all excited for her about Radames's triumph. Amneris remains melancholy throughout the scene at the thought that Radames might not return her love. Aida is in the room too, tidying up the mess of clothes.

### **Triumphal March**

To properly depict the horrors of war in this scene, Tim Albery deliberately stages this scene as if it were "Aida's nightmare." Instead of the more traditional pageantry showing off the glory of Egypt, the scene begins with a huge revolver flag being moved downstage by the Egyptian army enveloping Aida in the flag and trapping her. A curtain opens to reveal a backdrop of a ravaged landscape, in which lie wounded Ethiopians, one of whom is Aida's father, Amonasro. The wealthy Egyptians are seen picking over the bodies of the dead in a distasteful celebration.

As Aida's nightmare continues, Radames appears, acknowledges her joyfully, then turns and shoots her father dead. Doubles of Radames (in skeleton masks) and Amneris (in skeleton dresses under their coats) appear and start rolling around amorously, then walking off arm in arm. Aida's dream ends as the scene shifts into a large reception room (like a throne room), with all of the seats and the back of the king's throne facing the audience. This way, all appeals from the Egyptian people about whether or not to keep the Ethiopian hostages as slaves or have them freed are directed at the king and the audience. The King agrees to let them go, but under the guidance of Ramfis, keeps Aida and Amonasro captive.

### **Temple of Isis**

What traditionally has taken place in a temple to the goddess Isis in previous productions is now set in a below-stairs storage room, where we see other bits of furnishings not currently being used in the palace. A stairwell is also visible and we see Amneris and Ramfis ascending it at the start of the scene. Aida is waiting for her meeting with Radames. Radames arrives and after he is tricked into revealing the path of the Egyptian army to Aida and her father, he is taken to a prison cell.

### **Prison Chambers**

This is a grim space, a waiting area outside a series of prison cells, stripped of the palace's opulence. Aida enters and disappears down a small staircase, so, when she appears later in the tomb, the audience is not that surprised. When Amneris enters, she is wrapped in an old cardigan, oddly casual, making her appear more equal to Aida. Despite pleas from Amneris to revoke his love for Aida, Radames stays true to his heart and accepts his fate by going down the stairs to the tomb. The priests enter, wearing gloves with their suits. They take off their jackets and look like menacing thugs. After the priests return from roughing up Radames, the waiting area platform rises up half way and we see a tomb-like cellar below. There are now two performing levels visible. This lower cellar is where Radames is entombed. A simple candle adds to the poignancy of the story, as Aida and Radames die.

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## Costumes



- Aida is a slave working in the palace. She wears a dark dress covered with a pale jacket throughout the opera, only taking off the jacket in the very last scene. Her outfit and her look is that of a prisoner in a work camp or concentration camp who has been selected to work in the main house. She is viewed as a “privileged slave” as she is treated more humanely, being fed and encouraged to keep in better appearance than her enslaved counterparts.
- Radames is a warrior. He is dressed in typical tailored military suit, which is of a western look with less braiding than you might expect. As the opera develops, his suit becomes more disheveled showing Radames frazzled and desperate state of mind.
- Amneris shows off her wealth by over-accessorizing and being dressed in the most expensive fashions. Her look is hard and glamorous. Her socialite friends (female chorus) copy her rich look in overdone makeup, hair, accessories and high-fashion styles. They are in direct contrast with Aida and the enslaved women, showing the decay of society and discrepancy between the two classes of people.
- All the priests (male chorus) are high-end bureaucrats dressed in army attire and standard suits in shades of tan, gray and light browns. Ramfis, as high priest, is the power behind the king. His appearance is very hard with jet black hair, dark rimmed glasses and a dark suit, symbolizing the rigid ruling of Egypt.
- On the other hand, the king of Egypt, is dressed in a royal yet understated military suit. The colour of his clothing, an earthy grey-brown, is in contrast to the rich gem-like hues of the costumes of the people of Egypt. The structure and formality of his attire emphasize his status and intelligence but hints at his softness as a ruler. He is a more malleable leader than his advisor Ramfis.
- The temple dancers first appear covered up, but then shed their cover-ups to reveal sensual costumes of leather corsets. They also wear Middle-Eastern style copper face masks.



# How the Opera Came to Be

## **Aida: How the Opera Came to Be**

1869 was a busy year in Egypt. The Suez Canal\* opened and so did the new Cairo Opera House. The Khedive (or Viceroy) of Egypt for the Ottoman Empire was Ismail Pasha. He was a fan of all things European and it was his wish that his new opera house open with a work by Giuseppe Verdi.

"If you were to ask for a pyramid (the biggest one, of course) as a bonus, he's just the sort of person who might give it to you," Khedive on Verdi.

Verdi was enjoying a great reputation as a beloved composer and a symbol of Italian unification\*\*. He had already rejected an offer to compose an inaugural hymn for the opening of the canal, and he wasn't interested in writing a new opera for the Khedive, so instead the opera house opened with his already existing opera, *Rigoletto*.

Two years later, however, a French director/librettist called Camille du Locle persuaded Verdi to change his mind, by using a little Psychology 101: du Locle told Verdi that if he didn't want the job, German composer Richard Wagner might be interested and would probably do a very good job with it! The French composer Charles Gounod had also been approached. Du Locle then told Verdi that the Khedive would be willing to give him almost anything: "If you were to ask for a pyramid (the biggest one, of course) as a bonus,

he's just the sort of person who might give it to you." As might be expected, Verdi didn't receive a pyramid, but he took the commission and created one of his best-loved operas for Cairo: *Aida*.

The source material for *Aida* came from Auguste Mariette, an archaeologist and Egyptologist who worked for the Khedive of Egypt. He created the basic story for *Aida*, which was then expanded by Camille du Locle, and then turned into a full libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni, who had worked with Verdi previously, helping him revise the opera *La forza del destino*.

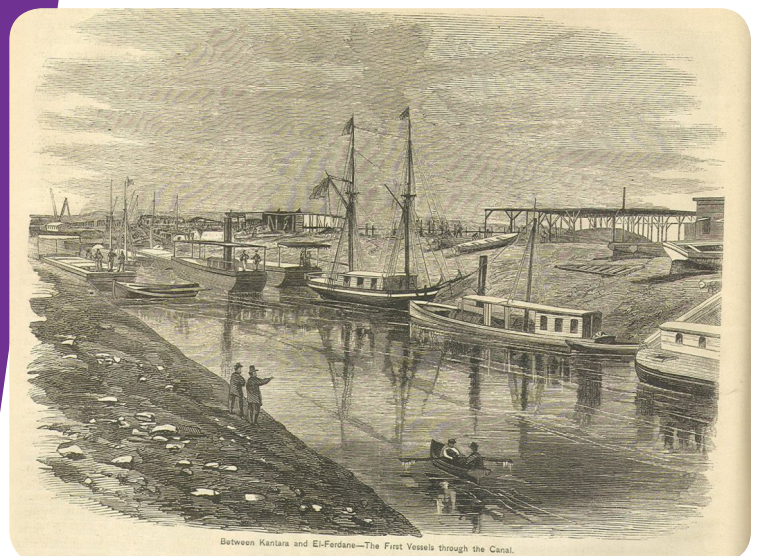
Auguste Mariette was a multi-talented man. In his youth he'd had some experience with drawing and design and so he was hired to design the sets and costumes for this first production of *Aida*. They were built in Paris, but this was during the Franco-Prussian war, and the city was besieged for months, not allowing the sets and costumes to be shipped to Egypt. It was for this reason that the premiere of *Aida* was delayed. The opera finally had its first performance on December 24, 1871.

The critics were mixed in their reactions to *Aida* but audience reaction was strong from the start. *Aida* was a hit from its premiere and remains one of Verdi's most popular operas.

Gianna Wichelow, COC Creative Manager

\*The Suez Canal opened in 1869. This remarkable man-made structure meant that ships were able to travel from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea in under 200 km, instead of making the immense journey around the coast of Africa.

\*\*Italian unification ("Il Risorgimento" or "The Resurgence") was the political movement that sought to unite the states of the Italian peninsula into the single state of Italy in the 19th century.



# Modern-Day Slavery

## Slavery, Today

In *Aida*, Aida, an Ethiopian princess, is captured and brought into slavery in Egypt. In Ancient Egypt, slavery was widely accepted and the majority of wealthy households kept slaves to do housework and care for children. Slaves also worked outside of the home, as wards of the state,

**"They are people of all ages and ethnicities, held far from home with no money, no way of communicating, with no way to ask for help."**

building temples and fighting in wars. Some Egyptians sold themselves into slavery to repay debts, or to escape poverty. Slavery is as present in today's society as it was in Ancient Egypt, though its existence has manifested into different walks of society and has been hidden from the eyes of the public and the law.

The going misconception is that slavery\* doesn't exist in modern-day society. It is common belief that slavery was abolished in the United States in 1965, following the Civil War. Slavery wasn't illegalized worldwide until the 1980s, and millions of people (an estimated 27 million) worldwide are still enduring some form of enslavement. The most prevalent forms of modern-day slavery are bonded labour, forced labour, and sexual exploitation. It is incredibly difficult to say exactly how many people are enslaved, and what they are doing because of its clandestine (secretive) nature and the difficulties inherent in locating and accurately identifying its victims. (amnesty.ca)

Bonded labour, also referred to as debt bondage, is the

most common type of slavery. A person becomes bonded to another when their labour is demanded, under threat of violence or even death, as repayment for a loan. The person is trapped into working for long hours without pay to "repay the loan." Invariably their work far outweighs the amount of money owing. People in extreme poverty, with no money are forced to sell their labour as a means of survival; it is a common form of enslavement in poverty-stricken countries.

Victims of forced labour (which includes sexual exploitation) are forced to work against their own free will, under threat of violence. Forced labourers might toil in fields, or work in factories under brutal employers who can threaten them with violence or death as a means of punishment if they try to escape. Forced labourers are often purchased, sold, and traded as commodities via 'human trafficking'\*\* – the fastest growing criminal activity in the world. People in vulnerable situations (the poor, victims of abuse, homeless, runaway teens), are targeted by traffickers, who coerce them with the promise employment and/or education in another country. They are people of all ages and ethnicities, held far from home with no money, no way of communicating, with no way to ask for help.

### Recommended Websites

#### Canadian Non-Governmental Organizations:

*Amnesty International*, [amnesty.ca](http://amnesty.ca)  
*Free the Children*, [freethechildren.ca](http://freethechildren.ca)

#### International Non-Governmental Organizations:

*American Anti-Slavery Group*, [iAbolish.org](http://iAbolish.org)  
*Anti-Slavery International*, [antislavery.org](http://antislavery.org)  
*Free the Slaves*, [freetheslaves.net](http://freetheslaves.net)

### Journal Entry

- Ask around – are the people in your life aware that slavery still exists in modern-day society? Why is awareness about modern slavery important?
- Explore some of the suggested websites, and discuss how slavery is not so removed from your daily life.

**Slavery\*** Anti-Slavery International ([antislavery.org](http://antislavery.org)) distinguishes slavery from other human rights violations defining it as someone who is forced to work, owned or controlled, dehumanized, treated as a commodity, and physically constrained.

**Human Trafficking\*\*** Human trafficking is the sale or trade of human beings with the purpose of enslavement.



# Listening Guide

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The 19th century's fascination with uncovering the past and development in archeology enabled Verdi to throw himself into researching the culture and traditions of ancient Egypt when he first set out to write the score for *Aida*. However, throughout the composition process, the desire to remain true to ancient Egyptian traditions became of less importance, and in typical Verdi fashion, instead he concentrated on the complexities of human emotions and relationships. As a result, Verdi composed one of the grandest operas in history, based on very intimate personal struggles, complete with a full orchestra, thrilling choruses, heartbreaking duets and ensembles, powerful arias, memorable melodies and explosive emotions. The tracks listed below correspond to the complimentary Listening Guide CD provided to school group bookings only.

Not coming to the opera but looking to explore *Aida* in the classroom? The excerpts below can be found in the recording of *Aida* with Leontyne Price in the title role, and Sir George Solti conducting the Orchestra and Chorus of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, on the Decca label.

*Compiled by Ali Kashani, COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau member*

## **Track 1      "Quale insolita gioia nel tuo sguardo!" (Have you just heard a joyful tale that stirs you?)**

### **Connection to the story**

The Egyptian princess, Amneris, loves Radames, an officer of the Egyptian army. But she suspects that he loves her slave, Aida. Amneris asks Radames what is on his mind and he says that he hopes the gods will choose him to lead the battle against Ethiopia. Amneris suspects that he's thinking about Aida. This suspicion is confirmed when Aida walks on stage and Amneris observes Radames's reaction. Aida is conflicted about the impending battle against Ethiopia, her homeland.

### **Musical elements and significance**

Amneris's music is very gracious at first, as she strikes up a conversation with Radames. It's even tender when she asks him about his thoughts. However, the music suddenly becomes very tense as Radames thinks about how he must hide his love for Aida while Amneris suspects those feelings [0:56 - 1:23]. This tense music (which starts with rapid notes in the violins) comes back throughout the opera (and this trio) to signify tension in the love triangle. When Aida walks on stage [2:56 - 3:29], her "theme", played on the clarinet announces her arrival. As the trio reaches its climax, Radames and Amneris continue their "tension" music while Aida introduces a new melody into the trio, soaring above the other two [4:35 - 6:32]. At this point, the conflicting emotions of all three play out through simultaneous asides: Radames confessing his love for Aida, Amneris' anger having realized Radames' and Aida's secret, and Aida professing her sadness regarding her tragic love. The timpani (low drums) evoke the uneasy beat of their hearts.

*Further reflection: The clarinet was favoured by Verdi to evoke exoticism or other-worldliness in his operas. If you had to write a score for a modern version of Aida, what type of instruments would you use to suggest the story was taking place in an exotic location or in a world different from your own?*

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## Track 2 "Ritorna Vincitor" (Return victorious)

### Connection to the story

The gods have declared Radames the captain of the army and the Egyptians send him off with a heroic battle cry – "Return victorious". Aida joins in with the battle cry as he marches off but when left by herself, she repeats the battle-cry bitterly, recognising that he is going off to war against her father and brothers. She prays to the gods to have pity on her.

### Musical elements and significance

It starts with a full-of-fury recitative (sung-spoken style with orchestral accompaniment that helps a character propel the plot). Aida scolds herself for joining in on the battle cry and expressing her conflict of supporting Radames in the fight knowing it is against her father and country. The horror of her brothers and father dying in battle is expressed vividly in the opening section of the aria. But then, the tone of the aria changes completely as she thinks about her pitiable state and prays to the gods [1:05 - 1:48 and again at 4:30 - 7:28]. It's a very famous aria that allows the soprano to show her versatility, by simultaneously having to express conflicting emotions as well as the strength and vulnerability of her character.

*Further Reflection: Based on this aria, would you consider Aida a strong or a weak character? Is she selfish for loving Radames even though he is an enemy of her country?*

## Track 3 "Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside" (Glory to Egypt and Isis)

### Connection to the story

The Egyptians have returned victorious from battle and they have a massive processional across the stage, displaying the spoils of war as well as parading the Ethiopian prisoners.

### Musical elements and significance

Musical elements and significance: The scene represents the climax of the spectacle of the aria. The opera is much more intimate in the following acts. This scene begins with a trumpet call by a special trumpet specifically designed by Verdi for this opera, often referred to as the Aida trumpet, [link to Parlando blog – Herb Poole post] which leads into the heroic chorus. After the opening chorus, there's the Triumphal March which is probably the most famous melody in the opera (melody in the trumpet) [0:46 - 1:45]. This is followed by several melodies, with each group of citizens honouring their King and army: women honouring them with grace [1:49 - 2:29], whilst the priests bow (notice the descending melody, which emphasizes the "bowing" of the priests) and sing praise to the mighty gods thanking them for bestowing glory on their army [2:30 - 3:08]. The chorus comes back at the end of the procession to bring the piece to a heroic conclusion.

*Further Reflection: The opera was written with ancient Egypt in mind. Traditional stagings are elaborate, especially during the Triumphal March. Historically the scene has called for animals (yes, on stage!), over 100 chorus, palm leaves, carriages, even replicas of pyramids for sets showing all the glory Egypt has to offer. How did the situation surrounding the creation of the opera (see Historical Background article [link to it]) affect Verdi's original concept for Aida? Why would Verdi feel compelled to have a strong reference to and show off the exotic, grand and fantastical elements of Egypt?*

*Fast forward to the 21st century, to the COC's production: instead of showing off Egypt's glory and victory of going to war, director Tim Albery chose to highlight the horrors of war. This idea transforms the Triumphal March into a nightmare for Aida, who is subjected to seeing the destruction of her country and countrymen. Listen to this excerpt again. How could this concept be realized on stage? (Continued on next page)*

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## **Track 4 "Ciel! mio padre" (Heaven! My father!)**

### **Connection to the story**

Aida is waiting for a late-night rendezvous with Radames when her father, Amonasro (the King of Ethiopia and a prisoner of war) approaches her. He tells her that his troops are already regrouping and planning to attack Egypt to rescue both of them. All they need to know is the Egyptians' battle route so they can sneak through it before the Egyptians mobilise again. Aida asks him how they can find this out and is horrified when Amonasro tells her that it's up to her to get the information from Radames. Aida claims that she can never betray her lover like that, causing Amonasro to lash out at her, denouncing her as his daughter and declaring her a slave to the pharaohs. Aida weeps and begs her father not to curse her, promising to do what is asked of her.

### **Musical elements and significance**

Verdi was always at his most inspired when writing for father/daughter combos. Amonasro's music is very serious at first as he describes the task ahead for him and his army. The music becomes more lyrical as he and Aida rhapsodise about their homeland [0:48 - 1:51]. When he tells her that it's up to her to ask Radames for the secret battle-route, the music starts off quietly and gradually builds as Aida realises what he's asking her. The music explodes when she refuses and he curses her, with the orchestra playing at full blast behind him [1:52 - 5:06]. The music changes completely as Aida begs him to forgive her. Here is some of the tenderest and most emotional music of the opera as Aida tells her father that she will do her duty as his daughter. [5:07 - 8:03] Aida's pleading is evoked in the cello's arpeggios (broken chords consisting of three notes) as she drags herself to her father. Having accepted her fate, Aida remorsees: "Oh dearest country, how much you cost me." Note Aida's low notes on the words "mi costi" or "cost me" - 7:25 - 7:50 - do they foreshadow her death?

*Further Reflection: The character of Amonasro represents patriotism, a theme that is often explored in Verdi's operas. Some of Verdi's choruses have become national theme songs in Italy (such as "Va pensiero" - "Fly, thought" - from his opera Nabucco. What types of patriotic songs do we have in Canada (aside from our national anthem)? What patriotic songs do you know from your own culture?*

## **Track 5 "L'abborrita rivale a me sfuggia" (The detestable slave escapes my vengeance) and Track 6 "Già i sacerdoti adunansi" (Soon all the priests will gather here)**

### **Connection to the story**

Having reported Radames for his plans to flee with Aida, Amneris now feels remorse at causing his imprisonment. But this remorse is mixed with her resentment towards Aida and the fact that Radames was willing to give up everything for her. She asks Radames to appear before her and tells him that, if he renounces Aida, she will save him from the priests. Radames says that his conscience is clear and that he would never renounce his love of Aida. This sends Amneris into a fury and she tells him that no one but she can save him. Still, Radames refuses to submit to her demand and is willing to go to his death.

### **Musical elements and significance**

This scene is Amneris's big moment. Her music in her introduction shows her two main qualities -- her rage and her vulnerability. When Radames first appears, Amneris's music is calm as she tries to persuade him to renounce Aida, though her internal rage and agitation is reflected in the detached and dark sounding of the bass clarinet [Track 6, 0:00 - 0:59]. But when Radames refuses and says that his only concern is Aida's life, Amneris's music becomes more agitated. As she describes Amonasro's death and Aida's escape, the music is tense and paints a vivid picture of them fleeing. When Radames says that he hopes Aida reaches her homeland safely, the music changes suddenly to reflect his words. As Radames refuses to renounce Aida, Amneris becomes more furious and launches into some of the most thrilling music in the entire opera [4:40 - 5:38]. The high drama in the duet and orchestral closing reflects the battle of wills between the two characters. (Continued on next page)



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*Further Reflection: In opera, composers use the technique of playing two or more different melodies at the same time to show the conflict of emotions in characters. Similarly, they sometimes write a melody that two or more singers would sing at the same time to emphasize the unity in thought. How have contemporary artists used this idea of layering two or more melodies or songs at the same time? What emotions or ideas does this technique evoke?*

**Track 7 to 9      "La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse...O terra addio"  
(The fatal stone is now in place above me... Farewell life)**

**Connection to the story**

Radames is in the tomb where he has been buried alive. He thinks about the fact that he'll never see Aida again when she suddenly appears. Knowing that he would be sentenced to death, she has snuck into the tomb and been waiting for him so they can die together. He's horrified at first but the two of them bid farewell to the world together. Above them, the priests are heard chanting and Amneris prays for Radames. She repeats the word "pace" ("peace") as the opera ends.

**Musical elements and significance**

Compared to the music of the previous scene, this final scene has some of the opera's most peaceful music. There is quiet resignation in the declamatory music Radames sings at the beginning, as he reflects on his sad fate. Aida's presence is sounded in the orchestra by a quick flute and oboe "sigh" [Track 7, 1:56 - 1:58]. The only moment of tension in the music comes when Radames realises that Aida is hiding in the tomb with him. The low strings, clarinet, bassoon and bass drum accompany Aida's sombre yet strong declaration of acceptance of her fate: dying in the tomb with Radames [Track 8, 0:00 - 0:38]. It is evident that Aida's decision to die with Radames comforts him as he responds "Morir! sì pura e bella!" ("To die! So pure and lovely!") in a sweet melody. As the two bid farewell to the world, the music is ethereal and euphoric, suggesting that the two will meet again in heaven. Their euphoric state is interrupted by the Priestesses, reminding them of their tragic situation. Radames's attempt to move the stone closing the vault is heard in the drums and short notes in the low brass [Track 8, 3:23 - 3:59]. The music becomes a trio in the final moments when Amneris joins in with her prayers [Track 9, 3:15]. Her music has an appropriately peaceful quality as she wishes Radames peace. Aida dies. Her melody is echoed in a solo violin [Track 9, 4:42 - 5:38] over Amneris's final words of the opera imploring for peace: "pace" ("peace").

*Further Reflection: Some would suggest that this opera should be called Amneris instead of Aida? Debate! What would your "heaven" or place of absolute contentment sound like?*

# Exploring Patriotism, Lesson Plan

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## Critical Learning

- » Students will discuss and define the word “patriotism” and will be given the opportunity to think about what being patriotic means to each individual.
- » Students will explore the significance of patriotism as it relates to Canada’s contribution to foreign policy.
- » Students will use art to express their individual beliefs by taking one scene from *Aida* and incorporating designs that represent their ideas of patriotism and foreign affairs.

## Guided Questions

- » *What is patriotism? What does it mean to be patriotic?*
- » *Is patriotism as prominent today as it has been throughout history? Why or why not?*
- » *How does patriotism influence modern Canadian society?*
- » *How does multiculturalism affect the overall patriotic views of society in Canada?*
- » *How is patriotism reflected through the arts?*
- » *How should Canada interact with the rest of the world?*

## Curriculum Expectations

### Canadian History Since World War I – Grade 10

- » Assess how individual Canadians have contributed to the development of Canada and the country’s emerging sense of identity.

### Civics – Grade 10

- » Explain what it means to be a “global citizen” and why it is important to be one,
- » Describe the diversity of beliefs and values of various individuals and groups in Canadian society.

### Canadian and World Studies – Grade 11, 12

- » Explain how different individuals and communities in Canada seek to fulfill their ambitions and express their identities.
- » Explain the importance of active citizenship and respect for heritage in the everyday lives of Canadians.

## Learning Goals

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- » Demonstrate a deeper understanding of the affects of patriotism on foreign policy.
- » Understand that ideas of patriotism vary among different individuals.
- » Consider the relationship between multiculturalism and patriotism and how they influence each other.
- » Examine representations of ideas and beliefs through the arts
- » Demonstrate an understanding of the significance of using art as a platform to express ideas and beliefs.

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## Instructional Components and Context

### Readiness

Review synopsis of Aida prior to delivering this lesson to provide background knowledge to the students.

### Materials

- » Internet access to visit [Attending an Opera: FAQs & Etiquette](#)
- » Signs to post for four corners of the room,
- » Chart paper and markers,
- » Copies of the "Organizing Your Ideas Chart."

## Patriotism                      Approximately 20 minutes

### Whole Class Discussion

Briefly explain to students how Verdi used opera to express his nationalist point of view.

### Four Corners

Post signs in each of the four corners of the room, reading: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree.

Ask the following questions to the whole class and have students move to the corner that best describes their opinion.

After each question, ask few students from each corner to explain their choices.

1. *"Patriotism is love and devotion to one's country and the willingness to sacrifice for it."*
2. *"Our (Canada's) lack of patriotism IS our patriotism" (Marche, 2008)*
3. *"It is patriotic to support government actions even when you disagree with them"*
4. *"One's sense of patriotism intensifies when one is in a foreign country"*

### Think-Pair-Share

Have a Think-Pair-Share session using the following questions:

1. *If you were in another country as a visitor, how would patriotism affect the way you interact with people of that country? What role does patriotism play when one is in a foreign country?*
2. *What effect did patriotism have on the character of Aida?*



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## Action! Approximately 40 minutes

### Option A: Rapid Writing, Individual Work

- » Have students respond to the questions, “*What does patriotism mean to you?*” by writing down whatever comes to mind for 2 minutes.

### Option B: Group Work

- » In groups, students will pick one scene from *Aida* of which they will incorporate their own designs that reflect their ideas of patriotism and foreign policy.
- » Refer to the Organizing Your Ideas Chart which will help students organize their thoughts and ideas for the task.
- » Each group will draw or write their ideas on chart paper to present to class.

## Consolidation Approximately 15 minutes

- » Each group will present their ideas to the class, while rest of the class critically reflects on their thoughts on each of the presentation by writing down key ideas.
- » Verdi expresses his patriotism in the form of an opera. Ask students pay close attention to where and how ideas of patriotism are being expressed and reflected throughout the opera.
- » Also, briefly discuss **proper opera etiquette** with students so they are aware of what to expect at an opera.

### Assessment for Learning

Carefully observe and facilitate Four Corners Activity by paying close attention to students opinions and beliefs.

### Assessment as Learning

During "Consolidation" students will critically reflect on each other's works.

### Differentiation

- Students are given the opportunity to express ideas through the arts
- Group work encourages cooperative learning

### Quick Tip

Ensure students are engaged during the Four Corners. Effectively facilitate discussion by asking few students to share their thoughts.

### Link and Layer

For history course: when students are designing a scene, you may specify a time period that has been the focus of study, and ask them to incorporate ideas from that specific time period.

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The COC offers a wide variety of school programs for Kindergarten to Grade 12.

To find out more, visit our website at [coc.ca/Explore](http://coc.ca/Explore) or contact:

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The COC Gratefully Acknowledges:



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