Aida by Giuseppe Verdi: Opera Analysis

Aida is a famous opera written by Giuseppe Verdi which has been sung more than 1100 times since 1886 in New York's Metropolitan Opera alone. It was premiered on 24 December in 1871 in Cairo's Khedivial Opera House, Egypt, but Verdi did not regard it as an official premiere as, the general public were not invited. And later in 1872, Aida was premiered in Italy and it consisted of four acts and had an old Egypt Kingdom setting. The libretto was written by Antonio Ghislanzoni and the staging was produced by French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette. Verdi scholars mostly agreed that Aida was added with new chromaticism, subtlety orchestration and dramatic streamlining that could only be found in Wagner's works in his time.1 I think to a large extent Aida is related to the broader social cultural or political currents.

In Aida, ballet numbers, incantations by priests and priestesses, the hieratic color of the music, the Oriental dance style, 'Ethiopia' with descending minor-mode tunes,2 old Egypt kingdom scenarios, costumes, special instrumentation including 6 Egyptian trumpets, ... and many other features were combined together to have created an exotic Oriental feeling in this 'Egyptians' Opera.

Verdi (1813-1901) was a leading Italian opera composer at his time. He was a musician as well as a politician, as he was elected as a member of the new provincial council in 1859. He showed sympathy to the Risorgimento movement in his early opera and his "chorus of the Hebrew" from opera Nabucco has gained significant political influence in which it became the song of liberation.3 Aida was also one of his operas which contained political elements, imperialism in specific. The opera was an entrust of Khedive Ismail (Khedive of Egypt and Sudan) to write a featured opera for Cairo, and to celebrate the opening of the Khedivial Opera House. Except he was given 150000 francs in gold, Verdi was also blarneyed as he was considered as the best choice, before both Wagner and Gounod.4 And therefore, that was the reason for Verdi to compose Aida. Although in the end, the first opera played in the opera house was Rigoletto instead of Aida, another work of Verdi's due to the outbreak of Franco-Prussian War which hindered the transportation of Scenery and costumes in French.

At the 19th century, the European countries were expanding abroad to different countries, colonized places such as Africa, India and America, where Egypt gradually became dependent to Europe, then in 1882 Britain occupied Egypt entirely. Colonization provided European power and imperial ruling pleasure as demonstrated by Leila Kinney and Zeynep Celik in their study of belly-dancing.5 By the expansion in foreign lands and social dislocation from home, there seemed to encourage the production of autonomous intellectual and aesthetic images. The Orientalist, Africanist and Americanist discussions were being raised. Different non-European cultures ideas were flowed into European countries, in forms of painting, fiction, writings. However, those ideas might not essentially to be the authentic culture but rather in the perspective of the European. The imperial attitude and pleasure fostered the Europeanizing of other cultures, Aida was an example, as an opera in Egypt created according to a European taste and the European idea of Egypt. Aida as an Egypt opera, with what Verdi thoughts of Egypt, has confirmed the Orient culture as essential exotic and antique place where European culture can show off their power.6 The absorbance of exotic elements from other countries mixed with the well-developed opera system in Europe would be a way of demonstrating soft

power.

While the western culture was independent to the other cultures, interest and curiosity of the Europeans towards them were expected. As evidence, there were more and more World exhibitions in the 19th century, especially in European countries. In the Eighth International Congress of Orientalist 1889, the Egyptians were invited as scholars, however, they felt like they were treated as exhibits more. In the 19th century, non-European visitors were always treated as an exhibit and sometimes suffered degradation.7 This implied the level of curiosity of other cultures in the Europeans eyes, but this might have caused some bad drawback. Some Egyptians visited the World Exhibition in Paris, the Egypt exhibition tried to create the noise effect in the street by importing animals from Cairo and the mosque was set up as a coffee house. They were disgusted by how the Egypt exhibition was made and feeling embarrassed at the same time.8 Although they did not say it was not authentic, it was truly not the culture they are feeling proud to present. Aida as a European produced Egyptian Opera, it may seem great work in the eyes of European as it mixed with new exotic elements but how will things turn out when a native sees it?

Verdi insisted to create Aida on his own, he wrote to Ricordi that his work should only have “only one creator”. The creator of scenarios Mariette, Verdi regarded as a wealthy Oriental potentate had joined with a genuinely brilliant and single-minded Western archaeologist that he could keep his command and undistracted in his artistic presence.9 Verdi so insisted to create the whole opera by himself, but he, however, was having no connection with Egypt, not even been there once. So, the whole opera was only the imaginary of Verdi. Though Verdi has asked a Musicologist from Belgium Francois-Joseph Fetis for advice, who was the first European to try on studying non-European music separately with the general music history.10 Verdi read his examples of oriental music and oriental instruments. During the production of the opera, Verdi and Mariette were believed to have taken the reference of Napoleon’s Description of Egypt. What Napoleon found was an Egypt which experienced the screening of Muslim, Arab and Ottoman Empire with French.11 Verdi and Mariette couldn’t get to know the more glamourous part of Egypt in the old days which were no long existing. Moreover, as they were looking through reconstructed models of Egypt, it was a kind of projective. That’s not enough, to truly understand and produce a successful Egypt opera, as they ignored the modern Egyptians. The author of Cultural and Imperialism, Edward thinks that Verdi had no feelings at all about modern Egypt. During the two years Verdi preparing the opera, he regarded himself as doing something for Egypt on a national scale. Owing to the submissive attitude of Egypt, Verdi was allowed to pursue his artistic intentions with his uncompromising intensity.

Aida was one of the representations of the invasion of European cultures into Egypt, together with the Khedivial Opera house. Aida was strongly criticized as an embarrassment because of the political intention and imperial domination in behind.12 The influence of the Europeans was great that the foreign residents grown rapidly by the early 1880s. And by the end of the 19th century, Cairo happened to have two distinctive communities, divided by a single street, described as the discontinuity between Egypt's past and future.13 The ’colonial’ part of the city had steam-powered machines, gaslights, French formal gardens, while the native part of the city was dark and underdeveloped. It then started to have reformation under European influence, the culture of the places was divided into two. Moreover, Ismail ruling was opposed by the Egyptians as they were being aware of him handing Egypt over to Europeans. The submissive attitude of Ismail caused foreigners to take Egyptians non-resisting attitude as granted an the society of the Egyptians were disrupted.

The Khedivial Opera house was burnt down in 1971, and Cairo only built one Opera House after 17 years. Although Aida seems to be a successful and popular opera in other places such as America, Cairo could not sustain the play. Aida happened to be a European façade, a dividing line of aesthetic value and an imaginary wall which divided the city into colonial and native.

Bibliography

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