

OPERA SAN LUIS OBISPO BRINGS GRAND OPERA TO TOWN

By Kathryn Bumpass

OPERA SAN LUIS OBISPO PRESENTS
GIUSEPPE VERDI'S
AIDA
A CITYWIDE ARTS COLLABORATION

Ballet Theatre San Luis Obispo
Central Coast Children's Choir
Civic Ballet San Luis Obispo
CORE Dance Company
Deyo Dances
Opera San Luis Obispo
Studio @-Ryan's American Dance

Directed by
Daniel J. Witzke
Choreographed by
Drew Silvaggio

Opera San Luis Obispo
Chorus & Orchestra Conducted by
Brian Asher Alhadeff

SATURDAY - 7PM | 2
OCTOBER 11 | 0

SUNDAY - 2PM | 1
OCTOBER 12 | 4

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Opera San Luis Obispo pulls out all the stops in yet another citywide arts collaboration: Giuseppe Verdi's monumental *Aida*, Saturday October 11 at 7:00pm and Sunday October 12 at 2:00pm. Major performing arts organizations from all over the city will join together for what many consider to be the grandest of all operas.

Ask most opera fans for an example of grand opera, and I believe *Aida* will top the list of responses you get. With its crowds of soldiers, priests, captives of war, and skilled dancers, most of them attired in exotic costumes, its triumphal march with heraldic trumpets, its tale of doomed love marked by dramatic confrontations, and an achingly beautiful tomb scene, this masterpiece virtually defines the term "grand opera" as we commonly use it today.

The large forces required include the Opera San Luis Obispo grand orchestra and chorus, conducted by Brian Asher Alhadeff, Artistic Director; the Central Coast Children's Choir, directed by Beth Klemm; Civic Ballet San Luis Obispo, Drew Silvaggio, director; Ballet Theatre San Luis Obispo, Theresa Slobodnik, director; CORE Dance Company, Leslie Baumberger, director; Deyo Dances, Lisa Deyo, director and Studio @-Ryan's American Dance, Ryan Beck, Director.

I asked Maestro Alhadeff (now in his fourth year as Artistic Director of OperaSLO) why he chose *Aida* for this fall's production. He replied, "My goal is to create outstanding artistic events that unite San Luis Obispo's classical arts community—celebrating how amazing we can be when we all hold hands."

Further, "Opera is that playground where large-scale casts, choruses, orchestras and ballet harmoniously merge with lavish and spectacular set designs, costumes and stage effects. *Aida* is one of those special works that can showcase the abundant talent of San Luis Obispo on one stage at the same time."

I wondered, what persuaded Maestro Alhadeff to think it would be possible to stage a work like *Aida*, which requires such large performing resources?

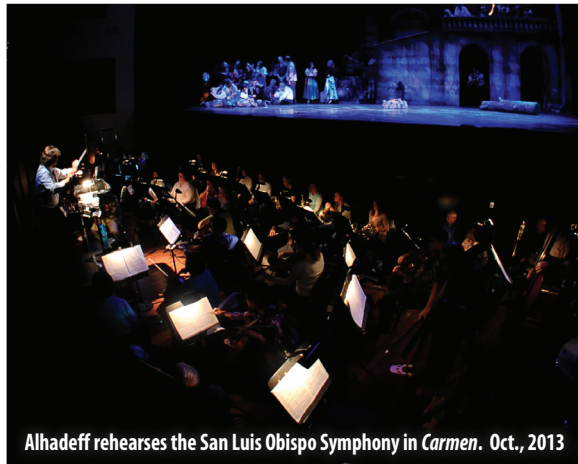
Alhadeff replied, "Grand opera can only happen in a very special kind of city that has strong roots in orchestra, chorus and dance, and most importantly a grand opera house like Performing Arts Center San Luis Obispo where real magic comes to life. We are very lucky to have strong support in all of these key elements of opera production. This is also part of the reason why *Aida* is so popular – it's one of those perfect compositions, a rare synthesis of every layer of art that defines grand opera."

A career highlight for Verdi, *Aida* brims with music that is “sublime, with one beautiful melody after another,” Alhadeff says. “The writing for the principal characters is an amazing celebration of the human voice. *Aida*’s monumental choruses bind the opera together in rich, lush textures, and the ballet segments offer another brilliant dimension to the operatic experience.”

Set in Egypt, *Aida*’s story is a classic conflict between duty and love: Aida and Radames are from opposing nations, Ethiopia and Egypt, and both owe loyalty to their respective peoples and rulers. Aida faces a “double duty” conflict. She has a duty to her people, and also to her father Amonasro, the King of Ethiopia, who demands that she lead Radames to reveal Egyptian military secrets. The theme of jealousy adds more anguishing conflict to the story. Amneris, the daughter of the Egyptian king, is in love with Radames and, jealous of her rival Aida, does her best to lure him away.

Aida is a typical Verdi heroine in that she is undone by the irrationality and violence of men. She is nevertheless a strong figure. When they meet, Aida and Radames dream of a land where they can live in peace far from the conflicts that beset them. She leads him to reveal the plans of the Egyptian army, which Amonasro overhears. Caught in his betrayal of military secrets he is arrested and tried by the council of priests. He is condemned to death in a sealed tomb. In the tomb, Radames is startled to find Aida there too. She has slipped in to die with him. As they expire, they sing a serene duet for which Verdi himself wrote the words.

In many ways *Aida* is a summation of Verdi’s practice during most of his career, and the most thorough integration of French and Italian, older and more modern elements. It is his final essay in grand opera, and arguably his most perfect.



Alhadeff rehearses the San Luis Obispo Symphony in *Carmen*. Oct., 2013

Maestro Alhadeff has assembled an impressive cast of artists to sing the principal roles in *Aida*. Soprano Tracy Cox makes her debut with OperaSLO in the title role. She is a Dallas native and a Domingo-Thornton Young Artist with Los Angeles Opera.

Returning favorite Ben Gulley will sing the heroic tenor role of Radames. His career is burgeoning, with lead and feature roles in opera, solo engagements, concert work, film work, nationwide touring and prestigious appearances abroad.

The role of Amneris, will be sung by Lauren Curnow. She holds masters’ degrees in Music and Opera Performance from The Juilliard School and The Curtis Institute of Music.

Aida’s stern father, Amonasro, will be sung by baritone Ralph Cato. He has sung a variety of roles including the title role in *Gianni Schicchi*, Marcello in *La Boheme*, Germont in *La Traviata* and Escamillo in *Carmen*.

Romanian bass Gabriel Vamvulescu returns to OperaSLO in the role of the Chief Priest Ramfis. He has performed with opera companies in Europe and the United States, singing roles such as Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* and Mephistopheles in *Faust*.

The High Priestess will be sung by Jumi Kim, who teaches voice at Cuesta College. Her operatic roles include Donna Elvira in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, the Countess in his *Le Nozze di Figaro* and Gilda in Verdi’s *Rigoletto* among others.

Finally, Ben Brady will make his debut with OperaSLO in the role of the King of Egypt. After graduating from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor’s degree in vocal performance, he moved to the Bay Area, where he has sung a number of roles, among them Hunding in *Die Walkure*, Zuniga in *Carmen* and Zaretsky in *Eugene Onegin*.



The *Aida* Collaborators: from left to right Stage Mgr. John Calder, Leslie Baumberger - CORE Dance Company, Set Designer Jean-François Revon, Theresa Slobodnik - Ballet Theatre San Luis Obispo, Drew Silvaggio - Civic Ballet San Luis Obispo, Ryan Beck – Studio @-Ryan’s American Dance, Beth Klemm – Central Coast Children’s Choir, Lisa Deyo – Deyo Dances, Stage Director Daniel J. Witzke, OperaSLO Acting Executive Director Sharon Dobson, OperaSLO Artistic Director Brian Asher Alhadeff, and Costume Designer Cynthia Cooley-Vest