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In Honor of Professor Roger Allen

Al-Karmil
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Volumes 40-41 (2019-2020)

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GIUSEPPE VERDI AND *AIDA* IN THE EGYPTIAN PRESS: AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN 1913¹

PAOLA VIVIANI

Abstract

This essay highlights the importance of Italian culture in the formation of Arab nationalism and both Egyptian and Syro-Lebanese patriotism in the *Nahḍa* period. Its focus is on an article that appeared in the well-known *Majallat al-Zuhūr*, a literary, scientific, and artistic magazine published from 1910 to 1913 by the Lebanese intellectual Anṭūn Jamīl al-Jumayyil (1884-1948) and a number of his colleagues. The text analyzed in this essay focuses on Giuseppe Verdi and his famous work *Aida*, the latter representing an example of Verdi's patriotism, nationalism, and anticlericalism.

Keywords: Patriotism, Nationalism, Anṭūn Jamīl al-Jumayyil, *Majallat al-Zuhūr*, Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida*.

1. *Introduction*

When choosing the topic for this occasion, I thought it would be interesting to provide some examples of the circulation and reception of Italian texts², within the Arab world and by means of literary magazines, in the period known as *al-nahḍa al-ḥadītha* or, more commonly, *al-nahḍa* (the mid-19th century up to the 1930s).³ By Italian texts I mean texts either produced by Italian

¹ This article is an extensively revised edition of “*Literary Magazines and the Circulation/Reception of Italian Texts: Some Examples*,” a paper written for an international conference entitled: “The Multiple Renaissances: Revolutions, Translations, and the Movement of Ideas across the Eastern Mediterranean in the Nineteenth Century,” Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne, Università degli Studi di Torino (24 and 25 October 2019).

² In this specific case study, the term “texts” may not exclusively refer to purely literary texts. On Italian writers and texts discussed in some leading Arab magazines of the period, see Avino, *L’Occidente Nella Cultura Araba*, 93-97.

³ The bibliography on this fundamental topic is absolutely vast. As a way of example, see fn. 7. In Italian, see Camera D’Afflitto, *La letteratura araba contemporanea*, 17 ff.

writers and artists or concerning the “garden of the Empire” and its reality.⁴ I also thought that it would be gripping to focus, once again,⁵ on the activity of the Syro-Lebanese journalist, essayist, dramatist, poet and politician Anṭūn Jamīl al-Jumayyil (Beirut, 1884-Cairo, 1948),⁶ who migrated to Egypt in the first decade of the 20th century. Al-Jumayyil became famous in the Arab political and cultural world thanks to his versatile and multifaceted personality which supported his many endeavors during a very important period for all Arab societies. I recently became interested in his work in the course of my own research on Nahḍawist Syro-Lebanese literati, journalists and reformists who moved to Egypt during the 19th and the 20th centuries. At this time, Egypt became the first and privileged *mahjar*, a land of Arab migration for Levantine people both in and beyond Arab territories.⁷ Indeed, both al-Jumayyil’s literary production and the activities carried out by him in the abovementioned fields give an additional enthralling glimpse of the cultural and social ferment which took place in the Arab world and in the *mahjar*. In particular, it is worth remarking here that some personalities, works and facts related to Italian culture were discussed in the famous magazine al-Jumayyil cofounded and codirected in Cairo with many other major intellectuals: *Majallat al-Zuhūr* (or *al-Zuhūr*, The Flowers, 1910-1913). Consequently, discussions about al-Jumayyil and his entourage’s literary and political projects can help researchers highlight not only his (and their) specific place within the coeval intellectual structure, but also shed light on an often neglected aspect: the relevance held by Italian literary as well as political culture on the formation of Arab nationalism and patriotism, especially in some specific areas of the Arab world. In fact, we cannot forget the ongoing and ever increasing academic investigation of *al-nahḍa*. While studies only infrequently examine the interrelations between Italian and Arab societies, other Western

⁴ Italy is “l giardin del Imperio,” as in Alighieri, *Divina commedia, purgatorio, VI*, 105.

⁵ Viviani, *Les œuvres littéraires occidentales*, paper submitted for evaluation.

⁶ Al-Ziriklī, *al-A’lām*, 27.

⁷ That was notoriously a critical time in the history of the Arab-Ottoman people, characterized by a harsh worsening of living conditions in the Arab territories which were under the direct control of the Sublime Porte. Many Syro-Lebanese intellectuals who wished to continue (or start) their career made up their minds about settling down in Egypt in search for a living for themselves and their families. Within the vast bibliography on this topic, see Philipp, *The Syrians in Egypt*. Many Levantine people also migrated to the Americas, creating their impressive communities. For some texts on this subject, see Viviani, *Faraḥ Anṭūn e l’America*, 269-291; *Ibid.*, *Syrian Women*, 25-36; *Ibid.*, *The Requests*, 113-128.

cultures' influence was and is being greatly scrutinized.⁸ The pivotal studies conducted and published by Professor Allen spurs students to continue their research of that period through a markedly different lens. For example, Professor Allen, in his recent essay "The End of the *al-Nahḍah?*" (2019), written from his long and authoritative experience, rethinks this very concept in some ways. First of all, he questions its meaning and its usual English translation(s), while remarking that he prefers to consider *al-nahḍa* as a *revival*, rather than a *renaissance*. He argues:

At the basic lexicographical level, the Arabic term *nahḍah* involves a process of upward motion, and, in English terms, I would suggest that "revival" captures that basic sense more effectively than "renaissance" which seems to have been the preferred translation in spite of its unsatisfactory and inappropriate links to European cultural phenomenon of the same name, not to mention the fact that the notion of "rebirth" (re-naissance) presumably implies that its precedents are not merely "decadent" but "dead" or at least "moribund."⁹

This passage is very interesting and gets to the heart of the discussion concerning the deepest meaning of *al-nahḍa*, its origins, as well as its factual or probable evolution. It is also a stimulus for further research into the possible bonds existing between *al-nahḍa*, the Renaissance and the Italian Risorgimento;¹⁰ the connections between Arab culture in the aforementioned era and

⁸ Much has been written on the said period, also in Italian, but not yet enough attention has been paid to the strong intellectual link between Italy and the Arab world from a broad cultural standpoint. Scholars usually continue to focus on the relationship between the Arab region and other Western countries (mainly US, the United Kingdom and France). See, among others: Hanseen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age*; Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution*; Id., *The Dawn of Arab Printing*, 259-274; al-Bustani, *The Clarion of Syria*; Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda*; Makdisi, *The Conceptualization of the Social*; *ibid.*, *The Eastern Mediterranean*; Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*; Zachs and Halevi, *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria*; Zemmin, *Modernity in Islamic Tradition*.

⁹ Allen, *The End of the al-Nahḍah?*, 5.

¹⁰ See the bibliographical references provided for in Professor Allen's essay. See also Benigni, *Renaissances at Borders of Literary Modernity*. On the Risorgimento and elements of continuity and

Italian culture can be more deeply scrutinized. It also allows researchers to examine the various ways these intellectual and physical links were structured and introduced to Arab readership. I will try to show how the presentation of these characteristics was influenced by the context into which they were inserted.

In this essay, focus will be put on a text concerning Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) and his *Aida*, published in the Cairo-based magazine *Majallat al-Zuhūr*.¹¹ At the same time, a hypothesis will be proposed about the reason why the author of this article chose to discuss Verdi and his famous opera forty years after its composition and prenetation.

Aida had been commissioned to Giuseppe Verdi by Khedive Ismā'īl Pasha (r. 1863-1879) in 1870, and was first staged on December 24, 1871 in the newly built Khedivial Opera House.¹² In 1913, on the centenary of Verdi's birth, al-Jumayyil and his staff took the opportunity to write about Verdi and his opera, which had decades before marked a turning point in Egyptian life. Therefore, one may wonder: Did they select this particular subject simply to pay tribute to the great Italian composer's genius and to his "Egyptian" opera? What elements did they highlight, and why? What message can be read in these words? And what message could *Aida* and Verdi's experience as a whole convey to the Egyptian and Levantine audience both at home and in the *mahjar*, in 1913? Was it the same message that the Khedival regime wanted to convey to its people and to the world in the 1870s?

2. Viva V.E.R.D.I.!

Much has been written regarding Levantine migration to Egypt and the basic role played by its members in the evolution of both Egyptian and their own homeland societies at all levels. It is

discontinuity between it and the Rinascimento, among others, Croce, *La crisi italiana del Cinquecento*, 401-411; Banti, *Il Risorgimento Italiano*.

¹¹ Anon., *Verdi*, 281-290.

¹² The Khedivial (or Royal) Opera House was built in 1869 by the Italian architect Pietro Avoscani (d. 1891), a noble born in Livorno (Tuscany) who had fled to Egypt for political reasons in 1837. He belonged to the third migratory flux described by Balboni in his study consisting of three volumes (see fn. 41). Avoscani worked a great deal on behalf of the Khedivial Court. Among his other work was the Zizinia Theatre in Alexandria, which was embellished with "terracotta decorations, typical of Milanese buildings of the Risorgimento period, perhaps to celebrate the accomplishment of his patriotic ideals after Italian Unity was proclaimed in 1861." (See Pallini, *Italian Architects*, cited in Petrocelli, *The Evolution of Opera Theatre*, 48). The Royal Opera House was inaugurated with Verdi's *Rigoletto*. It was then destroyed by a fire in 1971.

however very important here to note that Levantine involvement on behalf of Greater Syria caused stress to the Egyptian immigrants, who were accused of devoting all their energies to their homelands and not to either their adopted Egypt or to the Pan-Arab nation. This was actually partly true when we consider the innumerable measures they put in place so that they could fight struggles aimed at improving Syro-Lebanese life conditions both in the homeland and in the *mahjar*.¹³ However, in this essay, focus will be put on how and to what extent the Levantine agenda to improve Arab and Syro-Lebanese conditions in Egypt, and the relevance of Italian cultural elements may have impacted thinkers like Anṭūn Jamīl al-Jumayyil and his highly esteemed staff. This must have influenced their choice about what works or figures linked to the Italian peninsula would, in their view, deserve attention from Arab readership and particularly from the Egyptian, Levantine and mixed Syro-Lebanese-Egyptian audience in the 1920s. Before going any further, one must necessarily focus on some details of al-Jumayyil's activity in the 1910s, when the text on Verdi and his opera were produced. First, one must consider some of the works of al-Jumayyil as writer and journalist;¹⁴ among these we must note the lecture/essay *al-Jū' wa-l-Majā'āt* (Hunger and Famines, 1916) which offers an interesting survey of Arab and European studies, chronicles, and religious writings describing famines over the centuries. The last part of this overview, which can be labelled as an elegy dedicated to the tragic Syro-Lebanese famine that spread throughout the region during World War I, is a poetical invitation addressed to a personified Greater Syria to not give up, even in the face of such a horrific situation.¹⁵ *Al-Jū' wa-l-Majā'āt* is a clear example of al-Jumayyil's deep involvement in the Arab Levantine "affaire," and of his spurring the Syro-Lebanese colony in Egypt to lend more support to their suffering brothers.

Similar involvement is patently evident in *al-Zuhūr*, which was founded to create a bridge between all Arab territories. First was the connection, between Egypt and Greater Syria, based

¹³ E.g., Viviani, *The Requests*.

¹⁴ He also wrote, as a way of example, the drama *al-Samaw'al*, about the famous story of Jāhilī poets Imru' al-Qays and al-Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā', this latter being a symbol for unshakable loyalty. He also wrote the essay entitled *Shawqī*, from the second name of the celebrated Egyptian poet Aḥmad Shawqī, who was among the many contributors to *Majallat al-Zuhūr*, and where we read, for instance, an elegy al-Jumayyil dedicated to Giuseppe Verdi. Shawqī, *Rithā' Verdi*, 308.

¹⁵ Needless to say, there is a good number of primary and secondary sources concerning the 1915-1918 Great Famine as well as literary works dealing with it. For some sources, see, Batruni, *Surviving the Famine of World War I*, 97-106; Barbaro, *In nome del pane e della libertà*, 107-124.

on objective and subjective reasons. These areas were the main two homelands of the magazine's contributors and supporters, as well as possessing a special bond. It is also possible to point out a momentous political reason. From 1910 to 1913, the years of publication of *al-Zuhūr*, al-Jumayyil was one of the leading figures of the newly established *Ḥizb al-Ittiḥād al-Lubnānī* (*Alliance Libanaise*), which “was not an ideological political party, but instead a pragmatic political committee that represented a Syrian and Lebanese urban professional class abroad.”¹⁶

Its agenda was to protect Mount Lebanon's administrative privileges (*imtiyāzāt idārīyya*) as outlined by the *Règlemente Organique* of 1864, to support the extension of local rights and home rule, and to establish Arabic as the administrative language. As such, the *Ittiḥād Lubnānī* was the first emigrant party to articulate a reformist, decentralization platform.¹⁷

The party's origins date back to 1909, when Yūsuf al-Sawdā' and Anṭūn Jamīl al-Jumayyil went to Mount Lebanon in order to “investigate recent rumblings that the C.U.P. planned to alter Lebanon's administrative status.”¹⁸ What is more, its leaders were all journalists who “commanded editorial opinion in the *mahjar*, and they used this hold over the press to publicize the decentralization question from 1909 until the First Syrian Congress of 1913.”¹⁹ Al-Jumayyil is then reported to have promoted *al-Ittiḥād al-Lubnānī*'s activity by writing for the very famous newspaper *al-Ahrām*.²⁰ However, one can also view *al-Zuhūr* as a major tool itself created to foster the same ideals that had led to the emergence of the *al-Ittiḥād al-Lubnānī*; this underpinned the turkocentric twist in Constantinople's domestic policy after the Young Turks' re-taking of power in 1909, subsequent to the short-lived rule of Sultan-Caliph²¹ Abdülhamid

¹⁶ Fahrenthold, *Transnational Modes and Media*, 37. See also *ibid.*, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente*, 97.

¹⁷ Fahrenthold, *Transnational Modes and Media*, 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

²¹ On the rejuvenation of the caliphate during Abdülhamid II's reign, see, for example, Donelli, *Simboli e tradizioni “inventate,”* 1-17; and also Buzpinar, *Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate*, 59-89; Abushouk, *Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā's Reformist Project to Establish a True Caliphate*, 55-80.

II (r. 1876-1909).²² The constitution promulgated in 1908 seemed to have been extolled by al-Jumayyil in the editorial of *al-Zuhūr*'s first issue in 1910 entitled "Mā hiya hādhihi al-majalla?" (What is this magazine?). Al-Jumayyil's seeming enthusiasm for the constitution is perplexing and potentially misleading unless the editorial is read through the lens of bitter irony and is purposely disguised with specific goals in mind.²³

As previously mentioned, the article concerning Giuseppe Verdi's life and activity was published in *al-Zuhūr* on the occasion of the centenary of the Italian composer's birth in October 1913. It was not signed²⁴ and, thus, was likely written by *al-Zuhūr*'s main editor and founder al-Jumayyil.²⁵ As such, he fully directed the editorial stance and policy of the journal and can be considered to be one of the *maitres-à-penser* of the journal responsible for developing its aims and scope, as well as overseeing the entire publication process. In the editorial of the first issue, al-Jumayyil writes that he had been suggested by his initial staff, which comprised some of the most outstanding Arab intellectual figures of the time, to seek the collaboration of other major Arab personalities; the magazine therefore was born out of a collaboration of minds and intentions aiming at creating both metaphorical and concrete links between all Arabs. It was intended that these intellectuals, in reading the title's articles, would discover their contemporary Arab genius as well as to (re)discover the creative Arab genius that had been at work throughout history, restoring and reviving their own cultural heritage.²⁶ This emerges clearly from the words which al-Jumayyil used when explaining to the readers what lay behind the creative process which ended up with the publication of this new magazine. It aimed at being a tool for mutual knowledge of the Arab world who came from different areas and who might have had difficulties to get in touch with each other, due to political reasons.

²² Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, 102.

²³ Viviani, *Les œuvres littéraires occidentales*.

²⁴ Unfortunately, unlike the previous three volumes which had alphabetized indexes of contributors, the authorship of the articles in this volume is not known. Every entry of the first three volumes is also accompanied by both the title of the article(s) attributable to the specific contributor and the page(s) where each item is to be found.

²⁵ In magazines, many articles were published anonymously. In most cases, and especially when the writer of a single text employed the first person plural, that meant that he/she was acting as a spokesperson for that particular journal. Usually, the spokesperson was the founder of the magazine, or, when there was a plurality of founders, the one who was also its main (handling) editor. See, for example, Avino, *La rivista "al-Muqataṭaf" e la Grande Guerra*, 29 fn. 13.

²⁶ Al-Jumayyil, *Mā hiya hādhihi al-majalla?*, 10.

Above all, al-Jumayyil and his impressive team strove to have the results achieved by *al-nahḍa* known in every part of the Arab and Arab-Ottoman world. In this way, the formation of a really strong bond between the various realities of the *umma ʿArabiyya* would allow this vast community to be really as one again, after centuries of dismemberment of its united political body. Therefore, it is fundamental to strongly underline the following concept: Al-Jumayyil's magazine was intended to help the Arab community revive its ancient strength and glory and to show the Arab people those features of Western culture that might prove to be helpful on the road towards the authentic reappropriation of the consciousness of their own identity.

Apart from being *al-Zuhūr*'s principal founder, al-Jumayyil might also be considered its main handling editor; he seems to have carefully maintained the underlying editorial line during the four years of activity in the board of the title. Within the framework of the aforementioned policy, the article focusing on Verdi and *Aida* appeared to be one of the gems nestled in the pages of the magazine, because of the scope it served.

Needless to say, Verdi's personality and works have been studied and analyzed extensively from many standpoints. In this context, the composer's closeness to the Italian nationalistic struggle in the Risorgimento has always been emphasized through the scrutiny of his operas. These have been read by some critics as a kind of manifesto of the Risorgimento. In fact, Verdi's works *expressed* his values through allusive librettos with astonishing, magnificent, unforgettable contents, rich in incredible vigor and fierceness. Widely known, for instance, is the politically relevant and revolutionary message hidden within the phrase *Viva V.E.R.D.I.!* (Long live Verdi!). This phrase was plastered on city walls in many places throughout Italy, since it stood for *Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia!* (Long live Vittorio Emanuele King of Italy!), the member of the House of Savoy who would become the first monarch to ascend to the throne of a united Italy in 1861. This detail is recalled, among others, by the famous musicologist Philip Gossett who in his paper "Giuseppe Verdi and the Italian Risorgimento" (2011) wrote:

Scholars have recently taken to unravel myths that grew up around Verdi's relationship to the historical movement for Italian independence and unity known as the Risorgimento, which dominated Italian politics and thought during the first 60 years of the nineteenth century, and continued to accompany the country's dreams and ideals for the rest of the century.²⁷

²⁷ Gossett, *Giuseppe Verdi and the Italian Risorgimento*, 242.

Both these words of Gossett and his remark about Gundula Kreutzer's study concerning the influence of Verdi's music on the nationalistic thought and feeling in Germany are particularly important for the present topic.²⁸ On one hand, they are a demonstration of the enduring impact of Verdi's personality and operas on the Italian imagination; on the other hand, one also witnesses their impact on the formation and development of the national ideals of other peoples. This leads to the question as to whether these same ideas might have had an influence, and the extent of that influence on the Arab nationalistic struggle, especially after the promulgation of the Ottoman Constitution in 1908 with its anti-Arab effects. More importantly, is it likely to find any hints on the relevance of Verdi's personality and music as symbols of a patriotic fight against tyranny in the article concerning him and his *Aida*? Its author wrote:

In Italy, a group of artists emerged who gave prestige to their country's name and elevated its position among the Nations. These artists gave Italy its pride back, a pride that neither it nor any other Nation could gain through wars and great conquests.²⁹ World politics may be subverted, Nations may either perish or revive, but Italy's rich glory and unwavering honor will still be there as long as its poetry, music and visual arts have a Nation and men. The Nation of these fine arts will live as long as men have a beating heart and a soul longing for beauty.

This year that country celebrated Verdi on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, one of its famous geniuses in the universe of melody [...]. This is how living and developed Nations commemorate their geniuses, instilling energy in their sons again!

Verdi is not an unknown man for us; we would never let its centenary pass by without saying a word about him, and without laying a bunch of flowers on his grave, or matching all the Nations that started these celebrations. He is the composer of *Aida*, and *Aida* was the first opera (*riwāya mulaḥḥana*) to

²⁸ Kreuzer, *Verdi and the Germans*, cited in Gossett, *Giuseppe Verdi and the Italian Risorgimento*, 242, fn. 15.

²⁹ In these words, we might read an allusion to the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), which was reported in the magazine.

be performed in our great national theatre, the Khedivial Opera House.³⁰ He composed it on commission of the previous Khedive and set it in Egypt. It was first staged in Cairo, and European troupes coming to the country every winter represent it with great success. This is why we think it is appropriate to spend a few words regarding the man and his works, as well as his opera and its connection with us.³¹

After this illuminating opening, this article details some of Verdi's biography: the objective difficulties that he met in his childhood and youth as well as his first achievements and his great success. Moreover, a part of the article focuses on the man who, trusting in Verdi's skills, supported him in his music studies.³² The article also describes a few important traits of the artist to illustrate Verdi's endless strength and resilience in the face of many different hard times. As *al-nahḍa* and Nahḍawist literature demonstrates, thinkers of that time insisted that young people should tackle problems and take care of their own personal development. This led to inspiring individuals ready to devote themselves to the growth of their own country, of their nation and fellow citizens. This was essential for the creation of a new Arab world, ready for unity and freedom from domination. Likewise, coeval reformers pushed for the recognition of the indispensability of the activities of literati and artists within the Arab world. In fact, the latter's work was too often marginalized, not only for political or social/ethnic reasons, but also for artistic reasons. This reflected a mindset typically influenced by tradition in all fields of human existence and a rooted individualism, as well as the need to preserve one's dignity in the community.³³ This is why, in the opening sentences of the article, the behavior of developed countries is highlighted. These countries are, and must be, grateful to those women and men

³⁰ See fn. 12.

³¹ Anon., *Verdi*, 281-282.

³² *Ibid.*, 282-283.

³³ Interesting considerations on these topics and many other related issues can be found in dozens of texts by Nahḍawist writers and reformers: Among them, Mārūn al-Naqqāsh (1817-1855), in his famous speech reported by his brother Niqūlā in *Arzat Lubnān* (The Cedar of Lebanon, 1869). For the first critical studies on al-Naqqāsh's theatre in Italy, see the undated manuscripts by Lupo Buonazia (1844-1914) *Gli scritti drammatici di Marun Naggas*, and *Materiali manoscritti per un dramma in dialetto in Siria*. See also Viviani, *Lupo Buonazia*, 75-87, Langone, *Molière et le théâtre arabe*, 21-82. And also Ruocco, *Storia del teatro arabo*.

who honor their homeland; they must pay tribute to these outstanding personalities. That is a real, significant sign of evolution and greatness. Reading between the lines, a new claim from thinkers living in Egypt and elsewhere in the world seek to have this claim and their efforts recognized by both those in power and by average men in the Arab world.

Furthermore, if Verdi was to be considered an Italian Horatio Alger and a patriot in his homeland,³⁴ he and his experience were to be considered extremely important both in Khedivial Egypt, and in the greater Arab world of the 1910s. In fact, the writer of the article under examination seems to be deeply fascinated by Verdi, his genius, this personality, and his opera. In *Aida*, three different realities are displayed. The first one is that of the ancient Egyptian *milieu*, with its peculiar religious rites and the celebration of its own imperial grandeur. The second one is that of enslaved and defeated Ethiopians. The third one is that of the redeeming power of love; this is personified in Aida and Radames when they go to death in the vault on which was built the Temple of Vulcan, the god of fire, while the Egyptians pray to the goddess Isis in the upper part of the same temple. The author of the article published in 1913 also reminds his readership that the charming power unleashed by Verdi's *Aida* had been renewed in every theater season in Egypt since 1870. This underlines the relevance of this opera in the life of Egyptians, even though the target audience was made up of mainly European, new Egyptian and new Cairene inhabitants as well as westernized Arabs.³⁵ Indeed, this kind of audience was exactly that Khedive Ismā'īl Pasha, had in mind when he proposed writing the opera, as did Egyptologist Auguste Mariette (1821-1881), who was responsible for the opera's costumes and scenario. The scenario was then reworked by Antonio Ghislanzoni (1824-1893) and Giuseppe Verdi himself.³⁶ Their libretto was soon translated into Arabic, but did not meet widespread acceptance; meanwhile, Levantine Salīm al-Naqqāsh's (d. 1884) adaptation of the opera's words and music was released in 1875 and was more in keeping with Arab taste. Furthermore, the name Aida was retranslated from *Ayida* into *'Ā'ida* and it was this latter name that was used in the text published in *al-Zuhūr* in 1913. Salīm al-Naqqāsh's activity was considered a further way to meet Ismā'īl Pasha's nationalist/patriotic needs.³⁷ *Aida* was an essential part of the political agenda carried out by the Khedive; this has been highlighted by

³⁴ Gossett, *Giuseppe Verdi and the Italian Risorgimento*, 241.

³⁵ Re, *Alexandria Revisited*, 163-196; Gitre, *Acting Egyptian*.

³⁶ *Quaderni dell'Istituto di studi verdiani*, *passim*.

³⁷ Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, 53-54.

researchers. Edward Said, for example, saw in *Aida* the fundamental aspects of imperialism and colonialism at work. He stated:

Aida's Egyptian identity was part of the city's European facade, its simplicity and rigor inscribed on those imaginary walls dividing the colonial city's native from its imperial quarters. *Aida* is an aesthetic of separation [...]. *Aida*, for most of Egypt, was an imperial article deluxe purchased by credit for a tiny clientele whose entertainment was incidental to their real purposes. Verdi thought of it as monument to his art; Ismail and Mariette, for diverse purposes, lavished on it their surplus energy and restless will. Despite its shortcomings, *Aida* can be enjoyed and interpreted as a kind of curatorial art, whose rigor and unbending frame recall, with relentlessly mortuary logic, a precise historical moment and a specifically dated aesthetic form, an imperial spectacle designed to alienate and impress an almost exclusively European audience.³⁸

While some analysts followed Said's view, other voices countered his opinion. Lucia Re, for example, commented: "Khedive Ismail is likely to have seen in Verdi's music a political symbol of the spirit of national independence rather than a means to enslave Egypt economically, culturally, and politically to Europe."³⁹

From the 1870s until the 1910s things started to change rapidly. First, Egypt became a veiled British protectorate (1882-1914) which reduced the Khedivate's power and its scope. While the new situation might have helped the members of other colonies to blossom,⁴⁰ it diminished the effectiveness of some high status colonies, the Italian one among them.

³⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 130; Gregory, *Edward Said's Imaginative Geographies*, 310 ff.

³⁹ Re, *Alexandria Revisited*, 164.

⁴⁰ This new situation caused some to be considered traitors, especially the Christians among them, even if erroneously, in some cases. They were considered so not only by Muslims of the same region, but also by their coreligionists who never accepted or came to terms with being subservient to any regime, with the consequence of having their activity harshly hindered by the British. See, for example, the hardships faced by Farah Anṭūn (1874-1922), who opposed the British openly and was opposed by them in many ways. He fiercely attacked some Levantine colleagues for their connections with the British. About him, see, Viviani, *Un maestro del Novecento arabo*.

The position of Italians in the 1870s Egypt was immense. They had an exceptional impact on the country's society, politics, and culture, thanks to massive migration started in the last decades of the eighteenth century.⁴¹ The protagonists of this migration brought refined artistic abilities and technical qualifications with them, along with the Italian language, which was *the* language of Egypt already in Muḥammad 'Alī's reign (r. 1805-1848). Moreover, they introduced the revolutionary and nationalistic ideals of the Risorgimento in the country. It was full of Masonic ideals, which began to be widespread in Egyptian society.⁴² In the crucial period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many societies witnessed identity consciousness-raising; this provided a set of values which was considered unavoidable also by a good number of Arab rulers and reformers, who consequently embraced these values in their own activity. Many Arab advocates of development, liberalism, tolerance, freedom, and social justice were notoriously Freemasons, who depending on the levels of their own courage, the openness of their readership and other salient facts, divulged these ideas more or less clearly in their works. The close link between Nahḍawist thinkers and Masonic teachings, which they were eager to promulgate with due precautions, emerges clearly from the examination of their socio-political, literary and journalistic works.

Interest in ancient Egypt and its rites permeated parts of Masonic lodges, and was firmly linked to the so-called Hermetic tradition, which played a key role in Ismā'īl Pasha's political agenda.⁴³ This element cannot be underestimated when analyzing the interconnections existing between Italy, with its Rinascimento/Risorgimento background, Egypt and Constantinople

⁴¹ In 1906 Prof. L.A. Balboni wrote that dozens of Italians arrived in Egypt in three different migration fluxes. Between 1780 and 1810, many people went there in search of freedom from socio-political oppression at home, and lots of them landed in the country following Bonaparte's military campaign. From 1811-1828, it was the turn of archeologists and, broadly speaking, of people interested in antiquities, as well as scientists and explorers. With regard to the years from 1829 to 1849, Balboni devotes a whole chapter to "travellers, scientists, artists, professionals, and merchants" who migrated to the Pharaohs' land. See Balboni, *Gl'Italiani nella civiltà egiziana del secolo XIX*^o, I, 358.

⁴² Among the good deal of sources focusing on Freemasonry in the Arab-Ottoman world, see, for example, the texts: De Poli, *Il mito dell'Oriente*, 634-654; Ibid., *La massoneria in Egitto*; *ibid.*, *Freemasonry and the Orient*. See also the book which is considered to be the milestone of the history of Freemasonry in the Arab world, *Ta'rīkh al-māsūniyya al-'āmm mundhu nash'atihā ilā hādhā al-yawm* (General History of Freemasonry from its origins until today, 1889) by Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914). In this text the relevance of Italian masons and lodges is widely highlighted.

⁴³ Mestyan, *Arab Patriotism*, 116.

before, during and after the Young Turk Revolution.⁴⁴ Needless to say, the Levantine people both at home and in their *mahjar* played a fundamental role in spreading the nationalistic ideas of the Italian Risorgimento, as demonstrated by Mārūn al-Naqqāsh's and his nephew Salīm's education and activity in the formative years of modern theater in the Arab world.

Italian Rinascimento/Risorgimento ideals, the Hermetic tradition, Freemasonry, and Egyptomania all contributed to the creation of *Aida* as well as to the interpretation of its message. Moreover, what clearly emerges here is Verdi's anti-clericalism and sympathy toward the Ethiopian slaves, rather than his admiration for the magnificent Pharaoh.⁴⁵ As far as the Arab interpretation of this opera is concerned, a crucial shift seemed to occur from 1870 to 1913.

As already discussed, according to some observers and critics, *Aida* was a hymn to patriotism and nationalism, because it was aimed at reviving ancient Egypt's grandeur; this should reflect modern Egypt's splendor, achieved in the Ottoman era under the Khedivial regime, and especially during Ismā'īl's reign. Thus, the ruler wanted to show the world that Egypt had acquired the same status and power as the great imperialistic European nations had. In actuality, he had expansionist ambitions over Ethiopia. Consequently, the story of the enslaved princess Aida was to reflect that of the conflict between two communities, with Egypt managing to overthrow Ethiopia. Instead, in *al-Zuhūr's* interpretation of the opera dated 1913, the perspective is likely to have completely changed. First, because the Nile Valley had by then become a British (veiled) colony; consequently, it was subject to Empire that was even greater than its own ambitions. As such, it needed to express its desire to get rid of this incredible dominating power. Secondly, this shift took place thanks to the increasingly heightened importance achieved by the Levantine community within coeval Egyptian society. This was brought to the fore, in a certain way, by the press founded by them or to which they contributed. The Syro-Lebanese, and particularly those who created and supported the *Alliance Libanaise*, may have envisaged in Aida's vicissitudes their homeland's tragic past and present as well as its quest for liberation from the newest version of Ottoman domination, the overtly turkocentric government put in place by the CUP in 1909. We could even go further and state that the Levantine people might consider Aida not only as the symbol of their own tormented land, but also as the personification of Ethiopia's struggle. This was described in an ancient myth accepted by a specific trend in Freemasonry: Ethiopia as the *trait d'union* between the Arab

⁴⁴ See the cited works by De Poli.

⁴⁵ Tommasi Moreschini, *Immenso Fthà*, passim.

East and Egypt. It is that place from where the ancient wisdom had migrated to Egypt and which fuelled the powerful results of future generations.

3. Conclusions

The long passages drawn from the article about Verdi published in *al-Zuhūr* are eloquent about al-Jumayyil's and his staff's intentions. Of course, not only is it clear that they wished to celebrate the talented Verdi and his music, but it is also absolutely evident that he was praised for his own personal fight in favor of Italian nationalism, which he served through his music and operas. These latter were, in turn, understood both for their exoteric and esoteric meanings. They were works of art and also a major political tool.⁴⁶ The story of the phrase *Viva V.E.R.D.I.!* and its message were highlighted for the audience's sake.⁴⁷ This article also states:

In those years, the Kingdom of Sardinia was striving to create the new Kingdom of Italy by getting rid of the Austrian domination, and Italian political unity. Verdi played a key role in those political events and joined the independent party, making memorable efforts for its sake. In his operas people used to see a patent hint and reference to the nationalistic hopes absorbing that generation's thoughts, which contributed to his popularity and the spreading of his fame.⁴⁸

Independence is the key word, here. Was the author of this text talking about Italy exclusively? If *al-Zuhūr* was really created as a tool in the hands of the *Alliance Libanaise*, it is likely to be seen as a further invitation to its audience to really strive for independence through its words. Actually, it may have turned into a tool for a more general discourse, given the fact that its nucleus included figures from Egypt and Greater Syria, almost all of them in their Egyptian exile. Moreover, all the contributors of this magazine were always looking for new ways to make the average reader trust them. The choice of talking about Giuseppe Verdi was indeed a clever one because of the Italian composer's renown within the Arab world. In 1913 Verdi was

⁴⁶ It is however necessary to note that *Aida* was much criticized by Verdi himself. *Quaderni dell'Istituto di studi verdiani, passim*; Tommasi Moreschini, «*Immenso Fthà*», *passim*.

⁴⁷ Anon., *Verdi*, 284.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

still an authentic symbol of hard work, an example of rags-to-riches experience, and of patriotism. It was an objectification to which Arab liberal intellectuals aimed.

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