

## Press Text on the new staging of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* “I try to speak to all human beings”



Shirin Neshat © SF/Birgit Probst

After five years, Shirin Neshat returns to Salzburg with a new take on *Aida*. Her first approach to this piece had been marked by an attempt “to focus on the language of the opera itself and the singers,” Shirin Neshat sums up her work as a director in 2017. “The second time around, we will have an *Aida* which is even more nuanced and visually more provocative. My current view of *Aida* is one more specifically oriented towards the time we live in.” She adds that the tale has acquired a new urgency today.

“I am very happy to be back here, with the possibility of re-evaluating and re-contextualizing my first opera experience. I have realized that at the time, I underemphasized my own work as a visual artist and filmmaker. Now I have a broader palette and idiom, regarding both the various levels of meaning and audience resonance.”

Asked about his role debut as Radamès this year at the Salzburg Festival, Piotr Beczala says: “It had been planned for two and a half years ago in New York, but the pandemic forced me to postpone it.” Ultimately, he is glad it is now happening in Salzburg, and in this special constellation – regarding the inherent challenges, he adds with a laugh: “The pressure here is comparable.” He saw the new production in 2017 and feels that this is really a new production rather than a revival or revision. “I am grateful that I can make my debut in a role which will hopefully accompany me through the coming years in this production.”

Shirin Neshat comments on the new elements in her staging: “My work always draws a parallel between me as a visual artist and the tension between religion and political regimes.” In her photographs and videos, she explains, she has always sought to find a balance between an emotional, poetic visual language and mystical aspects in order to show darkness and violence. “I believe the story of *Aida* could hardly be more contemporary, given what people in Iran, in Ukraine, in Russia are experiencing, like people everywhere in the

world where they are victims of political systems of dictatorships.” Still, she resists reducing the work to its political dimension.

Asked about his approach to his role, Piotr Beczala agrees with Shirin Neshat: “In the triangle between Aida, Amneris and Radamès, all three are faced with a dilemma: Radamès is expected to be a hero for his nation, but at the same time he loves his enemy’s daughter. And Amneris is trying to hold on to what she considers her due. Then there is the political conspiracy of Amonasro. It cannot end well; the situation cannot be resolved – as almost always in Verdi’s operas.” And as always in Verdi, he adds, there comes a point of no return – yet this complexity is also special about Verdi’s operas. In the consistency of his actions, he feels a personal affinity with Radamès.

Shirin Neshat also illuminates the portrayal of human relationships. The difference between this *Aida* and the 2017 version, she explains, is that the three central characters have grown in complexity. It is important to her to ask the viewer: how much control do we accept? She feels unable and unwilling to speak to this from an Iranian perspective alone. She herself has been living in exile in New York since she was 17, and artists actually living in Iran surely have a different perspective. Generally, she considers herself an international artist working at an international festival, and is happy to be part of the Salzburg Festival. “I try to speak to all human beings through my work.”



Piotr Beczala © SF/Birgit Probst

On a musical level, Piotr Beczala explains that he has many years of experience with Verdi, but this encompasses only a handful of roles in *La traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Luisa Miller* and in *Il trovatore*. They all have one thing in common: the precision in Verdi’s style. He says that the musical structure of the role is beautifully designed – even from the beginning of the aria “Celeste Aida”. Compared to the role of Manrico, it does not demand a high C, but 20 high B-flats instead. The treatment of this kind of tessitura is very important. In content, it is notable that only a few passages of the opera actually deal with the love between Radamès and Aida. Only in the face of death are the two lovingly united. The impossibility of love is demonstrated more clearly in this opera than in other Verdi works: *Aida* is utopian from the very start. In his view, Radamès does not die a physical death in the end. Rather, it is a mystical death; death as a possibility.

He explains that working with Shirin Neshat helped him, in that – unlike many other productions – the video projections that are featured were visible from the very first week of rehearsals. Shirin Neshat reveals that parts of these video projections refer to her works *Passage* and *Rapture*.

Piotr Beczala offers a preview of coming projects at the end of the event: apart from Radamès in New York and Madrid in the autumn and *Lohengrin*, he also plans to move further into verismo, singing roles in *Andrea Chénier* and *Manon Lescaut*, for example. However, he does not feel that there is a dream role missing from his repertoire. „I love delving deeper into roles like Werther, which I first sang 26 year ago.”

Further information on the production:

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/p/aida>

The podcast is available here:

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/presse/podcasts>

## **Premiere: 12 August, Großes Festspielhaus**

Further performances:

15, 19, 23, 27 and 30 August

Kind regards,

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