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“The Rule of Three”: Ternary Form and Third-Relations in “Aida”, Act II, Scene 2

Act II, Scene 2 marks the half-way turning point in Verdi’s opera “Aida”. Amneris has just confirmed Aida’s love for Radamés and we the audience have just discovered that Radamés has returned victorious from the Ethiopian war and that there will be a grand procession in his honor. The scene opens with a short introduction that sets up musical ideas borne out throughout the remainder of the act. It begins with a trumpet fanfare from an on-stage military band (111/1/1),¹ heralding the arrival of the procession. When the orchestra enters (111/2/1), it becomes clear that the opening Bb is dominant in the key of Eb. As in a standard fanfare, Verdi arpeggiates up to the third and fifth in the bass. However, rather than harmonizing it as a dominant expansion, he chooses to use each pitch as a brief tonicizer, hinting at the third-related keys of gm and BbM quite early on. A brief motive is repeated three times (111/4/1-3) before moving up a half step to begin on the chromatic note in the melody, Db – ^b6 in the local key of F, or the pitch located a major third below tonic. As exemplified in this brief introduction, the number three pervades Act II, Scene 2 of Verdi’s “Aida”, borne out in third-relations between and within keys as well as in the three-layer nested ternary form of the scene.

The number three is most immediately obvious in the large-scale ternary structure of the scene, as exhibited in Example 1. After the brief introduction described above, the chorus of Egyptian citizens enters with the first theme of the scene. The theme comes back at the

¹ Throughout this paper, all measure numbers refer to the Ricordi piano-vocal score, in the form page number/system number/measure number.

beginning of the A' section, musically marking the return. However, the ternary structure extends beyond the music to the dramatic action as well. As can be seen by the form chart, dramatic action is scarce to non-existent in the A and A' sections but plentiful in the B section. Indeed, the entire A section is pomp and scene-setting for the dramatic action contained in the B section, and the A' section serves to clarify the characters' reactions in preparation for the remainder of the opera.

This trend can be clearly observed in the emotional changes wrought in the eponymous Aida throughout the course of the scene. At the very end of the previous scene, Aida says, "Pray thee spare a heart despairing, life's to me a void forsaken; live and reign, thy anger blighting o'er my head no more shall loom; soon this love thy hate inviting shall be buried in the tomb."² Despairing because she feels she cannot compete with Amneris's rivalry for Radamés's love, she appears to be suicidal at this point. Because the A section serves as a grand spectacle to provide context for the upcoming dramatic action, Aida (as all other major characters) is silent throughout, although we know that she is following Amneris around in her entourage.

Appropriately contrastingly, the B section provides a number of surprises for Aida, fitting with the unstable tonal center. Via a short recitative, we learn that the prisoner Amonasro is Aida's father and, unbeknownst to his Egyptian captors, is also the Ethiopian king. Naturally, she concurs with her father's supplications to the king, turning her despair for Radamés's love to pleading for her father's freedom. Her solidarity, if not clear already, is reinforced by her reprise of his *cantabile* "Ma tu, Re" melody (154/1/2-155/1/3) in the stable key of F major, joined in octaves by Amonasro in the last phrase. The stable key allows Aida and Amonasro to project a clear, unified message. As more and more characters begin singing, Aida's emotion and

² All libretto translations are taken/adapted from the following source: Ghislanzoni, Antonio. *Aida*. Composed by Giuseppe Verdi. Anonymous translation. *Opera Glass*. Stanford University, 2009. Web. 13 March 2014.

desperation increase, as indicated by her ascending sequence to two high Bbs in close succession, the first solo Bbs of the scene (164/1/2-166/1/1). Another octave-duet with Amonasro on “Ma Tu, Re” (166/1/2 – 170/1/1) and a series of high Bbs (171/1/1 – 173/1/4) and a C (174/1/4) close out the large ensemble portion of the B section, musically representing both Aida’s solidarity with her father and homeland as well as the strength of her hope for mercy for her father. Though her father is spared, the King’s final recitative of the B section (returning now to an unstable tonal center), strikes Aida a different, unexpected blow. He says, “Radamés, the homeland owes you everything. Amneris’s hand will be your prize. One day, you will rule over Egypt with her.”

This pronouncement effectively turns Aida’s mind back to Radamés, as she is still unable to reconcile her love of Radamés with her love of father and country. Throughout the entire A’ section, she sings but one stanza of text: “Alas! to me what hope is left? He wed, a throne ascending, I left to measure all my loss like some poor widowed dove.” She repeats this text three times in full, first in melodic octave unison with Radamés (he with his own text of despair), then in canon with Radamés, and finally once more in melodic octaves (a ternary form, perhaps, shared between the two secret lovers). They share high Bbs of passionate despair (186/1/2, 194/1/2), which Aida continues through the final ensemble. As a character, Aida’s emotional arc matches the formal divisions of the scene: The B section matches her surprise and turbulent emotions with its quicksilver tonality, while in both the A and A’ sections, she is despairing of her seemingly hopeless love for Radamés.

Despite all this talk of large-scale ternary form, it is worth noting that the Gloria al’Egitto theme appears not just twice at the beginning of the A and A’ sections, but actually a total of four times. Since a second appearance indicated an overall ternary form, might these additional

appearances indicate subsidiary ternary forms? This is, in fact, the case. As shown in Example 2, each of the three large formal sections may in turn be broken down into three main subsections, creating a two-level ternary structure. Then, the four appearances of “Gloria all’Egitto” make sense: in addition to marking the A and A’ sections on the first-level structure, they mark the second-level a and a’ sections within the first-level A and A’. Given the prominence of this theme, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at it.

A chorale-style reduction of the theme appears in Example 3. Opening with glorious arpeggiations of the tonic triad, the first interesting moment occurs in 112/1/2, where the tenors sing ^5-^b6-^5 , out of rhythm with the other three voices. As discussed, ^b6 has already made a noteworthy appearance in the introduction – coming right after, this emphasis on ^b6 in a very major moment confirms that hypothesis. Looking at the text above this ^b6 from all four instances of the theme, we get “Iside”, “vindice”, and “[clemente] Egizio”: “Isis”, “avenging” (in reference to Radamés), and “Egyptian mercy”, respectively. As the opera continues, indeed, all three of these things become doubtful in their own way: The Egyptian priests seem more interested in exacting a harsh toll of justice than in mercy in the name of Isis, supposedly a mother goddess figure. As a result, Radamés is surely not avenging anyone at the end, locked in a tomb. ^b6 thus appears to be a subtle marker, calling into question the text which it highlights in this instance. ^b6 appears once more, now in the melody, in 112/2/2, ushering in a mixture passage under repeated text. Aside from emphasizing the text, this serves to introduce the idea of mixture on a small scale, as it will soon be introduced on a larger scale.

Although “Gloria all’Egitto” introduces the first-level A and A’ sections nearly identically (the A’ section, in addition to different text, has a slightly larger scoring including cymbals, timpani flams, and full scoring in the final two bars), they quickly diverge in content.

The A section is primarily joyous and triumphant in nature. “Gloria all’Egitto” is followed by the return of the introductory fanfare material (“Raise we our festive songs!”) before the introduction of a new, lyrical theme sung by the women in Eb major (115/2/3 – 117/1/3). The first hint of trouble appears when the priests enter canonically with a new theme (117/2/1). With no underlying harmony, only the presence of $b^{\wedge}6$ and $b^{\wedge}3$ in the first entrance (in relation to the previous Eb music) give us a sense that we might be in eb minor. As other voices enter at fifths, the tonal center is ambiguous until the presence of a descending eb natural minor scale in the basses (Ricordi 118/2/4-5) places us firmly in eb minor. The repetition demonstrates their strict adherence to dogma while the ambiguous mixture key forebodes impending conflict. This is followed by a brief codetta of the women’s theme (Ricordi 119/1/3 – 120/1/3), bringing us from the ominous tones of the priests back to the joyous mood of the triumphal procession. The vocal music is then interrupted by an instrumental second-level b section, presenting fanfares in Ab and Cb (written as B): third-related keys. After an interpolated ballet, the three themes return in the same order (with the interpolation of the priests’ music from 134/1/3 to 135/2/3), maintaining the joyous mood – but, notably, Radamés enters as the priests sing their theme in unison, now firmly in ebm (142/1/1) – a sign, perhaps, that not all will fall out well between them.

In contrast, the A’ section, while perhaps joyous on the surface, is much more turbulent, both in scoring and content. As mentioned above, the initial “Gloria all’Egitto” is scored nearly identically. However, now there are two sets of competing lyrics – the Egyptian people and king against the Ethiopian prisoners. This makes both groups much less easy to understand, starting out the reprise with a tinge of confusion. The joyous introductory fanfare material is cut, going straight to a new theme in Eb major praising Isis (182/1/3), sung by the priests – with tell-tale $b^{\wedge}6$ s still making appearances (183/1/1, 183/2/1 in particular). A third theme, also in Eb major

with ^b6 s, is then introduced by Aida and Radamés, reminding the audience of their desperate love triangle. Praise for freedom, religious piety, and desperate love – all cast in similar themes, all nine bars long. Something is afoot that was not in the A section, where the themes were all of various lengths and where ^b6 did not feature quite so heavily. The second-level b section, rather than being instrumental, serves to advance the plot by showing the audience that Amnasro is still plotting revenge – also cast in ebm, connecting his revenge to the revenge the priests will ultimately take against Radames. Finally, rather than presenting the themes one after the other, as in the A section, Verdi combines all three themes from A' into a grand quodlibet (191/1/1-195/1/2). The reason for the regular phrase lengths and presence of ^b6 in the three themes at the beginning of the A' section is now apparent: to be able to combine in quodlibet with “Gloria all'Egitto” theme. The coda is frenetic, with nine or ten different texts occurring simultaneously. While the words cannot be understood, the tension can – high Bbs and Cbs between Aida and Amneris (e.g. 199/1/3 – 201/1/2) together with strong ^b6 - ^5 low in the priests (e.g. 199/1/1-2, 200/1/2-3) heighten the dramatic tension. This makes sense – while the A section sought only to set the scene, the A' scene reminds the audience of all the tensions that have yet to be resolved: the Ethiopians plotting vengeance, the displeased priests, and the love triangle – all of which will come to a head in the next scene.

Ternary form also occurs within smaller-scale units of the scene. The second-level b section of the first-level A section, for instance, is mostly taken up by a ballet. As seen in Example 4, the shaded outer sections incorporate the same material (simply re-ordered) in F and C, while the B section contains differing, non-recurring material in a variety of non-closely related keys (by the standard definition of being built off a single diatonic scale). Thus, the ballet constitutes a third-level ternary form. Since the dance is relatively sectional, it does not make

much sense to give an analysis in terms of a global key. Therefore, without obvious diatonic relationships between each section, it is interesting to see how Verdi accomplishes transitions between them. Example 5 exhibits the first and last chord of each section (as well as between DbM and EM). In all but one case, the otherwise sectionally abrupt modulations are smoothed over by the use of a common tone (shown as ties in the example). The keys of the first five sections share a descending fifth relationship: C to F to Bb. A dominant transition leads to the next the next set of keys: DbM, EM, and CM, intuitively distant key relationships and, in particular, third-relationships. However, as shown in the example, the modulations between them are accomplished by common tone. Ab = G# is held as a common tone between Db and E while E is held as a common tone between E and C. Another dominant transition returns us to fm and material from the opening A section. The final key relationship, FM to cm, is noteworthy. It does not contain an explicit common tone, transitioning from octave F's to a c minor triad. Rather than being a third-relation or dominant to tonic motion, it instead ascends a major fifth – returning to the very beginning material of the ballet after cadencing in FM. This is permissible because of the strong motivic unity that comes from framing the ballet with the same material.

The ballet also makes use significant use of ^b6 , as it is present in literally every section of the dance. This is not especially surprising in the minor sections, but is particularly striking when it comes in major keys – for instance, the repeated forzando Dbs in 124/6/4 – 125/1/3, the accented Bbbs in 126/3/3 – 126/4/3, and the neighboring Abs in the bass in 127/1/4 – 127/3/2. The emphasis on this particular scale degree is evident. In addition to emphasizing that perhaps all is not as well as it could be, it serves to tie the ballet in with the rest of the scene so that it does not come off as an unrelated interpolation.

A final example of Verdi's use of three can be seen in the recitative at the end of the first-level B section (175/1/3 – 180/1/1). Musically, the section is entirely recitative except when the priests vehemently state their theme and opposition in 176/3/2 – 177/1/3. Thematically, however, this recitative is itself in three parts. Radamés requests the freedom of the prisoners (175/1/1 – 176/3/1), the priests object (176/3/2 – 178/3/4), and the King issues his decision to wed Amneris to Radamés (178/4/1 – 180/1/1). Thus, dramatically, this constitutes another third-level ternary form. Example 6 provides a harmonic analysis of this section. Having just cadenced in FM, we go through a distinctly non-standard stream of keys: DbM, dbm, AM, GbM, ebm, and finally reach EbM at the A' "Gloria all'Egitto" at 180/1/2. All of these key relationships, however, are either third-related or parallel. Thus, the modulations work not necessarily in a harmonically functional progression but rather, as in the ballet, by keeping common tones. These common tones are shown as ties in Example 7 (the voicing of the chords are arbitrary, designed to show as little movement as possible; they do not relate to the actual scoring). As a result of this modulatory technique, it is often unclear exactly when a modulation occurs. For instance, is the Db triad in first inversion at 175/1/4 I^6 in the unexpected key of DbM? Or is it V^6/bII in the key of FM, in which we just cadenced? Is the db triad in first inversion at 176/2/2 mixture in DbM, or is it tonic in dbm? Answers will depend on the listener – but it is precisely this ambiguity allows Verdi to smoothly transition from one key into another one with minimal disruption.

It is clear at this point that the number three played a large part in Verdi's construction of this scene, whether intentional or no. The question remains, however: Why three? Firstly, from a musical perspective, ternary form allows for a balance between freedom and unity. Unlike sonata form or older opera scene forms, ternary form allows Verdi to go in whichever direction he might desire – provided he repeats material at appropriate times. For instance, though the ballet

is sectional, it holds together as a coherent entity because of its ternary form – and particularly because it begins and ends with the same material. As well, key relationships that are otherwise unintelligible gain coherence from the common tone guaranteed by third-relations. Secondly, from a dramatic perspective, ternary form allows for subtle changes that develop the scene. For instance, the “Gloria all’Egitto” theme usually (three out of four times) appears beginning with “Glory to Egypt[ian mercy]” and then branches off into different text. While allowing for scene development, this repetition emphasizes how glorious Egypt is in a subtly reinforcing way – as important to this official ceremony as the Pledge of Allegiance is to any in the United States. In a similar way, the initial canonic entrances of the priests (117/1/1 – 118/2/5) drive home the solidarity of the priests – and make the unison statement as Radamés enters (142/1/1 – 143/1/2) perhaps the more ominous for that. Thirdly and finally, from a practical perspective, ternary form allows for greater comprehension for Verdi’s audience. Although they would have had libretto in hand, motivic development – an important part of any opera – requires the audience to be aware of the motives to begin with. Repetition ensures that we will end the second act humming “Gloria all’Egitto” and firmly associating a descending line beginning with ^b6 with priests and religion.

Whether it be ternary form, the ^b6 located a major third below tonic, or third-related keys, Verdi unifies Act II, Scene 2 of “Aida” with the number three.

Example 1. First-Tier Ternary Structure of “Aida”, Act II, Scene 2

Section	Bars	Tonal Areas	Dramatic Action
A	112/1/1 – 146/1/6	Primarily EbM (See Ex. 3)	Radamés’s victory procession
B	147/1/1 – 180/1/1	Highly modulatory	Amneris crowns Radamés Ethiopian prisoners appear, Aida and Amonasro re-unite Prisoners freed except Aida and Amonasro Amneris betrothed to Radamés
A’	180/1/2 – 203/2/5	EbM	“Stand and sing”

Example 2. Second-Tier Ternary Structure of “Aida”, Act II, Scene 2

A (111/1/1 – 146/1/6)

Introduction	111/1/1 – 111/6/4	EbM – gm – BbM (I -> V)
a	112/1/1 – 120/1/3	EbM/ebm
b	120/1/4 – 131/5/4	AbM-Cb (B) M-AbM; Ballet – see Ex. 4
a’	132/1/1 – 146/1/6	EbM

B (147/1/1 – 180/1/1)

Transition	147/1/1 – 153/3/1	Recit. (Some DbM, dm)
a	153/3/1 – 155/1/3	FM
b	155/1/3 – 166/1/1	Unstable; begins and ends in fm
a’	166/1/2 – 175/1/2	FM
Transition	175/1/3 – 180/1/1	Recit. (See Ex. 6)

A’ (180/1/2 – 203/2/5)

a	180/1/2 – 187/1/2	EbM
b	188/1/1 – 191/1/3	ebm
a’	191/1/4 – 195/1/2	EbM
Coda	196/1/1 – 203/2/5	EbM

Example 3. Theme, "Gloria all'Egitto", 112/1/1-113/1/2

A/A.Gloria-all' E - git-to,ad I - si - de cheil sa-cro suol pro teg - ge! Al Re cheil Del - ta
A/A'.Vie - ni,o guer - rie - ro vin - di - ce, vie - nia gio - ir con noi sul pas - so de - glie-
A',1.Gloria all' E - git-to,ad I - si - de cheil sa-cro suol di fen - de, s'in-trecci il lo - toal
A',2.Gloria al cle - men - teE gi - zi - o chei no-stri ceppi ha sciol - to, che ci ri - dona ai

reg - ge, al Re cheil Del - ta reg - ge in - ni fe - stosi al - ziam!
ro - i, sul pas - so de - glie - ro i i lau - ri,i fior ver - siam!
lau - ro, s'in trec - ciil lo - toal lau - ro sul crin, sul crin del vin - ci - tor.
liber - i, che ci ri - do - naai li - be - ri so - chi del pa - trio suol.

Example 4. Ballet Form Diagram (122/5/1 – 131/5/4)

	Section	Bars	Form	Pedal	Function
A	a	122/5/1 – 123/2/4	AABA + coda (A – IAC; B – HC)	C	cm
	b	123/3/1 – 124/2/3	AABB (A – HC; B – PAC)	F	fm
	c	124/3/1 – 124/4/1	Interlude – PSP (“IAC”/PAC)	F	fm
	d	124/4/2 – 125/1/3	Sentence (PAC)	F	FM
B	e	125/1/4 – 126/1/1	8-bar phrase repeated (PAC)	(Bb)	bbm
	f	126/1/2 – 126/3/3	Interlude – Transition	Ab	V/Db
	g	126/3/3 – 127/1/2	Sentence (PAC)	Db/ none	DbM/ EM
	h	127/1/3 – 127/5/2	AABB (A – IAC; B – PAC)	C	CM
	i	127/5/3 – 128/2/2	Interlude - Transition	C	V/F
A	b	128/3/1 – 129/4/1	AABB (A – HC; B – PAC)	F	fm
	c	129/4/2 – 130/1/1	Interlude – PSP (“IAC”/PAC)	F	fm
	d	130/1/2 – 130/5/2	Sentence (PAC)	F	FM
	a	130/5/3 – 131/5/4	AABA + coda (A – IAC; B – HC)	C	cm

Example 5. Transitions and modulations in the ballet, 122/5/1 - 131/5/4

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff, both in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The treble staff features a melodic line with various intervals and rests, while the bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The second system continues this musical texture, showing further melodic and harmonic development. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings, typical of a piano score.

Example 6. See next page

Example 7. Recitative key relationships, 175/1/3 - 180/1/1

The image shows a single system of musical notation for piano accompaniment, consisting of a single bass clef staff. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The notation features a series of chords, each with a long horizontal line above it, indicating a sustained or recitative-like quality. The chords are connected by a series of curved lines, suggesting a sequence of related harmonic positions. The notation is minimalist, focusing on the harmonic structure of the recitative.