

Giacomo Meyerbeer – L’Africaine (1963)

Written by bluesever

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Giacomo Meyerbeer – L’Africaine (1963)



1. Part I 1:04:56 2. Part II 1:13:46 Ines - Margherita Rinaldi (soprano) Selika - Antonietta Stella (soprano) Vasco de Gama - Nicola Nikolov (tenor) Nelusco - Aldo Protti (baritone) Don Diego - Enrico Campi (bass) Inquisitore/Sacerdote - Plinio Clabassi (bass) Don Pedro – Ivo Vinco (bass) Orchestra e Coro del Teatro San Carlo di Napoli Franco Capuana – conductor

L'Africaine was Meyerbeer's final opera. It was in production at the time of his death, and the renowned musicologist Fétis was asked to oversee the final touches before the premiere. The work is a grand opera in the heroic manner and contains many romantic elements popular with the audiences of the day. There are no fewer than three love triangles, a prison, a sleep scene, a sinister and vengeful African or Indian, storm-tossed ships that end up wrecked on an exotic continent, Indian natives and Brahmin rituals, trees with a poisonous fragrance, and self-sacrificing lovers who die by that fragrance.

The opera was premiered at the Paris Opéra on April 28, 1865. The work was a popular triumph and was performed in opera houses until the early twentieth century.

The libretto was inspired by a poem called "Le mancenillier" (The Manchineel Tree) by Millevoye, telling of a tree with a poisonous fragrance and a pair of lovers. Although Meyerbeer and Eugène Scribe, his librettist for the work, began the opera in 1837, they quickly set it aside to work on *Le Prophète*. When that work was done they again turned to *L'Africaine* but yet again set it aside, finally finishing a first draft in 1843. However, even that was rewritten and reworked. The action in the original libretto took place in Africa and Spain, but the final revision, begun in 1857 placed the story in Portugal, made the lead character Vasco da Gama, and had the "Africans" now hailing from India or Madagascar. References to Brahmin rituals and Indian gods were never taken out, although Fétis titled the opera "*L'Africaine*" after the character of Sélika.

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In the original libretto, she had been an African queen who had been sold into captivity by slavers. Scribe died in 1861, and Meyerbeer had more than one other librettist help him complete the work. Then Meyerbeer himself passed away in 1864, leaving the finishing touches to those in charge of the production.

L'Africaine contains some of Meyerbeer's most beautiful music, and love is the predominant motive for all of the music making. Inès is immediately set up as the romantic lead in Act One of the opera; she is given passionately florid melody and coloratura solos. Her "Romance" characterizes her ardor for the valiant Vasco as heroic, and it is their love which is bound to triumph through the trials of the opera. However, Act Two is devoted in part to establishing the relationship between Sélika, the Indian queen, and Vasco. She adores him and sings him an exquisitely erotic sommeil song while he lies sleeping and vulnerable in the prison of the Inquisitor. Later, when she saves Vasco's life, she and Vasco enjoy what amounts to a love duet. Finally, in Act Four, their love is mutually recognized in an Indian wedding ceremony. They have a passionate duet, after which Sélika realizes that she must relinquish Vasco. Her self-effacement and self-sacrifice forces her to give up her life for her beloved's happiness, and the opera closes with the ecstatic death of Sélika as she inhales the toxic perfume of the manchineel trees and suffers visions of her beloved's return.

The Inquisitor, Don Pédro, and the colorful character of Nesuko who invokes the Indian gods against the sailors, are adequate villains for the piece. The feeling of the original poem with the image of a poisonous fragrance comes through strongly at the close of the opera, and one feels that the entire work is something of a metaphor. --- Rita Laurance, Rovi

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