

August 23, 2011

Serious Mozart: A Grand Opera Gets Royal Treatment in San Jose

BY [STEPHANIE JONES \(/AUTHOR/STEPHANIE-JONES\)](#)



Christopher Bengochea as Idomeneo
Photo by Chris Ayers

Idomeneo, Mozart's first undisputed operatic masterpiece, written when the composer was all of 25, comes to the Bay Area in September, when Opera San José stages this grand *opera seria* (serious opera) in deluxe style.

The story is as epic as it gets. A storm-tossed Cretan King makes an ill-fated vow to Neptune to sacrifice the first person he sees on landing safely, only to lay eyes upon his son. The prince is, naturally, embroiled in a love triangle with two princesses, each of them involved in the recently concluded Trojan War, both of whom could use a dose of normalcy. Ilia is the daughter of King Priam, whose city (Troy) Idomeneo has helped destroy, and Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon, leader of the Achaeans (Greeks), who will soon be involved in her own tragedy.

As always, cuts have been made, allowing the running time of the opera to be a mere 3¾ hours.

“This was actually the largest opera ever conceived by Mozart. Some call it his ‘opera grossa,’” his biggest opera, said Larry Hancock, general manager at OSJ. Mozart was influenced by both the French *tragedie lyrique* and the Italian *opera seria*, Hancock explains: “It’s combining elements of both of these types so that we have two choruses, we have a *corps de ballet* — these are from France — and then we have extended arias and recitatives that are from the Italian tradition. So it’s infinitely huge.”

No kidding. The show includes 41 chorus members, 14 ballet dancers, 180 Cretan costumes, and a three-story-high set. What’s also unusual is the amount of research surrounding the production. Inspired by Crete’s ancient history, the show’s creative team consulted with at least three archeologists and are including artifacts from or inspired by the island of Crete in their designs. Even the set, designed by Brad Dalton, lives within the historical context of the Minoan era.

“It’s just a huge project and everything — everything — is from the island of Crete in the late Bronze Age. All the artifacts, the rituals, everything was taken from actual artifacts that exist in the world today or are found along the wall

FEATURED VIDEO



Anna Netrebko: *Idomeneo* – “D’oreste, D’ajace”

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April 24, 2010

paintings on the island of Crete,” said Hancock. “Everything was carefully researched with a group of archeologists who looked at every design and made suggestions on how to make it more authentic.”

A Helping Hand From a Supporter

There's a reason for the historical effort being taken with this production, and it goes back to the donor, philanthropist and long-time OSJ supporter David W. Packard (the son, not the father) of the Packard Humanities Institute who is underwriting the enormous cost of *Idomeneo*. Packard is also known for his involvement in the *Magic Flute* series that united and made electronically available seven of Mozart's most significant operas in their entirety.

“It [Idomeneo] was a conversation that had been going on for some years. David Packard from the Humanities Institute is very interested in Mozart. Mozart is by far his very favorite composer,” said Hancock. “When he was a young man going to the university, he majored in Classical Cultures and in particular Greek culture and his specialty was the island of Crete in the late Bronze Age. It just so happens that Mozart wrote an opera set on the island of Crete, in the late Bronze Age, at the fall of Troy. So, it was kind of a match made in heaven — Mr. Packard's very favorite composer, favorite period, favorite play.”

“It's just a huge project and everything — everything — is from the island of Crete in the late Bronze Age. All the artifacts, the rituals, everything was taken from actual artifacts that exist in the world today or are found along the wall paintings on the island of Crete.” — Larry Hancock, Opera San José

The cost of production won't be known until the accounting is finished, but *Idomeneo* is a big leap for the company. Says Packard,

This production is larger and more complex than the typical OSJ production, and the sets and costumes are designed to be usable for future productions. For this reason, the budget could be twice or even three times the budget for some OSJ productions.

In the midst of a production like *Idomeneo*, all you can do is know your stuff and keep your wits about you.

“The only thing you can do with so many people and so much material is to stay calm and encourage everyone to be present and focused on each moment as it comes, rather than worrying about the scenes we haven't gotten to yet,” said Dalton. “I am very lucky to have a fantastic collaborator, Dennis Nahat of Ballet San Jose, who helps me to stage my ideas. We work together at staging the large-scale scenes and this helps me to accelerate the process and keep the energy of rehearsals up and moving forward.”



Stage director Brad Dalton

For the Love of Mozart

As spectacular as it all sounds, OSJ isn't competing against Broadway or even L.A. Opera. It comes from a desire to do justice to a great opera. Said Hancock,

We're making this because it's one of the great masterpieces of Mozart. This isn't a publicity trick. Yeah, it's huge. It's bigger than the whole rest of our season combined I think. [If] you look at all the costs we have for our whole season, I don't think that they will equal the cost of *Idomeneo*. It's massive. What we're trying to do is live up to what this score asks for and make it as real as possible for the audiences that are coming to see this.

The creative team hopes that the effort and money will help audiences buy in to the drama in the show, which is sometimes difficult due to the dated conventions of *opera seria*.

“This is a compelling situation filled with moral decision making. That was what *opera seria* was about,” said Hancock. “Who’s going to do the right thing and who is not? It’s a moral kind of judgment problem. [In Greek] tragedy, also about huge monumental things, [it’s] not so much about morals as about how you’re not in charge.”

“The only thing you can do with so many people and so much material is to stay calm and encourage everyone to be present and focused on each moment as it comes, rather than worrying about the scenes we haven’t gotten to yet.” – Brad Dalton, stage director

Opera San José’s production of *Idomeneo* runs Sept. 10–25 and features a cast of alternating leads, with tenors Christopher Bengochea and Alexander Boyer as King Idomeneo, countertenor Aaron Blake and soprano Betany Coffland as Prince Idamante, sopranos Rebecca Davis and Sandra Bengochea as Princess Ilia, and sopranos Christina Major and Jasmina Halimic as Princess Electra.

Stephanie Jones received her Bachelor of Science in Music Industry from the USC Thornton School of Music in 2008. She recently completed her Master of Arts in Specialized Journalism (arts journalism) in 2010 at USC and is currently a freelance journalist as well as a playwright, creative writer, and amateur poet.

EVENT INFORMATION

OPERA



[\(/event/opera-san-jos%C3%A9/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo\)](/event/opera-san-jos%C3%A9/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo)

Opera San Jose Presents Mozart's "Idomeneo"

[\(/Event/Opera-San-José/Opera-San-Jose-Presents-Mozarts-Idomeneo\)](/Event/Opera-San-José/Opera-San-Jose-Presents-Mozarts-Idomeneo)

Organization: [Opera San José \(/events-calendar/organization-profiles/opera-san-jos%C3%A9\)](/events-calendar/organization-profiles/opera-san-jos%C3%A9)

Venue: [California Theatre \(/events-calendar/venue-profiles/california-theatre\)](/events-calendar/venue-profiles/california-theatre)

City: San Jose

Date: Sat September 10, 2011 8:00pm

Price Range: \$51 to \$101

Tickets: 408-437-4450

Additional Dates:

[Sun September 11, 2011 3:00pm \(/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-0\)](/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-0)

California Theatre

[Tue September 13, 2011 8:00pm \(/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-1\)](/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-1)

California Theatre

[Sat September 17, 2011 8:00pm \(/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-2\)](/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-2)

California Theatre

[Sun September 18, 2011 3:00pm \(/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-3\)](/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-3)

California Theatre

[Thu September 22, 2011 8:00pm \(/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-4\)](#)

California Theatre

[Fri September 23, 2011 8:00pm \(/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-5\)](#)

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[Sun September 25, 2011 3:00pm \(/event/opera-san-josé/opera-san-jose-presents-mozarts-idomeneo-6\)](#)

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