

A MOZART OPERA---MAD, MED, YES, BUT NOT MEDIOCRE
Great Music, Plus Immersion in Minoan Culture
And All About Doffing your Crete Shoes

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SAN JOSE-----The King of Crete, finally stepping to center stage, with all his court, retinue, and dancers! High time!

Arguably the most extravagant production ever at Opera San Jose, one of Mozart's more obscure operas is overwhelming audiences with its impact at the California Theater. Despite its antiquated scenario and musical format, "Idomeneo" is a hit of a spectacle, backed by some extraordinary singers and strong stage direction.

"Idomeneo" (1981) is one of Mozart's rare examples of the held-over baroque *opera-seria* format, featuring an augmented tale out of antiquity. The gist of it, apart from the complex love stories you might expect, is embodied in the near-fatal storm at sea. There King Idomeneo promises Neptune that, if he survives, he will sacrifice to the god the first human he sees on shore-----who of course turns out to be his son and successor in waiting, Idamante. Wrestling with that Abraham-Isaac quandary takes up most of the 3:40-long opera in three acts.

The first half of the opus is little more than neatly packaged vocal recital of recitatives and arias. But thereafter "Idomeneo" offers several pleasant surprises, including some of the first ensembles found in Mozart's work---the frosting on the operatic cake. Trio here, duet there, and a grand quartet at the finale. In addition, clarinets have been added to fill out the orchestra. And there is a mad scene for the spurned lover Elettra---the forerunner of hundreds of beloved mad scenes in 19th-century opera. And for lovers of dance, there is even a long ballet segment at the conclusion---a rarity in Mozart.

Mozart's music is simply exquisite in number after number. If King Idomeneo's music is not as adventurous (apart from one grand aria, "Fuor del mar") as the women's, it was in deference to a 66-year-old tenor in the world premiere, who had been the main reason for the production in the first place.

What is lacking here is any of the conciseness of the late Mozart masterworks. Minor characters are given major arias, the first-act curtain lacks dramatic tension, and the finale---apparently a slavish paean to the ruler, intended to satisfy the titled patron underwriting the premiere---is far too long to be effective (In today's theater world, such regal paeans by Moliere, for example, are trimmed or cut entirely, as they dilute effective drama). Taking some trimming shears to Mozart should not be out of consideration.

With veteran Mozart conductor George Cleve, 75, calling the shots, Opera San Jose

took the opposite tack, presenting as complete a version as it could, conflating the 1781 and 1786 productions. The king's "Fuor del mar" combines the two versions, the Idamante-Ilia duet of act three was borrowed from the later production, and some music cut before the world premiere was actually brought back here. There was even a rarely heard pipe organ thundering through the finale.

So for Mozart lovers, this is a one-time "Idomeneo" drama to treasure.

Cleve conducted the orchestra, showing spirit and vitality that carried the opus forward, aided by a harpsichord and cello playing the *continuo* (recitative-accompaniment) parts. The two storm sequences were every bit as electric as Elettra's mad scene itself, and the animated, augmented chorus provided extra heft to the show.

The other essential ingredient was arts patron David W. Packard, who provided essential funding making possible the elaborate Minoan décor which thrived on the Mediterranean, at least till they had their own 9/11, victims of the caldera volcano's blow-off on Santorini Island in the 17th century BC. (That is widely believed to be the ill-fated Atlantis that Plato much later lamented.)

Stage Director Brad Dalton brought plausibility and energy to a lot of otherwise static scenes, while Steven Kemp, last seen in the "Anna Karenina" premiere a year ago, recreated Minoan sensibility via his countless bright and vivid set designs. And Dennis Nahat brought over a dozen of his ballet dancers to go barefoot, doffing their Crete shoes, in elaborate allegro choreography.

Some patrons avoid the "second cast," which we caught on Sept. 11. The second cast however adheres more closely to Mozart's score, with a mezzo in trousers, Bethany Coffland, singing the role of the king's son Idamante. In the first cast, the part was taken by a tenor, transposing the music down one octave.

Others of note we heard in the surprising mature, well-turned-out cast, were tenor Alexander Boyer (title role), and soprano Sandra Bengochea (Ilia), capped by the ever-madder, scenery-chewing, floor-writhing dramatic soprano Jasmina Halimic, whose seething Elettra was at first comic, then furious, and finally quite scary.

These are heady times for Opera San Jose, now in its 28th season, opening two years in a row with headline-making productions (last year being David Carlson's world-premiere "Anna Karenina.") Perhaps the start of a memorable trend?

'IDOMENEO' NOTES---An immense cast of close to 75 appears on stage, with even costumes copied from Minoan precedents...In the 1781 premiere of the opera, Idamante was sung by a (male) *castrato*, a type of singer that no longer exists. Thus the high-voiced female in a trouser role---less plausible, but musically more germane....Consistent with baroque opera, from which this libretto was resuscitated, the resolution at the final curtain is via *deus ex machina*---intervention of the gods, in this case Neptune, who lurks behind the scenes throughout.

MOZART'S OPERA "IDOMENEO," in Italian, double-cast, with supertitle translations. Opera San Jose. Two intermissions, three hours, 40 minutes. Through Sept. 25. California Theater, San Jose. For info: (408) 437-4450, or go [online](#).

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D. Rane Danubian has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a certain amount of salsa -- for years.

These critiques appearing weekly (or sometimes semi-weekly, but never weakly) will focus on dance and new musical creativity in performance, with forays into books (by authors of the region), theater and recordings by local artists as well.

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