



Rebecca Davis as the Trojan princess Ilia in Opera San José's production of Mozart's Idomeneo.

Credits: Photo by P. Kirk.

Opera San Jose's Idomeneo: Mozart on Human Sacrifice in Mycenaean Crete

By [Beeri Moalem](#), San Jose Classical Music Examiner

A couple summers ago I went island hopping in the Aegean Sea from Lycea in Turkey through the Cyclades to the Greek mainland— islands with magical names: Samos, Naxos, Mykonos, Santorini. Opera San Jose's production of Mozart's Idomeneo took me back to these hot dry islands. Archaeologically faithful reproductions of the famous Mycenean frescoes— profiles of athletic figures with dark curly hair, skin tanned brown-orange, and temples painted in bright teals and reds all recreate the lost glory of this civilization. Today the sites of these ancient Mediterranean island cities are sun-bleached piles of rubble. The set design (Steven C. Kemp), museum-piece-like props, and glamorous patterned costumes (Johann Stegmeir) in this production miraculously brings ancient Crete back to life with an archeological accuracy that brings to mind the New York Metropolitan Opera's famous production of *Aida*. Every time the curtain went up, or any time a new backdrop came down, the audience is treated to a fresh set brighter and more splendid than the one before. For this alone, the opera is worth seeing.

But opera is also about listening. Soprano Rebecca Davis's opening number as Ilia, the imprisoned princess in love with her captor, set the bar very high in Tuesday night's show.

She sang with powerful abandon that seemed to spill over into the orchestra and fill the California Theater with a deep cry that supplied the entire first act with enough emotional quality it needed to captivate. Few moments in the opera matched the quality of those opening moments.

The Old Testament tells of Abraham who sought to kill his

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son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. The New Testament tells of a God whose own son, Jesus, was sacrificed to atone for mankind's sins. The Greeks had Idomeneo (among numerous other instances of filicide in mythology) who promised Neptune the first person he saw as an offering on the altar in exchange for surviving a storm at sea. And who is the first person he sees after being shipwrecked on a desert shore? His own son, Idamante! Will he butcher his own son? Would he rather commit suicide? Or would he defy the gods? Any of these sounds like a viable operatic option—the sense of suspense was real.

Christopher Bengochea as King Idomeneo sang with feeling and warmth, especially in his last aria, “Torna La Pace.” (Sorry, spoiler alert!) The luxuriously long song, set in a tender moment between two raucous choral finales, express the satisfaction of an old warrior king set to retire in peace, abdicating the crown calmly and proudly for his son.

Aaron Blake cast Idamante as a slightly spoiled but honorable prince. Christina Major, as the jealous lover Elettra had some moving moments in her solo laments, with shapely sighs and a wide dynamic range. She was accompanied by two stunning attendants who looked like they walked straight out of the frescoes with their long necks and dark coiled hair. The attendants performed an interpretative dance number during Elettra's darkest aria pulling even more emotion out of Mozart's music. Unfortunately, Elettra's envy came off as comical by the end—met by cruel "Schadenfreude" giggles by the audience.

Idomeneo is not as often performed as Mozart's later operas—I have never heard it live before. Dating from 1780, when Mozart was in his mid twenties and attaining his final sublime musical maturity, it is an Opera Seria—different in tone from most of Mozart's comic operas. Mozart is usually thought of as light and pretty in a pure crystalline way. But here, Mozart reveals much more, with minor harmonies, agitated textures, and forceful melodic shapes presage his darkest works: fearful moments in Don Giovanni, the G minor symphonies, and the Requiem. His setting of Neptune's storm in the second act precedes Beethoven's tempest from his Sixth Symphony by almost three decades.

Andrew Whitfield's chorus sounded better than ever, especially when they all stood at the front of the stage. Brad Dalton's stage direction, so impressive in past productions at Opera San Jose, once again kept the action moving. With the better part of the plot stalling on Idomeneo's dilemma, there were plenty of visual details on stage to alleviate the ~3-hour length. Particularly memorable was the temple sacrifice scene with the entire cast assembled in symmetry with their offerings. The finale featured dancers leaping through the air, literally flying across the stage in an incredible choreographic display. There was really nothing missing in this production.

I have been to most of Opera San Jose's productions of the past couple of years, and the orchestra has never sounded better. Augmented in number and sounding crisp and swift under George Cleve's efficient direction, the sound was full but never overbearing. It was a little strange to hear Mozart with a bigger orchestra than previous productions of Puccini and Verdi. There's no turning back to smaller orchestras now! How puny would

Verdi's La Traviata (later this season) sound with only 3 or 4 strings per section after hearing 6-7 per section in Mozart? These orchestral reinforcements, along with the high-quality set design were only possible through the generosity the Packard Humanities Institute. I wholeheartedly join the San Jose Mercury and San Francisco Classical Voice's praise for this production. Bravo to all, and good luck on the 2011-2012 season!

PS

The specter of Neptune (and his nymph) with his perfectly chiseled chest, flowing white beard, clear blue eyes staring straight ahead, and statuesque unmoving facial expression was downright hubris-shattering!

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