

Mozart's 'Idomeneo'

Opera San Jose presents an opulent production of Mozart's operatic spectacle.

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by Scott MacClelland on Sep 16, 2011

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Alexander Boyer's Idomeneo faces some hard choices in Opera San Jose's current production. ([video](#))

Mozart's *Idomeneo, re di Creta*, as witnessed in [Opera San Jose](#)'s opulent new production last Sunday, sheds far more light on the 24-year-old composer's progress than this stage work might suggest at first glance. But as sheer operatic spectacle, this OSJ triumph should keep audiences buzzing for weeks.

The hapless king of Crete makes the same blunder as the biblical Jephtha—promising the gods to sacrifice the first seen following deliverance from doom. Both are so delivered; both first see their own offspring. In *Idomeneo*'s case, the ensuing tale further involves his son Idamante's love for Ilia, the captured Trojan princess (daughter of Priam) and her rival for the prince's attention, Electra, daughter of Agamemnon.

Written in 1781 for the Munich Opera, *Idomeneo* is modeled on the operatic successes of Christoph Gluck, not least for a story line similarly drawn from Greek

legend. What that means in practice is an ongoing musical stream that underscores dramatic development as opposed to a sequence of disconnected scenes and freestanding arias. Most revealing of all, however, is the steady growth of Mozart's own style traceable over the course of this three-hour piece. Gluck's example is prominent in Acts 1 and 2—notably the “gentle breezes” arias. But by Act 3, Mozart has transcended his mentors and created his own searing heat (Electra's “mad” scene), grand utterance (Idomeneo's final aria) and the extravagant ballet music just before the close.

Sets, scenery (Steven C. Kemp) and costumes (Johann Stegmeir) were persuasively inspired by Minoan art, including palace rooms, projections of ships at sea with dolphins, and in Act 3, a stunning three-story facade and a final drop showing young athletes vaulting over charging bulls. Brad Dalton's stage direction energized the proceedings. The biggest voice was Jasmina Halimic (Electra), who stopped the show with her last act display of self-destructive revenge and despair. Her negotiation through the few coloratura bits earlier on got a bit dicey, but the voice and personality are commandingly dramatic. Lyric tenor Alexander Boyer made the title role consistently expressive and dramatic where it mattered. Happily, soprano Sandra Bengochea was cast as Ilia, sympathetic and lovely in voice and presence. As Prince Idamante, Betany Coffland created an adolescent impetuosity (Cherubino five years early?) but drove her mezzo-soprano to a harder edge than sounded either natural or comfortable.

Dennis Nahat's choreography played to the strengths of his ballet dancers, and the orchestra snapped to under George Cleve's authoritative baton. Long sections of connective recitative depended on Veronika Agranov-Dafoe at the fortepiano and, briefly in Act 3, organist Jerry Nagano. Kudos for lighting to



Christopher Ostrom, who makes a fearsome storm.

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