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OPERA REVIEWS

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Reviews

Elegant authenticity

by Michael Vaughn

Mozart: Idomeneo
Opera San Jose
11 September 2011



Thanks to a gift from Hewlett-Packard heir David W. Packard, Opera San Jose made its very first *Idomeneo* a truly lavish affair. The great thing is, the money went not into showy elegance but to elegant authenticity, a production that seemed like a four-hour exhibit of bronze age Minoan art, architecture and dress.

To modern sensibilities, Mozart's 1781 creation suffers a bit from its story. Cretan King Idomeneo buys his survival in a shipwreck by promising Neptune he will sacrifice the first mortal he sees upon reaching land. That mortal turns out to be his own son, Idamante. Librettist Varesco then tried to crowbar in some Enlightenment values with a *deus ex machina* that provided several final-act titters.

The opera is worthwhile, regardless, for a view of Mozart's most ambitious production, including a decided emphasis on choruses and dance. The company takes full advantage of these elements. Andrew Whitfield's chorus performs as robustly as I've ever heard them, particularly in the opening chorus, "Godiam la pace." A 15-member dance troupe, meanwhile, performs rustic, athletic interludes - notably in the final coronation scene - choreographed by Ballet San Jose director Dennis Nahat.



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It was interesting to see how some of OSJ's now-familiar voices matched up with the opera's roles. A perfect example is Sandra Bengochea, who should probably travel the world, seeking out chances to sing Ilia, surviving daughter of the fallen Troy. Ilia's lilting, lyric lines are a perfect match for Bengochea, and I have never heard her sound more vibrant, particularly in Ilia's third-act farewell to Idamante, "Zeffiretti lusinghieri." She makes the most of her phrasing, notably in several beautifully shaped *sustenatos*, and sings with a relaxed optimism that matches Ilia's resilient demeanor.

Soprano Jasmina Halimic has the kind of Queen of the Night/Lady Macbeth/Tosca intensity that makes a perfect match for Elettra, particularly in her black-and-gold Evil Queen dress (designed by Johann Stegmeir). Halimic suffered some breathing problems in the second-act "Idol mio, se ritoso," but stole the show with Elettra's final-act freakout, "D'Oreste, d'Ajace."

The only real flaw in tenor Alexander Boyer's OSJ performances has been a bit of awkwardness in his stage movements, but with the tragedy-stricken monarch, he seems to have settled into his skin. (It also helps, in playing royalty, to be very tall.) He was a little tentative with the runs of the second-act aria "Fuor del mar," but otherwise received many chances to show off the natural warmth of his tone, especially in the more anguished *fortes* of the final act, when he is faced with actually carrying out his promise to Neptune.

Speaking of Neptune, the company provided a side of beefcake with Paul Gemignani, who also (kidding aside) endowed the non-singing role with a stern godlike presence. Another side-treat was the quartet of "civilian singers," Trojan men Jo Vincent Parks and Raymond Chavez; Cretan women Tori Grayum and Jillian Boye, all with lead-level voices.

The great emotional heft of the opera belongs to the role of Idamante, shunned by his father for no apparent reason, and infatuated with a woman, Ilia, who considers him an enemy. These conflicts fall to just the right performer, mezzo Betany Coffland, and the results are wonderful. In Act I, Coffland delivers the heartrending lament, "Il padre adorato," then curls up on the beach as the curtain falls on Idamante's befuddlement. This emotionality continues into the affair with Ilia, notably the third-act duet with Ilia, "S'io non moro." The duet leads into the brilliant quartet, "Andro, ramingo e solo," in which Elettra, Ilia, Idamante and Idomeneo simultaneously explore their varying conflicts. (In the alternate cast, Idamante is played by a tenor, Aaron Blake, in an alternative score written by Mozart in reaction to the growing movement against castrati.)

The orchestra played under the sure hands of George Cleve, one of the finest Mozartean in the world, and, given his 21 years as director of the San Jose Symphony, a local favorite. Cleve led orchestra and audience in a longstanding tradition - the opening-weekend singing of The Star-spangled Banner - that, given the date of the performance, carried much more significance than usual.

Michael J. Vaughn is a 25-year opera critic and author of the novel Operaville, , available at amazon.com.

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