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San Jose Opera's Idomeneo: A Three-Act Feast for the Eyes, Ears and Intellect

by [Anastasia Crosson](#) Oct 4, 2011 10:20 pm Tags:

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[Wesley Dugle](#), Spartan Daily

Alexander Boyer (middle) plays the title role of the Opera San Jose production of Mozart's "Idomeneo." Photo courtesy of Opera San Jose

It was opening night, the curtains were drawn and the lights in California Theater were dimmed just enough for the gold foil detailing around the stage to appear as if it were glowing. Conductor George Cleve, was directing us, the audience, in a pre-show sing-along of the national anthem.

As theater-goers clad in gowns, opera coats and the other costumery of the bourgeoisie lifted their voices to the art deco rafters, the acoustics made these amateurs (myself included) sound almost operatic. The last eight bars played by the orchestra reverberated. We applauded and I knew I was in for a treat.

That treat being an Opera San Jose production of "Idomeneo" by Mozart, a tale of King Idomeneo's paternal love and a forbidden romance between the prince of Crete, Idamante, and the captured princess, Ilia, from the rival civilization of Troy.

Christina Major, singing the part of Elettra — a princess vying for the attention of Idamante — belted out a solo aria in front of the drawn stage curtain so close to the audience it felt like intimate girl-talk. George Cleve, also a music director of the Midsummer Mozart Festival, conducted the orchestra in a way only one well-versed in Mozart could have. I was enamored. As lengthy as a three-hour production may be, this wasn't one that would have you checking your watch or mentally going over your to-do list for Monday. In fact, with each act theater-goers audibly "wow"-ed at the constantly changing sets, richly hued costumes and impeccable vocal performances which were sang with equal vibrato from the first scene to the last.

In the third act, the curtains opened to reveal a floor-to-

ceiling construction of a set which any discerning eye could see was inspired by the true Temple of Knossos. It was not a historically accurate rendering of the ancient temple on the island of Crete, but the period-specific detailing in the temple columns and earthy red and sand tones were close to any picture of the real deal. At this point a man to my right leaned over to his companion to whisper, "They really plunged some money into this one didn't they?" — I was thinking the same thing.

Humanities Honors Visits the SJ Opera

SJSU humanities honors students visited California Theater, on First Street in downtown San Jose, to view matinee performances of "Idomeneo" on Sunday, Sept. 18, and Sunday, Sept. 25.

According to Cynthia Rostankowski, director of the humanities honors program, the cohort of about 250 students in the program focus on antiquity studies in the first semester and baroque studies in the second semester.

Set in Ancient Greece, "Idomeneo" is in fact about antiquity. While Mozart, the respective composer, wrote this opera during the Baroque period of the 18th century.

"The (humanities honors) program is comprehensive, and I think its great because we get the opportunity to see an opera," said Griffith, a sophomore majoring in humanities and Spanish.

This was Griffith's first opera experience, made possible by a private donation to the humanities honors program from Marcia and Hank Lawson.

According to Rostankowski, the Lawsons have been long-time supporters of the program as Marcia Lawson herself was once a humanities honors student at SJSU, where she majored in music.

"When we have this extraordinary opportunity for the gift of funding, it will enrich (the students) lives in the future," Rostankowski said. "It gives students a chance to really cultivate that part of life-long learning and have a richer, more varied experience of contemporary culture."

"It's a very exceptional opportunity to be in the program and for someone to donate money," Griffith said. "(The opera) is a fundamental experience you need to have, and it puts our class readings into perspective."

The opera production sets alluded to the art of antiquity with replicated interpretations of the Temple of Knossos and a Minoan bull-leaping fresco, both of which appear in the texts used in the humanities honors program.

A Layman's Education in Fine Arts

Opera San Jose productions encourages an educational

experience.

Prior to the opening of each production, Opera San Jose resident company members, as well as visiting performers and conductors, host a vocal performance in the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library at SJSU.

As both a library for the public and SJSU, these performances are open to all and are free to attend. Each event is a mix of arias from the opera performers (often sung acappella) and a panel discussion about the production. Performers discuss their interpretation of centuries-old characters and composers and discuss their interpretation of opera scores from the greatest composers ever known.

Speaking on music and art from periods of antiquity to baroque, each Opera San Jose vocal performance is both food for thought and food for the soul. The same can be said, as it will be said here, for Opera San Jose's production of "Idomeneo" — a feast for the eyes, ears and intellect served in three acts.

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