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- [Paid gigs/small presses](#)

## [Performance Review: Opera San Jose's Production of Idomeneo](#)

[Reviewed by Bart S. Alvara]

I was unfortunate to have seen *Idomeneo* at the [Opera San Jose](#), only because I now have a love of this art that will probably have me buying season tickets, and I'm in college, money is not my thing.

Walking in off of a street filled with car horns and cell phones ringing, the Opera House instantly transported me into 18th century France. Opera San Jose may not be the largest one, yet that only adds to its elegance and charm. With the richly decorated vaulted ceilings, Greco-Roman columns along the walls and a live pianist playing chamber music, the mood lifts you out of the modern world. That immersion into the past gave the show I was a going to see a sense of authenticity that no amount of downloaded music and iPads could deliver, so I knew I had to give the Opera my full attention.

There is something so visceral about the live performance that it almost overwhelms the senses. For the modern audience, we are too used to hearing our music on speakers, and forget that real song and music is made with instruments and voices. I say this because if a thundering drum was hit, you can feel the percussion resonate through the air. When an Opera singer hits a high note, the sound waves carry through the air to you. That connection to the music is something that television and movie screens cannot equal.

The plot comes from Mozart by way of Ancient Greece; a love story between a star cross Prince and Princess, and a father and King torn between sacrificing his city or his son. It builds from the tale of the Trojan Princess torn between her grief over the fall of Troy and her new love for the Greek Prince, into a powerful tale of being at the mercy of Fate. Filled with vengeful Gods, scheming lovers, and cruel destinies, the plot excels at creating tension and awe until its powerful climax.

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As for the performance, if there was a failure, I could not find one. Every part was not simply a singer or dancer, but that main job combined with actor. All of this was there to sell me that this myth was happening right before my eyes and I was as much part of the city of Crete as the citizens in it. Rebecca Davis played Ilia, the Trojan Princess, and with powerful notes that sailed through me, or a simple gasp at reacting to her Prince, she flawlessly executed a woman in love and in confusion. Christopher Bengochea's

Idomeneo created a presence was that of a King; singing, standing and moving stoically, except when fear gripped him with the constant threats of Neptune. Aaron Blake's Idamante had a subtle impetuosity to his charisma, worried and anxious, convincing everyone of his love of the Princess Iila and shame over the apparent rejection of his father. Electra was deliciously scheming and seductive, always singing with a hiss to her words with movements that were snake-like and furious. All of these characters performed like the mythic heroes and heroines they represented.

It was not just the powerful leads that created the awe-inspiring atmosphere; the entire ensemble built off what they did and amplified it. The presence of Neptune on stage was so commanding that you felt the threatening awe, and this was a character that did not sing a single word. Every time he appeared it was with such authority that the Idomeneo's songs of fear were justified. My person favorites were the two handmaidens of Electra, whose presence was seductive and stalking. With a smirk at the heroine Iila, it was more threatening and provocative than any analogy I could write about it. In one of the most innovative pieces of choreography I have seen, Electra and her other two Furies created an atmosphere of Hades and I was their target. The chorus may have been in the background, yet their performance was instrumental to believing the tale. It was not the might of their combined voice that impressed me, it was the subtlety of them, (and all the performers) when not singing. If they were not singing they were acting or reacting to the action. I could look at any of the characters and see small movements; devilish grins, or a hand to the lips to cover a gasp, or clenching at one's heart, all this combined to show a real story, actually happening and I was a part of that story.

The Music was conducted by Mozart, thus states its beauty more than my words can do, yet, conductor George Cleve made every note hit with power. The timing was so flawless that I did not even notice the precision because it added to the drama and I was lost in the story unfolding. The same can be said for the stage design that was subtle when it needed to be and Olympian when the story dictated it. Notably in the first act a shipwreck rendered the entire stage a hurricane in the ocean where I felt trapped under water, with the characters on stage, drowning and pleading for help. Yet what was amazing about the sets and music was that during the performance I never noticed any of the skill that went into them. I was simply taken to the place that they were trying to send me, immersed in the story, unable to see the skill involved. If a character was belting out a note of sorrow, strings came up, perfectly timed to heighten that lament. In the final act when Idomeneo is dealing with the decision to sacrifice of his son, a three story high temple of Neptune was on stage, and I felt the imposing weight of fate bear down on me as well. All of this was done to make me, the audience, feel transported to ancient Crete, and they succeeded majestically.

Experiencing the Opera is something words in a review cannot do. This action is not filtered through some screen, it happens twenty feet away, with actual people. In movies, someone picks up a knife and I know it is time that the plot is telling me to be afraid. When a live person grips a blade only a short distance away, a gut reaction grips me and I simply become afraid. *Idomeneo* was intended by Mozart to be an ambitious production, and the Opera San Jose accomplished everything that he attempted. At some points there are nearly hundred people on stage, complete with ballet performances, singing, stage acting and an orchestra, and all of them flow continuously and flawlessly to create the story. Somehow the action walks a fine line of being larger than life, while never overwhelming the senses. The stage direction was able to tip toe this line to let me accept the action at my leisure. It was, again, the small things. If the plot has a celebration scene where a ballet performance is shown, then the extras watching the show react with smiles or gasps, which let me appreciate their performance as well as the timed perfect choreography of the action. It is in these subtle additions that drew me in, not just showing me some spectacle, that made me feel the terror of Neptune on stage, or the lament of wondering why the Princess does not love me, or the awe of the a God

siding with the heroes.

So, Opera San Jose, I now have to blame you for a new life-long obsession with the Opera. You're production of *Idomeneo* was so heartfelt, dramatic, and surreal and that my regular life of books and movies seems lesser. Thank you.

 [Uncategorized](#) | [SynchChaos Staff](#) |  October 5, 2011 5:17 pm

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