

Pascoe's lacklustre production (borrowed from the Washington National Opera) does not enhance the work's stature. The attempts to tart up Romani's libretto with murky psychological bits only make it appear thinner: need Gennaro be enjoying a homoerotic relationship with Orsini? The designer Pascoe suggests Renaissance splendour, with oppressive mock-brick walls and sweeping staircases over which warring factions swarm in the semi-darkness, like refugees from *Phantom of the Opera*. Anything scenic will do, apparently, at the San Francisco Opera in the austere Gockley era. It doesn't get much flimsier than this.

ALLAN ULRICH

## San José

The opening production of OPERA SAN JOSE's season was the most lavish in the company's nearly 30-year history, and it made perfect sense that the opera was *Idomeneo*. Set in Crete at the end of the Trojan War, the *grosse Opera* (Mozart's term) was based on a French model in accordance with Reformist thinking that Italian opera needed a dose of spectacle. That is what it got, in a staging conceived by the philanthropist David W. Packard, a longtime backer of Opera San José. Having written a Harvard dissertation on Minoan tablets, he shared his expertise on Greek art from the time of Idomeneo (12th century BC). Accordingly, this was an *Idomeneo* with sets (by Steven C. Kemp) and costumes (Johann Stegmeir) inspired by archeological discoveries, especially frescos from the Cretan palace of Minos at Knossos. Idomeneo's festive homecoming from Troy took place before a vast harbour, with images of ships, decorative fish, and buildings on the shore. The stage picture was consistently impressive, vividly-coloured, charged with a sense of authenticity and fully in tune with the mood of the opera. Brad Dalton directed with a feeling for the fraught interpersonal relationships, although his decision to have Neptune personified by a mute figure was a mistake—the sea god is always more threatening if left unseen. Dennis Nahat's choreography—the final (condensed) ballet was included—was lively, even acrobatic.

Opera San José is an ensemble company of young singers and it fielded two able casts. On September 10, Christopher Bengochea's burly tenor and commanding presence underpinned a thoroughly convincing portrayal of Idomeneo. Rebecca Davis offered a heartfelt Ilia in generous voice but occasionally oversang. Christina Major brought an opulent soprano and a determined manner to Elettra's music, and Aaron Blake acquitted himself well as a tenor Idamante, in accordance with Mozart's Vienna revision. The following afternoon, Alexander Boyer sang Idomeneo with smooth tones and a cultivated manner. Sandra Bengochea's lovely sound, nuanced singing and care with words resulted in an exquisite Ilia. Jasmina Halimic's Elettra was arrestingly sung and vividly acted. With Betany Coffland's appealing Idamante, the role reverted to its original mezzo range; both performances used the revised (i.e. tenor) version of the Act 3 duet with Ilia. Both Idomeneos chose the simplified version of 'Fuor del mar' but sang 'Torna la pace' complete, providing pleasure as well as time to effect a set change before the finale. It was a pity that a similar strategy was not employed prior to Idomeneo's festive homecoming; instead, the divertissement hailing Neptune was shifted from the end of Act 1 to the start of Act 2 with a corresponding loss of irony. Another, more satisfactory, departure had the pronouncements of the divine voice accompanied not by trombones but by the frightening 32-foot diaphone of the Wurlitzer organ in the handsomely restored CALIFORNIA THEATRE, a former movie house. George Cleve's conducting was a model of Mozart style, and both orchestra and chorus (the latter suitably enlarged) responded handsomely.

GEORGE LOOMIS