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IDOMENEO

The Masterwork of Mozart presented in a Masterly production

By Iride Aparicio

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Christopher Bengochea as King Idomeneo (center) surrounded by the pleading Cretans

SAN JOSE, California – Such magnificent production as MOZART’S IDOMENEO: KING OF CRETE, has never before been presented by IRENE DALIS, General Director of OPERA SAN JOSÉ in this city, or presented by any other director in another Opera house in the United States. To describe the opening night production of WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791) masterwork, is beyond words. We can state, however, that it was a magic night where the joined talents of all the outstanding stars of design,

music, dancing and singing managed to create in the audience of the California Theatre, a lasting once in a lifetime experience,

The spark of genius in the production of *IDOMENEO* came from Arts Philanthropist DAVID W. PACKARD, a former professor and lifelong admirer of Mozart who a few years ago approached OSJ General Director, Miss DALIS with the idea to produce the Opera. By co-producing *IDOMENEO*, Dr. PACKARD who holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University and is familiar with ancient Crete and the Minoan Culture may have wanted the audience not only to listen to Mozart's masterwork but also to have a visual experience of the Minoan arts and culture. The production, with a cost close to 4 million dollars, was financed by a grant from The Packard Humanities Institute (PHI) his foundation, and watchfully supervised by him. Under Dr. PACKARD's guidance, the production was set in the Minoan and Mycenaean Bronze Age. Elaborate sets were constructed taking inspiration from archeological sets. Original paintings were reproduced. One hundred and eighty costumes were sewn and artifacts and even jewelry from the epoch were recreated to enhance the action on the stage.

Set in the island of Crete, *IDOMENEO* relates the story of Idomeneo, (CHRISTOPHER BENGOCHEA) the king of Crete, returning home after 10 years fighting in the Trojan war. When his ship is about to be shipwrecked and sank during a violent sea storm, Idomeneo promises to Neptune (the Greek's Sea god) to sacrifice in his honor the first person he (the king) sees when he touches land. Unfortunately, that person is Prince Idamante (AARON BLAKE) his only son.

Unable to kill his own son to keep his promise to Neptune, Idomeneo tries to hide him. Arbace (NOVA SAFO) his advisor, suggests that the king hides Idamante by shipping him and Elettra (CHRISTINA MAJOR) the greek princess his father wants him to marry, to the isle of Argos. The king agrees. Elettra, who is in love with Idamante, is very happy with the plan but Idamante is not pleased because he had fallen



in love with Princess Ilia, (REBECCA DAVIS shown in picture) the daughter of the slain King of Troy. Also unhappy is Ilia who is in love Idamante but refuses to admit it because she feels that by falling in love with a Greek she had betrayed her people, the Trojan slaves who are now living in Crete. Neptune, feeling cheated by Idomeneo, tries to force the king to fulfill his promise by ravaging Crete with storms and sending a MONSTER to devour the people. Terrorized the people implore the king to fulfill his promise and kill his son. Here we should mention that when the Opera that debuted in Munich on January 29, 1781, was presented in Vienna, Mozart wrote new music for the work and gave *IDOMENEO* a happy ending by using the *Deus ex Machina's* help.

IDOMENEO the Opera, was a work commissioned to MOZART by the Elector KARL THEODOR of Munich in 1780. In Munich MOZART encountered the Mannheim orchestra formed by the best musicians in Europe. The richness of sound of the orchestra, and its precise articulation and phrasing influenced MOZART in the creation of its orchestral parts for *IDOMENEO*. Based in Greek mythological characters and with a very dramatic plot, he noticed that characters in the Opera change their emotions often, so to express their changes in mood, Mozart decided to express them in music writing melodies to fit the mood and orchestrations. This is the reason why in this opera the tempo of the music and its rhythms change constantly.

To get the "sound" from the original work, in this production OSJ. uses a larger orchestra and the

orchestra is conducted by **GEORGE CLEVE**, a conductor whose name is almost synonymous with **MOZART** because he is one of the world's most devoted interpreters of his music. Seeing Mr. **CLEVE** conducting, on opening night, using short, crisp and precise movements in both his hands, made us feel as if the beautiful melodies were floating in the air, flying over our heads as they metamorphose from written notes in the pentagram, to melodious sounds filling the theatre.

IDOMENEO's overture sounded powerful, with the violins playing at fast tempo the notes of their high ranges to emulate the wind. After that the strings went into a dialogue with the deep instrumental sounds of the orchestra marked by the beats of a drum to express the pathos. The overture blended with the beautiful aria in which **Ilia (DAVIS)** standing alone inside a decorated palace room, reveals her suffering of being left an orphan when her father was killed in the war, and now a slave in Crete because of the Greeks. With a change in the original melody she expresses in a lyric aria her dilemma of loving **Idamante (BLAKE)** for saving her life, when he is the person she should hate for causing her so much personal pain. The aria ends with **Ilia** singing: *When I look at him (Idamante) I forget how to hate.*

Soprano **Davis** sang the aria in a flute-like tone with a powerful voice and with all the required emotion. The melismatic aria, was one of many sang by the soprano which received an ovation. As **Ilia, DAVIS** sang all her arias using fluent Italian and as a Trojan princess in love with her Greek's enemy, she represented the part convincingly.

Tenor **AARON BLAKE** as **Idomeneo** sang his role well in spite that the role he played was written, originally, for a *Castrati* (male singers who castrated themselves to conserve their feminine timbre in their voices) The tenor hit all his high tones and his tone was pleasant. **BLAKE's** best aria that night was his "*Andro ramingo e solo*" a quartet with **Idomeneo, Ilia** and **Elettra**, considered to be **MOZART'S** great assemble, in which **Idamante** announces that he is leaving and does not know what is going to happen to him. On opening night, however, **BLAKE's** acting could have been better. As **Idamante, BLAKE**, has the disconcerting role of being rejected over and over by his father (He does not know that the reason is because **Idomeneo** doesn't want to kill him) without knowing the reason why. As if that dilemma was not bad enough, the prince is in love with **Ilia**, "The enemy's" daughter, but is about to marry **Elettra**. Because his role required different facial expression **BLAKE** could have been more convincing if he had changed more often his facial expressions.

As King **Idomeneo**, tenor **CHRISTOPHER BENGOCHEA** looked and sounded regal. When singing, his Italian was properly pronounced and his mellow dark tone of voice that night sounded resonant and



powerful. His acting was excellent. He was both, proud and humble. Proud when he lands in Crete escorted by his soldiers (see picture at the left) Humble in the scene before, when he pleads to **Neptune** for his life and the lives of his warriors.

His best scene and the most dramatic was when alone on the deck of his shipwrecked ship wonders with horror, how he is going to feel after he kills the first person he sees, a completely innocent person he promised **Neptune** to kill and sacrifice in his honor, and as he raises his head, at the distance, he sees the person arriving. That night **BENGOCHEA's** acting was so moving, when accompanied by the music of his arias, that he made us experience every one of his different emotions, that were plenty. We should add that the tenor received also plenty ovations that night.

Also excellent in her acting and singing that night was **Elettra (CHRISTINA MAJOR)**. The soprano who has a beautiful tone of voice sang all her arias well and her acting could only be described with one word: **Dramatic**. It is no wonder that in her mad scene she was superb. When she finally realizes that **Idomeneo** loves **Ilia** and that she is never going to be his queen, invoking in a frantic aria her dead brother **Orestes**,

Elettra starts distorting her face. We could see the madness reflected in her eyes. She grabs the knife from the table. She is going to kill herself. The scene was one of the Opera's best scenes.

Also well sang and acted in character were the roles of Arbace (NOVA SAFO) and MATHEW EDWARSEN who sang the roles of the King's adviser and High Priest. The choir was also impressive in its voices and it had a rich sound because it had forty singers. This production of IDOMENEO has also an athletic ballet choreographed by Ballet San Jose Artistic director DENNIS NAHAT. Here we should add here that the ballet is poetic in nature and that its style blends perfectly with the Opera's action.

As Stage Director, BRAD DALTON needs to be commended for the excellent acting of all the singers, their presentation on the stage and specially for the details that made this IDOMENEO unforgettable. The one that most impressed the audience that night was his NEPTUNE (usually represented by a big face of Neptune on the wall). In this production, however, NEPTUNE is an unidentified white, bare-chested, muscular actor with long white hair who moves silently on the stage wearing a golden crown over his head.

After King Idomeneo promises Neptune to kill a man, this NEPTUNE walks towards him and without saying a word, deposits a sword on his hands. After Idomeneo breaks his promise, this NEPTUNE appears in his room standing, completely silent, pointing his finger at the king. And that accusatory finger says more than a thousand words.

In a production where each set is a masterpiece, and looks like a postcard, one also needs to mention set designer STEVEN C. KEMP who copied archeological pictures to create the magnificent palace rooms with decorated walls, and huge red and black pillars. Every one in the audience that got a favorite. We liked three: The first one, the one that represents the deck of the shipwrecked ship surrounded by waves as the soldiers struggle with the sea. The feeling is real because projected around the ship one sees the foaming green waves raising up and coming down as light changes (Designed by CHRISTOPHER OSTROM) simulates the flashes of lighting and the instruments of the orchestra create the whailing wind, and the sound of a thunders with the drum.. It is awesome.

Our second favorite set represents the port. and we could see at a distance several ships sailing in the ocean. Idamante and Elettra on shore are about to embark, so in a procession we see their servants carrying the trunks, the boxes, the statues and the painted jars, which are the exact replicas of the Minoan Trunks, boxes and statues and the clay jars of the time. Even the colors are copied.

And our third favorite set is the Majestic facade of the palace of Knossos, a replica of the real one, 26 feet high. A mammoth three story building from where King Idomeneo looks as the people from his balcony on the second floor and where we see several courtesans standing on the other balconies. The props in this scene are also to be mentioned because they are unique, they include the life-size head of a painted black bull. Two clay statues about three feet long representing Phoenician-like ships, and two clay burners made out of stone. The altar in front of the palace, is for Idamante to lay down before he is killed by his father.

There are 180 colorful costumes in IDOMENEO designed by JOHANN STEGMEIR and all are elegant. and wigs created JEANNA PARHAM who also put the make up in the faces of the cast.

There are no words to describe this production. To experience IDOMENEO, one has to hear the music, see the sets and become part of the action. Those who did, enjoyed the experience so much that on opening night they jumped to their feet shouting Bravos and Vivas, in a several minutes long standing ovation.



L-R Christina Major as *Ilia*, Christopher Bengochea *Idomeneo* and Aaron Blake as *Idamante*

Highlights of *Idomeneo* may be seen at <http://operasj.org/galleries/operas/idomeneo/>

Opera San José presents Mozart's *Idomeneo*, September 10 – 25, 2011. Tickets may be ordered online Tickets.com or by phone 408.437.4450 (M-F, 9am to 5pm).

