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Review: Opera San Jose unveils a jaw-dropping, must-see production of Mozart's 'Idomeneo'

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As the recession grinds its sharp teeth into local arts groups, philanthropist David Packard has unleashed a stimulus package at the California Theatre. The exciting new production of Mozart's "Idomeneo" being staged there by Opera San Jose -- on Packard's dime, mostly -- is a jaw-dropper: sets that reproduce the Palace of Knossos in ancient Crete; a troupe of dancers from Ballet San Jose; a 40-voice chorus; plus 180 costumes and a sacrificial altar. And, oops, almost forgot -- an excellent cast.

When Sunday's performance came to a close, the audience leapt to its feet, and this was no obligatory Standing O. This "Idomeneo" -- something like Ringling Bros. at New York's Metropolitan Museum -- is singular. Sunday's performance wasn't perfect, but it never let up, building momentum across its nearly four-hour running time, including two intermissions. Ever more glowing, this marathon exhilarated with its spectacular presentation, with the obvious enthusiasm of everyone involved -- and with the perfect beauty of Mozart's music.

Set on the island of Crete after the Trojan War, "Idomeneo" carries a heavy price-tag: Packard says the budget could hit \$4 million, about four times greater than any previous Opera San Jose production. (It opened Saturday, with singers in the leading roles from the other of the company's two rotating casts.)

And who's the star of this production? First, I nominate conductor George Cleve, a lifelong Mozart connoisseur,

who guided the orchestra through a beautifully sustained performance.

At age 24, Mozart composed "Idomeneo" for a premier orchestra, in Mannheim, and his writing is filled with unexpected textures, colors and harmonic motion, a steady commentary on the stage action. Cleve and his players did full justice to the score, building small gestures into long dramatic arcs, capturing effects both storming and delicate, building a running dialogue between orchestra and singers.

My second nomination: soprano Jasmina Halimic, in the role of Electra, princess of Argos, jealous wannabee lover of the boy prince Idamante. Singing the famous rage aria "D'Oreste, d'AJace" in the opera's final moments, when it becomes clear that Electra won't get her man, Halimic was sleek as a figure on an ancient Greek urn. She writhed, unleashing her lush and powerful voice, patiently phrasing the aria's lamentations, then venting her boundless anger. Oh madness! Oh Fury!

The plot involves King Idomeneo, a warrior returning to Crete after the Trojan conflict. During a violent sea storm, he has vowed that if the god Neptune allows him to survive he will sacrifice the first person he meets on dry land. That person turns out to be his son Idamante, and the plot grows thick. Idomeneo must find a way to avoid killing his boy, who is pursued in the meantime by two women. Yes, Electra wants him, but so does a captured Trojan princess named Iliia. Idamante falls for Iliia.

Flash forward a few millennia: Packard, whose Packard Humanities Institute is co-producing "Idomeneo," is a Mozart fanatic and a scholar of ancient Greece, whose Harvard doctoral thesis

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concerned Cretan hieroglyphics. Now, urged on by Packard, the company has specifically situated the action in the Minoan and Mycenaean Bronze Age, and the sets (by Steven C. Kemp) and costumes (by Johann Stegmeir) take their cues from artifacts of the period.

It's a feast of color as the action unfolds, guided by stage director Brad Dalton. But be warned: The early going is slow; this opera finds Mozart transitioning out of the world of opera seria, with its grave succession of arias and recitatives. Opera San Jose doesn't often venture into this territory, which possibly is why the singers took a while to get comfortable. There were pinched high notes from mezzo-soprano Betany Coffland, as Idamante. (The role originally was scored for a castrato.) There were not-crisp-enough coloratura passages from Sandra Bengochea, as Ilia.

But toward the end of Act II, Mozart begins to change, growing more lyric, more flowingly dramatic, inspired by French models of the period. And now Sunday's cast changed, too: A choral number, "Placido e il mar," arrived like a calm sea breeze, as did the "Farewell" trio" sung by Coffland, Halimic and soulful tenor Alexander Boyer, as Idomeneo, who weathered multiple endurance tests Sunday. When it was time for Bengochea to sing the Act III aria "Zeffiretti lusinghieri," her voice had taken on new luster -- and precision.

Therein, the production's pleasures kept growing: more choral numbers, almost religious in feeling; and Coffland, glowing through the close harmonies of her love duet with Bengochea; and then the opera's great quartet, with its hushed plaints of suffering among the principals.

But don't worry. No one dies. Love triumphs. And straight up to the final curtain, the surprises keep happening -- for instance, would you believe, a mini-ballet choreographed by Ballet San Jose's Dennis Nahat for a dozen of his dancers? This production is too much.

Go.

Opera San Jose

Presenting Mozart's "Idomeneo," conducted by George Cleve, directed by Brad Dalton and choreographed by Dennis Nahat, with two casts in rotation

When: Tuesday through Sept. 29

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

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