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OPERA REVIEW: Opera San Jose produces spectacular "Idomeneo"

by Mort Levine

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Opening its 28th season with a work by Mozart seems like an automatic winner. That might be true of "Don Giovanni" or the "Marriage of Figaro" but who would have thought of mounting a work few opera-goers have ever seen or heard of before? David Woodley Packard, that's who. He also found that the collaboration his own Packard Humanities Institute with its people and resources could inspire world-class efforts from Opera San Jose's fine team of production specialists as well as a galaxy of marvelous vocalists and musicians.

The just completed first week of performances at the California Theatre in downtown San Jose brought forth this new staging of Mozart's most mature operas. It wasn't easy or inexpensive to match the Packard vision for a literal recreation of the Palace of Knossos, where King Idomeneo of Crete ruled the island kingdom. And it isn't easy for audience members who want to appreciate fully the achievement Opera San Jose has accomplished.

One first needs to absorb some background on the long war between the Greeks and the Trojans. It also helps to know the conventions of Opera Seria, a stylized form of staged works that dominated the late 1700s. It was then a 24-year-old Mozart was given a commission he craved but hated the restrictions inherent in the story he was to score. There are dozens of formulas and conventions which dictate many parts of the opera and its music and subject matter.

Returning from the war, Idomeneo's ship runs into a powerful

storm. To win the promise of a safe landing from the sea god Neptune, he agrees to sacrifice the first person who meets his ship on the island. This turns out to be his fully grown son, Idamante, whom he

had not seen since he was an infant. The god, angry because Idomeneo then is vacillating (while singing, of course), sends a monster to ravage Crete. Ready for action, the son Idamante does in the monster (off stage) and it all gets settled with Idomeneo giving up his throne to his son, who then marries a Trojan captive, Iliia, and makes his beloved his queen.

Throughout the three acts of the opera there are spectacular sets, paintings and objects which are authentically in the character of bronze age Crete. Costumes by Johann Stegmeir, wigs by Jeanna Parham and a careful color palate integrate perfectly with the set designs of Steven C. Kemp. Director Brad Dalton maintained a graceful flow of the 73-person cast, largest in the history of the company in keeping with the Opera Seria limitations.

Musical forces radiated from the magical spells cast by Maestro George Cleve, one of the great Mozartians of our era. He led both singers and instrumentalists with finesse.

The title role in the Sunday performance we heard was sung by tenor Alexander Boyer. Both his singing and acting were exemplary. The range and endurance required for the role was challenging throughout.

Other key roles were outstandingly sung. Idamante was performed by a veteran Opera San Jose resident artist, Betany Coffland, a mezzo soprano. The role originally written for a castrato but is nowadays often sung by a tenor. Sandra Bengochea, who has been a company member for many years, returned to sing Iliia.

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Electra, the rival for Idamante's affection, admirably sang the role of the vengeful, mean spirited daughter of King Agamemnon. Opera San Jose's remarkable Bosnian soprano Jasmina Halimic was particularly effective with a fiercely dramatic "Doreste e d'Aiace" ("I feel the torment of Orestes and Ajax") in the third act.

Other strong vocal contributors were tenor Nova Safo, who acted most believably as Arbace, the troubled adviser to the king. Silas Elash used his strong bass to make a convincing off-stage voice of Neptune. Tenor Mathew Edwardsen gave a workmanlike rendition of the high priest who kept pushing the sacrificial knife into Idomeneo's hand, to get the god appeased.

The chorus under Andrew Whitfield and Ian Robertson provided the dominant role Mozart intended as part of the Opera Seria format. The original commission of the opera by Elector Karl Theodor of Bavaria also required ballet scenes and this production more than complied with the elector's wishes. Dennis Nahat, artistic director of Ballet San Jose, and 15 dancers provided splendidly athletic choreography benefiting from the large stage at the California Theatre.

"Idomeneo" goes forth with three more performances by this cast (Sept. 17, 23 and 25) and two more by the opening night cast (Sept. 18 and 22). The next offering of the company is a pair of 20th century one acts: "La Voix Humaine" ("The Human Voice"), a 40-minute tour de force for a solo soprano. It will be followed with the greatly contrasting "Pagliacci."

Meanwhile, Opera San Jose's appreciative audience hope this remarkable production partnership with the Packard Humanities Institute can build into a continuing relationship to enhance the cultural richness of our region as well as benefit the local opera company's reputation.

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Mort Levine founded the Milpitas Post with his wife Elaine in 1955. He is publisher emeritus.



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