

Performance at the end of the world

The Heart of a Trojan Woman

September 12, 2011



Alexander Boyer and the cast of *Idomeneo* in San Jose Photo: B. Shomler/OSJ 2011

The weekend ended in the same tone and fashion as all that had preceded it – with **Trojan women lamenting their lot** and an opera about another heart of another soldier. Opera San Jose opened up their 2011/2012 season on Saturday with **Mozart's *Idomeneo***. The company relies on its own in-house resident vocal artists for all of its shows and usually presents performances more frequently over a shorter time period than other companies using two different alternating casts. This system provides some benefits in terms of more protracted rehearsal times and better integration among performers who work together repeatedly over a season in many different productions. When Opera San Jose opens a show, they are good and ready, which was apparent on Sunday when I saw the second performance in the run, which was the first with its particular cast. It was ironic in a way that on September 11, I felt as if Mozart had more to say to me about heroism and loss than ***Heart of a Soldier*** did. Within moments of the opening bars of *Idomeneo* all the insanity of the world seemed to organize itself in a manner humanity could comprehend.

But this is the magic of Mozart. *Idomeneo*, the King of Crete, has returned from war and a decade lost at sea to find that he is still at the whim of capricious gods. He has unwittingly promised Neptune to sacrifice his son (to end the king's wanderings at sea), a task from which he demurs until he finds it otherwise means that many more of his subjects will die. *Idomeneo's* heroism comes with a price and is not an unassailable given, making him more dramatically interesting and his story more profound. The opera is a huge undertaking for San Jose- and they have clearly spent a lot of time and effort in putting together a show that pulls out all the stops. Large sets, a huge chorus, and a corps de ballet are a few of the bells and whistles here. There was even use of the California Theater's organ to accompany the voice from above in Act III. And just when you thought the show was over, the dancers returned for the final burst of ballet music with elaborate acrobatics like something out of *Stomp* as a show capping bonus.

But most importantly the company was able to offer up four well-matched and quite enjoyable vocalists on Sunday in the large principal roles. Sandra Bengochea sang Ilia (the above mentioned Trojan woman taken captive during the war) with Betany Coffland as Idamante, and Jasmina Halimic as Elettra. All gave detailed and well controlled performances with lovely flourishes. But I was most impressed with Alexander Boyer whose Idomeneo had boundless energy and stamina. His performance grew richer and progressively more touching as the show continued. The Act II quartet was particularly affecting and well sung. Meanwhile in the pit George Cleve took a leisurely pace through much of the afternoon, never crowding or rushing the vocalists. The orchestra was lovely and sounded very invested. Which was important considering that even though there were still cuts to Mozart's score, as is typically practiced everywhere, there were far fewer cuts in this performance than anyone reasonably familiar with *Idomeneo* might expect, and the show runs just under 4 hours with two intermission. With music like this, though, you won't regret a moment of it.

As for the production itself, Brad Dalton directed the show, which was designed around photographs of Minoan art and relics from Crete. It was a logical choice for the show and the sets used large reproductions of famous Minoan frescoes for backdrops. It wasn't unattractive, but the flowing robes and sandals kept things square in the European fantasia opera camp. And while things swerved recklessly towards kitsch at times, the hard work and commitment to the story kept things on track. Dalton cleverly casts a non-speaking actor as Neptune (one with a duly godlike hard body on display despite the white hair and beard) who haunts the stage when Idomeneo sings about his fateful choices, keeping the focus on the central conflict in the story. I was also taken with the large and elaborate three-story shrine used in the opening of Act III that gave the finale the kind of grandeur it needed. The show runs in the beautiful California Theater in downtown San Jose through September 25.

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posted by Brian | 9/12/2011 09:57:00 AM

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