

“Idomeneo” on Crete

by Heather Mac Donald

The humanists who created the first operas in late sixteenth-century Florence hoped to recapture the emotional impact of ancient Greek tragedy. It would take nearly another 200 years, however, for the most powerful aspect of Attic drama—the chorus—to reach its full potential on an opera stage. That moment arrived with Mozart’s 1781 opera *Idomeneo, re di Creta*. This September, Opera San José performed *Idomeneo*’s sublime choruses with thrilling clarity and force, in a striking new production of the opera that wedded a philanthropist’s archeological passion with his love for Mozart. San José’s *Idomeneo* was a reminder of the breadth of classical music excellence in the United States, as well as of the value of philanthropy guided by love.

In 1780, the twenty-four-year-old Mozart received his most prestigious commission yet: to compose an opera for the Court of Bavaria to open Munich’s Carnival season. The Bavarian court orchestra had recently been transplanted from Mannheim by its patron, Elector Carl Theodor; the “Mannheimers,” as the players continued to be called, were famed throughout Europe for their virtuosic skill. To write an opera for them, Mozart had declared to Carl Theodor in 1777, was his “fondest wish.”

The story for Mozart’s Bavarian opera was to be based on *Idomenée*, a 1712 Parisian work by André Campra. Idomeneo, the king of Crete and ally of the Greeks, is returning from the Trojan War when a deadly storm strikes his ship. He vows to Neptune that he will sacrifice the first person he sees upon landing if he is allowed to return safely home. That person turns

out to be his son, Idamante, whom, in Campra’s opera, the king does indeed sacrifice before going mad. Such a dark ending no longer suited Enlightenment tastes, however, and in Mozart’s libretto, by the Salzburg cleric Giambattista Varesco, the gods grant Idomeneo a last-minute reprieve from his vow and rule is amicably passed from father to son.

The delight that Mozart must have had in composing for the Mannheimers is palpable in *Idomeneo*’s dynamic score. And it is in the opera’s nine choruses that the orchestral writing reaches its pinnacle. In the celebrations of the Trojan War’s end—“Godiam la pace” (“Let us savor peace”) and “Nettuno s’onori” (“Let Neptune be honored”)—the strings skitter jubilantly through complex rhythms and rapid volume changes, while the winds embroider fleet counterpoint around the vocal and other instrumental lines. The joyful climactic crescendo of “Nettuno s’onori” anticipates *Le Nozze di Figaro*’s effervescent overture and Don Giovanni’s explosive paeans to pleasure (not to mention Rossini’s nuclear-powered crescendi).

The choruses of terror are more astounding still. The hair-raising “Oh voto tremendo!” (“Oh terrible vow!”) matches the solemnity of any Dies Irae. Idomeneo has just revealed to his court that it is his son whom he is obligated to sacrifice. The winds slowly beat out an agonizing chromatic scale upwards followed by a monumental outburst of anguish from the chorus. “Death now rules” (“Già regna la morte”), lament the Cretans in a pulsing call-

and-response with the winds that anticipates Verdi's hypnotic antiphonal choruses.

In light of the enormous emotional power that Mozart unleashes with these choruses, it is all the more surprising that choral numbers had virtually disappeared from *opera seria* in Italy by the mid-1700s. (*Opera seria* grew out of an early eighteenth-century reform movement designed to purge Italian serious opera of anything that distracted from its purpose of representing the virtues of noble rulers; out went the by-then traditional comic characters, ballet, and choral spectacles.) The chorus was undoubtedly given a helping shove off the Italian *opera seria* stage by preening castrati and other virtuoso soloists.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, however, what had begun as a reform movement was itself reformed. The Berlin critic Christian Gottfried Krause called in 1752 for a return of the classical chorus. The greatest of the reformers, Christoph Willibald Gluck, wrote magnificent choral numbers, above all in *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), but even they do not prepare a listener for the transcendent effect of *Idomeneo's* choruses.

Opera San José's chorus performed with a precision, clarity of voicing, and rhythmic drive that are rare even on the opera stages of New York—the absence of unionized singers may partly explain that difference. In “Corriamo, fuggiamo” (“Run! flee!”), dueling male and female choruses scatter in shuddering horror across the musical scale; the San José singers pulled off this showpiece with blazing percussive panache. After overcoming some initial pitch problems, the soloists (one of two different casts, heard on September 13) were also impressive. The tenor Christopher Bengochea conveyed Idomeneo's despair with riveting intensity, shouting out in anger: “Inguisto sei!” (“You are unjust!”), as a glowering, bare-chested Neptune silently presses him to fulfill his vow. Bengochea brought a dark baritone color to his virtuoso solo “Fuor del mar” (“Rescued from the sea”), ending the aria on his hands and knees, a broken man.

The tenor Aaron Blake as Idomeneo's son Idamante started out the evening with such wooden physical gestures as to suggest delib-

erate theatrical archaism, but soon loosened up dramatically and vocally. He seemed to shrink with heartbreak as his beloved father, still concealing his lethal vow, persistently rebuffed him. Blake's recitatives were stylish; his pleasing vibrato communicated youthful passion. Rebecca Davis as Idamante's beloved, the Trojan princess Ilia, rightly luxuriated in her floating arpeggios in “Zeffiretti lusinghieri” (“Flattering breezes”), in which Ilia decides to confess her reciprocal feelings to Idamante.

The neurotic Argive princess Elettra, who has taken refuge on Crete after her family's bloodshed, is not usually a comic character, but Christina Major elicited chuckles from the audience as she displayed a catty, Marcellina-like exasperation at her rival Ilia's obvious success with Idamante. Playing against type, Mozart gave Elettra the most sensuous duet in the opera, in which she weaves her hope of conquering Idamante into the chorus's lilting barcarole, “Placido è il mar” (“Calm is the sea”), sung by the Argives in anticipation of their sea journey home. Major's soprano had an occasional harsh edge, but she tore through her final rage aria with bravura skill, eyes flashing, voice snarling, slapping her body and grabbing her hair as the vipers of insanity descend upon her.

The quartet, “Andrò ramingo e solo” (“I shall wander alone”) is, after the choruses, the opera's musical high point. The Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein called it the first great ensemble in the history of opera seria. Cleve maintained a suffocating tension as each of the four principals layers his suffering onto the others' in a tight canon; the singers' sharp stress on the first syllable of “soffrir” seemed like a dying exhalation of grief. Cleve provided taut orchestral support that emphasized the score's regal architecture throughout the evening: the timpani and muted trumpets' descent into silence in “Oh voto tremendo!” was chillingly profound.

In a particularly poignant moment in Brad Dalton's imaginative staging, Idomeneo and his councilor Arbace try to force on an athen Idamante a large bouquet of white lilies and roses to present to the triumphal Elettra upon their embarkation for Greece. Idamante shies away from them like a frightened colt. The

opera's final ballet was vivid and well-coordinated, contrasting with the sloppy pastoral interlude in last season's *Queen of Spades* at the Metropolitan Opera. The only choreographic misstep came in Elettra's first rage aria when a pair of dancers mimed her anger with Isadora Duncan-esque melodrama.

Idomeneo has not been spared from the assault of narcissistic directors who commandeered defenseless operas into serving as vehicles for their own adolescent posturing. In fact, it was a production of *Idomeneo* in—where else?—Berlin that brought the depressing phenomenon of *Regietheater* (German for “director’s theater”) to worldwide attention. In director Hans Neuenfels’s rewriting of the opera, first produced in 2003, *Idomeneo* places the severed heads of Neptune, Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammad on chairs during the finale, allegedly signifying humanity’s liberation from superstition and religious belief. Of course, Mozart’s tale is set over a thousand years before the birth of Christ and Mohammad, and it ends with a prayer to the goddesses Juno and Hymen. But if the composer and librettist’s intent no longer count on European opera stages, Islamist sensibilities do. In 2006, the Deutsche Oper Berlin cancelled its revival of Neuenfels’s production for fear of triggering Islamist violence. An international scandal ensued, leading to the eventual remounting of the production. The real scandal in Berlin was not the putative censorship, however, but the damage Neuenfels had done to Mozart’s opera.

Opera San José’s *Idomeneo* was a conscious rejection of *Regietheater* solipsism. The production took the libretto’s setting in ancient Crete more literally than Mozart and Varesco could possibly have imagined by reproducing in exact detail the Bronze Age palace at Knossos, where a king who had fought in the Trojan War (c. 1200 B.C.) might have lived. Since the palace only began to be excavated at the end of the nineteenth century, its architecture and visual iconography would have been unknown to eighteenth-century composers and audiences. This was probably

the only occasion one will have to see a life-size replica of the palace at Knossos peopled by Minoan royalty and its retinue.

The set (or should one say palace?) consisted of simple architectural forms like children’s blocks; large swathes of color—primarily brick reds and smoky slate blues, often in wave and circle motifs—took the place of more refined architectural detail, for an effect recalling David Hockney. Frescoes from the palace and related archeological sites, including a charming harbor panorama with dolphins leaping over stick-figure galleys, formed the backdrop for several scenes. (Ironically, this rigorously historical production ignored some of the libretto’s scenic directions, such as for Neptune’s temple in the final scene.) The soldiers wore short, full skirts with bright geometric borders; *Idomeneo* sported a full-length, red leather coat while *Ilia* was outfitted in long white robes with cobalt marine appliqués. The dancers and supernumeraries, with their sweepingly broad shoulders and wasp waists, seemed to have leapt onto the stage from the frescoes behind them; Elettra’s black snaking locks echoed the coiffeurs of a trio of females in a 1700 B.C. wall painting serving as a backdrop. Other visual correspondences were more serendipitous: Aaron Blake’s profile, with its receding line from nose to chin, uncannily resembled those of the smiling Minoans.

The biggest dramatic pay-off for the production concept came in the sacrifice scene. When *Idamante* hurled himself at the stone altar, imploring his father to kill him to save Crete from Neptune’s wrath, the savagery of the moment seemed perfectly believable in such an archaic setting. Ultimately, though, Mozart’s music is, for me, more Tiepolo than prehistoric. Its grandeur and refinement embody the European courtly aesthetic (however much a nascent bourgeois class was also becoming important music patrons). While the San José production contained none of the painful musical disjunctures that result from setting Handel in a Walmart, say, the Bronze Age setting reflected the spirit of the music less persuasively than, for example, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s Baroque realizations of Mozart’s *opere serie*.

But this is a quibble. San José's superbly-executed production constitutes a precious addition to *Idomeneo's* performance history, especially given the abuses routinely inflicted on opera today. And its origin is an object lesson in how philanthropy can accomplish the most good. David W. Packard, the fanatically reclusive son of Hewlett-Packard's co-founder, conceived of the production, then funded and oversaw its execution. Packard is a classicist by training with a lifelong interest in Minoan civilization. He also adores Mozart. The San José *Idomeneo* was a union of these two passions.

When a philanthropist is guided by Eros, he is more likely to create something of value than if he follows the latest charitable fad. The overwhelming pressure in the foundation world is to try to engineer "social change," a goal that has eluded everyone who undertakes it. Giving concrete form to what you find beautiful, however, is within reach; moreover, the chances are great that someone else will be moved by your enthusiasms. Packard has already made a lasting contribution to the humanities and the arts by following this principle; the invisibility of his public profile is inversely related to the importance of the projects the Packard Humanities Institute has supported, which include the creation of a free online archive for all of Mozart's music and letters, as well as the publication of the first complete edition of C. P. E. Bach's works. Packard's support of the arts in Silicon Valley extends to renovating the silent film-era movie palace in which Opera San José now performs; in a historical twist, the San Jose Symphony—whose conductor was none other than George Cleve—bank-

rupted itself in fundraising for that renovation project in 2002 before Packard stepped in.

The demise of the San Jose Symphony—founded in 1877 when San Jose was best known for its prunes—seemed at the time a troubling augury. But classical music is a hardier plant than that. Today, the scrappy Opera San José, whose neighbors include nightclubs, auto repair shops, and the occasional drunk slumped in a doorway, puts on four productions a year in the wild Moorish fantasy of the restored California Theater. The night I saw *Idomeneo*, the theater was packed with enthusiastic patrons, which may explain why Opera San José has been able to balance its books for twenty-seven of its twenty-eight years. Packard offered free tickets to *Idomeneo* to all Google employees, not a demographic known for its arts patronage. Fifteen hundred Googlers attended a performance; with any luck, some will have been intrigued enough to explore further.

As *Idomeneo* ran in San José, the gift of another impresario-philanthropist was on display on the other side of the country. The chemical industrialist Ronald P. Stanton had been smitten by Les Arts Florissants's exquisite production of Jean-Baptiste Lully's 1676 opera *Atys* in Paris in 1987. He yearned to see it again, and so he bankrolled the restaging himself, conducted as before by William Christie. This September *Atys* returned to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where it had run in 1989, fulfilling the desire not just of Stanton but of many New Yorkers to re-experience this breathtaking recreation of the Sun King's court. Packard and Stanton have demonstrated how one individual's desire for beauty can enrich the world.