

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



4. ANTIQUE ROADSHOW

MOZART WAS JUST 22 when he received the commission to write an opera for the Elector of Bavaria, to be performed at the court theater in Munich. The commission, in a way, was an exercise in antiquarianism. The subject, *Idomeneo, King of Crete*, which was probably given to him, is a relatively obscure appendix to the Trojan War. It was not new, but had been set as an opera by at least one other composer 50 years earlier. And such a commission called for a grand style, based in the Handelian tradition of *opera seria*, but also taking account of the spectacles written more recently by Gluck.

Mozart wore such borrowed raiment well, but he was not to be constrained by it. In addition to its conventional elements, *Idomeneo* contains some of Mozart's richest orchestration, his most varied choruses, a number of ensembles not generally found in *opera seria*, and a texture that often reaches beyond accompanied recitative to sow the seeds for the continuous music drama of Wagner. For these reasons, *Idomeneo* is an opera that conductors want to tackle and singers want to sing. But for the stage director, the problem of its antique subject and formal manner remains. We shall look at three attempts to reconcile the old with the new.

The excerpts listed below are given in the order they occur in the opera. The class, however, will begin with Act Two, and then fill in on Act One (briefly) and Act Three (extensively) in the second hour. Names in brackets are those of the directors.

4. ANTIQUE ROADSHOW

10 October, 2023

ACT ONE

Opening recitative (Carsen)

At the conclusion of the Trojan War, King Idomeneo of Crete has sent home the captured princess **Ilia**, daughter of King Priam, together with a number of other Trojan prisoners. She has been received courteously by Idomeneo's son **Idamante**, and has fallen in love with him. As a gesture of good will, Idamante orders that the prisoners be freed.

Chorus: "Godiam la pace" (Carsen)

Meanwhile another princess has come to Crete: **Electra**, the daughter of King Agamemnon. She too loves Idamante, and is prepared to fight for him, confident that she can break her rival's spell. The resulting love triangle will form the subplot to the rest of the opera.

But all this will be sidelined by a devastating blow. Shipwrecked on the shores of Crete, **Idomeneo** vows to Neptune that, if he is spared, he will sacrifice the first person he sees. And who should come to greet him but his own son, Idamante! Idomeneo pushes him away, but can give no reason for this mystifying rejection.

ACT TWO

Taking advice from his counselor **Arbace**, Idomeneo decides that his only hope is to send Idamante away, on the pretext of escorting Electra back to Mycenae. But as he becomes aware of Ilia's love for his son, his realization that this will only hurt the young people becomes his great aria *Fuor del mar*, "Far from the sea, the sea yet churns in my breast."

Aria (Idomeneo): "Fuor del mar" (Ponnelle)

Meanwhile, Electra delights in the calm weather for their voyage, and the prospect of being united with Idamante; her happiness is contrasted with the anguish of the two men in a notable trio. But then the sky suddenly darkens as a terrible sea monster appears, sent by Neptune to punish Idomeneo for ignoring his vow.

Chorus "Placido è il mar, andiamo" (Ponnelle/Dorn)

Trio: "Pria di partir, oh Dio!" (Ponnelle/Dorn)

Chorus: "Qual nuovo terrore!" (Ponnelle/Dorn)

ACT THREE

Ilia sings of her love for Idamante. He appears and declares his own love in return. But his father has no alternative but to try again to send him out of the country, a situation treated in a quartet expressing the unhappiness of each of the four main characters.

Aria (Ilia, part): "Zeffiretti lusinghieri" (Carsen)

Duet: "Spiegarti non poss'io" (Carsen)

Quartet: "Andrò ramingo e solo" (Carsen)

The **High Priest of Neptune** shows Idomeneo the depredation caused by the monster and demands to know the name of the victim that Neptune requires. Even though Idamante kills this particular monster, he accepts that he must die to prevent Neptune's further wrath; at last he understands that his father's anger was only to protect him. So Idomeneo, like a Greek Abraham, prepares for the sacrifice. But like Abraham, he is interrupted. The voice of Neptune proclaims that Idomeneo must abdicate the throne to Idamante and Ilia, a charge that he readily accepts. Everybody is pleased except for Electra.

Scenes as described above (Carsen)

RECORDINGS SAMPLED

PONNELLE, New York 1982. Luciano Pavarotti (Idomeneo), Frederica von Stade (Idamante), Ileana Cotrubas (Ilia), Hildegard Behrens (Electra); James Levine (c), Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (d)

DORN, Munich 2008. John Mark Ainsley (Ido.), Pavol Breslik (Ida.), Juliane Banse (Ilia), Annette Dasch (Electra); Kent Nagano (c), Dieter Dorn (d)

CARSEN, Madrid 2019. Eric Cutler (Ido.), David Portillo (Ida.), Annet Frisch (Ilia), Eleonora Buratto (Electra); Ivor Bolton (c), Robert Carsen (d)

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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