

# Mozart's Opera *Idomeneo* Set in Minoan Crete

Continuous screenings at AMC Pacific Place 11  
Free for AIA/APA members and guests

## The Opera

In September 2011, Opera San Jose and The Packard Humanities Institute presented a new production of *Idomeneo*.

Many years after Mozart's death, his wife Constanze was asked what were his favorite works. Her reply will surprise many people: "He was fond of *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, but perhaps most of all *Idomeneo*. He had wonderful memories of the time and circumstances of its composition."

People who love Mozart are often amazed and delighted when they discover *Idomeneo*. They have never heard Mozart sound quite like this.

The best known Mozart operas are comedies or have significant comic elements. *Idomeneo* is deadly serious in its subject: Can a father escape his terrible vow to sacrifice his own son?

No one would dream of suggesting that Mozart's comic operas are not profound, but they are different. Mozart himself called *Idomeneo* a Grand Opera. It reflects the lyrical vocal tradition of Italian serious opera with strong dramatic influence from French reformed opera.

But do not imagine that *Idomeneo* is stark, archaic and formal. All the characters are infused with familiar Mozartian humanity. It has a moving love story. When Ilia finally confesses to the bewildered Idamante "I love you, I adore you," you could pick a century out of a hat, and this would feel true.

As in Greek tragedy, the chorus has a central role, commenting on the action and representing the whole community, which is deeply affected by the hero's decisions. The great choral ode in Act 3, *Oh voto tremendo*, ranks with Mozart's most profound religious music.

Again as in Greek tragedy, *Idomeneo* has dancing, including an explicit ballet at the end.

The orchestra in Munich, where the opera opened in 1781, was the best in the world. Mozart knew the orchestra and was eager to write for it. He always liked to know the qualities of his singers before he wrote their arias, so he could suit the music to their character and abilities. The same can be said about his writing for this famous orchestra. He could ask them to play with a level of (almost violent) precision and nuance that was revolutionary. Of course Mozart himself conducted.

In Mozart's time, the symphonic tone poem did not yet exist, but passages in *Idomeneo* show that Mozart was a born master of the genre, painting with iridescent orchestral color. The circumstances of this opera inspired Mozart to enter a musical world that he never again had an opportunity to revisit.

Mozart was only 24 years old when he wrote *Idomeneo*. He knew this was a chance to do something really sensational, and he did it.

## Our Production

The opera is set on the island of Crete just after the Trojan War. In Mozart's time, essentially nothing was known about the archaeology of this period, but today we know much more about the world in which a real King Idomeneo might have lived. We believe that our production is unique in the way it sets the stage firmly in the Minoan and Mycenaean world.

Two of our sets directly reproduce the architecture and decoration of the Palace at Knossos (as imagined by Evans).

Our opening set for Act 1 recreates the so-called Queen's Megaron in the Domestic Quarter of the Palace. It is copied from a watercolor made by the excavators, which shows how they believed the apartment might have looked, based on archaeological evidence.

The final set for Act 3 is an almost full-scale copy of the imposing facade of the Palace (facing the courtyard). This facade included a small shrine, which fits perfectly with the requirements of the opera.

For the harbor scene in Act 2, our backdrop reproduces the famous harbor fresco from the island of Santorini dating to about 1700 BC. This fresco shows ships in a harbor with a town at the side. The original miniature fresco is about 17 inches high. Our copy is about 17 feet high and over 80 feet wide!

For the final ballet, a similar backdrop reproduces the famous "Toreador Fresco" from Knossos.

Mozart wrote extended ballet music for *Idomeneo*, which unfortunately is almost always omitted from modern performances. Our production retains a significant portion of the ballet, which we believe is an essential element in the opera.

## Free AIA/APA Screenings

You can watch a high definition video of our production in the AMC Pacific Place 11 Theatre, at 600 Pine Street, across the street from the convention. Admission is free for AIA/APA members and guests. See schedule below for Thursday-Sunday (Jan 3-6). Subject to change.

11:00	Act 1	6:00	Act 1
12:00	Act 2	7:00	Act 2
1:00	Act 3	8:00	Act 3
2:30	Act 1	9:30	Act 1
3:30	Act 2	10:30	Act 2
4:30	Act 3	11:30	Act 3