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IDOMENEO

DRAMATIC OPERA

Music
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Text
Abbé GIAMBATTISTA VARESCO

Idomeneo, King of Crete, has achieved victory in Troy, but such are the seas on the return journey that he despairs for the safety of his ship. He vows to make a sacrifice to Neptune if he will bring the ship to shore. The God of the Sea accepts, but stipulates that the sacrifice must be of the first person Idomeneo sees on landing. The first person Idomeneo sees is his own son, Idamante. They do not recognise each other, Idamante was a small child when Idomeneo last saw him. When the truth dawns on him, he cannot bring himself to mention how the ship was saved; instead he flees.

The Cretans have captured Ilia, a Trojan princess, and hold her prisoner in Crete. She hates her captors, but she has fallen in love with Idamante, though she has not yet admitted her feelings. He, to honour his father's imminent return, has released the prisoners, coincidentally, he loves her.

There is rejoicing, but this is interrupted by a report that Idomeneo's ship has sunk. Electra, daughter of Agamemnon, King of Argos, has been on vacation in Crete. She, too, has fallen secretly in love with Idamante. For her there is the additional fear that, with Idomeneo's death, Idamante will be free to marry Ilia.

Idomeneo discusses his situation with his confidant, Arbace. He suggests that if Idamante went abroad, the problem, so to speak, would go with him. Electra needs an escort back to Argos. Why not let it be Idamante?

Idomeneo sees this course not only as a way out of his dilemma, but also as a means of furthering his plan of arranging a marriage between Idamante and Electra.

However, Crete is a small island; Neptune soon hears. In his view there is a contract between him and Idomeneo, and he expects it to be honoured. He blows up another storm so that Idamante and Electra cannot leave. And in case anyone should think that storms are brought about by natural causes, he also sends a dreadful Sea-Monster to burn some haystacks and eat a few farmers' daughters.

The High Priest tells Idomeneo that a sacrifice to Neptune is needed. Idomeneo tells the High Priest who the sacrifice must be.

Arbace enters to announce that Idamante has killed the Sea-Monster.

Although Idomeneo did not tell Idamante the cause of the country's difficulties, he has heard, and now, as further evidence of his courage, declares his willingness to be sacrificed.

In an impassioned plea, in which her love becomes clear, Ilia offers herself to be sacrificed in place of Idamante.

There is a mighty earthquake. The statue of Neptune shudders. An Heavenly Voice is heard. So great is the unselfishness of Ilia's love that Idomeneo's vow is annulled. The sacrifice need not take place. However, Idomeneo must abdicate in favour of Idamante and Ilia must be his queen.

Electra departs in fury. Idomeneo announces that his son will from now on rule, and the people rejoice.

Idomeneo, K.V.366 was first performed in Munich in 1781 with a castrato in the title-role. Mozart made various changes to suit the tenor voice for a private performance in Vienna in 1786. *Idomeneo* has never been much performed and has never been popular, sadly, as it contains beautiful music, wonderfully scored. *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze di Figaro* may be more readily assimilable to modern ears, but to dismiss the work as belonging to an operatic pre-history of virtuosic castrati is misguided. The four main characters are not cardboard: they suffer, they develop; so much so that Alfred Einstein felt this to be "one of those works that even a genius of the highest rank, like Mozart, could write only once in his life."

There was a "Vollständige Neubearbeitung von Lothar Wallerstein und Richard Strauss" for Vienna in 1931, a New Working so thorough that Electra doesn't appear at all. This is strange, magnificent music was lost, and singers well able to cope with it were available. The same year it was also revised by Wolf-Ferrari for Munich. It was performed in English at Glasgow in 1934, but the first fully professional production in the United Kingdom was the one offered here and it is not unreasonable to claim that the cast and conductor at Glyndebourne in 1951 equalled or surpassed any since Mozart's time.

Bärenreiter's "Vocal Score based on the Urtext of the New Mozart Edition" [BA 4562a] was used in preparing this issue. It gives variants, discussing them first in a useful foreword. The performance follows this score, using some of the variants, but for some minor cuts and changes of words. This historic performance has survived in good sound, virtually complete on the original tape but for a substantial portion of Electra's last aria.

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records is most grateful to the late Hans Busch for making available the tape of this performance, and thanks are due Paul Lewis for assistance with the production.

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