Synopsis

Crete, around 1200 BCE. Idomeneo, King of Crete, has been fighting on the side of the Greeks in the Trojan War for several years. Prior to his victorious return home, he has sent ahead of him some Trojan captives, including princess Ilia, daughter of the Trojan king, Priam. She has fallen in love with Idomeneo's son, Idamante, who has ruled as regent in his father's absence. Also in love with Idamante is princess Elettra. The daughter of Agamemnon, commander of the Greeks during the war, she has taken refuge in Crete after killing her mother, Clytemnestra, in revenge for her father's death.

Act I

Ilia is torn between her love for Idamante and her hatred for his father and what he has done to her country. Idamante proclaims his love for her, but Ilia, still a prisoner, can't yet bring herself to openly declare her feelings. Idamante announces that as a gesture of goodwill the Trojan prisoners will be released. The king's advisor, Arbace, brings news that Idomeneo's returning fleet has been shipwrecked and that Idomeneo has drowned. Elettra jealously observes the growing love between Idamante and Ilia.

Idomeneo has in fact survived the shipwreck by making a vow to Neptune, god of the sea, that he would sacrifice to him the first man he comes across on land. That man turns out to be his own son, Idamante. Horrified, Idomeneo pushes him away. Idamante is confused by his father's behavior, while the Cretans praise Neptune for the return of their king.

Act II

Idomeneo confides in Arbace, and they try to devise a plan to save Idamante. They agree to send Idamante out of the country: he is to escort Elettra back to Argos. Happy and confident, Ilia tells Idomeneo that she now considers Crete her new homeland. Idomeneo begins to suspect that she and her son are in love, and it dawns on him that all three of them will be victims of the gods. Elettra, however, is triumphant: She hopes that as soon as Idamante is far away from Crete and Ilia, she will be able to win him over.

The ship is ready to depart for Argos. Idamante, who still doesn't understand his father's motives, is heartbroken but prepares to leave with Elettra. As they are about to set sail, another storm arises, and a sea monster appears. Idomeneo confesses his guilt in breaking his oath and offers himself as a sacrifice. The Cretans flee in terror.

Act III

Ilia longs for Idamante and finally admits her love when he tells her that he is going to fight the sea monster. Idomeneo—who still hasn't revealed the subject of his oath—commands again that his son leave Crete. Idamante, full of sorrow, resolves to do so. Arbace reports that the people are angry and, led by the High Priest of Neptune, are demanding to see the king. The monster has brought death and destruction to the island, and the High Priest demands that Idomeneo name the victim who must be sacrificed to appease Neptune. Idomeneo reveals that it is his son. The preparations for the sacrifice are interrupted by news that Idamante has killed the monster. Realizing that his father has been cold to him out of love, not hatred, Idamante demands that the sacrifice proceed, as this is the price for peace in Crete. Ilia volunteers to take his place. As Idomeneo is about to sacrifice his son, the voice of Neptune intervenes, proclaiming that if Idomeneo will step aside and yield power to Idamante and Ilia, the gods will be satisfied. Elettra, robbed of all hope, collapses. Idomeneo agrees to relinquish the throne to his son and unites him with Ilia. The Cretans bless their alliance.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Idomeneo

Premiere: Court Theater (now known as Cuvilliés Theater), Munich, 1781

On its surface, *Idomeneo* is the story of an oath made by the title character to ensure his safe return home to Crete following the Trojan War. The tale recalls many other myths, and specifically brings to mind the story of Jephtha from the biblical Book of Judges. The larger theme, however, concerns the motivations and emotions of humans whose fates seem beyond their own control. The opera explores these issues within the framework of the *opera seria* genre, a stylized format favored by aristocratic courts, in which idealized noble characters function with a clear delineation between action (expressed in recitative) and reflection (expressed in arias, ensembles, and choruses). While 18th-century audiences accepted, and even celebrated, the artificial nature of this form of theater, subsequent generations sought a greater sense of realism in opera. Along with many other pieces from this period, *Idomeneo* essentially disappeared from the world's stages until the mid-20th century. Modern audiences, familiar with works that reject realism and embrace certain artistic mannerisms, have once again returned this masterpiece to a place in the repertory.

The Creators

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) was the son of a Salzburg court musician and composer, Leopold, who served as his principal teacher and exhibited him as a musical prodigy throughout Europe. His achievements in opera, in terms of melodic beauty, vocal challenge, and dramatic insight, remain unsurpassed, and his seven mature works of the genre (*Idomeneo* now considered to be in this category) are pillars of the repertory. Giovanni Battista Varesco (1735–1805) was a poet and court chaplain of the Principality of Salzburg, Mozart's place of employment at the time of *Idomeneo*. The libretto is based on a 1712 French libretto by Antoine Danchet, an early member of the Acadèmie Française.

The Setting

The opera unfolds on the island of Crete in the aftermath of the Trojan War. The tales of this time have provided fertile grounds for many creators of opera, from Monteverdi (*Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*, 1640) and Berlioz (*Les Troyens*, 1863) to Richard Strauss (*Die Ägyptische Helena*, 1928) and Martin David Levy (*Mourning Becomes Electra*, 1967). The era is evocative, reflecting the confusion of a post-traumatic historical moment.

The Music

The composer's rich use of the orchestra in the recitative sections, highly unusual for its time, is one of *Idomeneo*'s most striking aspects. The woodwinds are especially active, and the score is among the first in opera to employ clarinets. The choral writing, likewise, is especially refined, with the music woven into the action in an unprecedented manner: the muted brass in the elegantly jaunty Act II orchestral march, for example, return as ominous harbingers of communal grief in the haunting Act III chorus "O voto tremendo." The diversity of the vocal solos and ensembles is astounding: from the ethereal beauty of Ilia's Act II "Se il padre perdei" and Act III "Zeffiretti lusinghieri" to Idamante's heroic Act I "Non ho colpa," and the title character's flamboyant "Fuor del mar" in Act II. Mozart even offers one of the first operatic mad scenes with Elettra's demented Act III "D'Oreste, d'Ajace." The Act III quartet "Andrò, ramingo e solo," a remarkable analysis of multiple characters caught in a single moment, is as insightful and sophisticated as any example in opera.

Met History

Idomeneo was first seen at the Met in 1982 in the present production by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, featuring the against-type casting of Luciano Pavarotti in the title role and a stellar ensemble including Ileana Cotrubaş, Hildegard Behrens, Frederica von Stade, and John Alexander. Ben Heppner made his Met debut in the title role in 1991, and Plácido Domingo starred in the 1994 and 2000 revivals. Other notable artists who have appeared in the opera include Carol Vaness and Cheryl Studer (Elettra); Benita Valente, Dawn Upshaw, and Hei-Kyung Hong (Ilia); and Anne Sofie von Otter, Susanne Mentzer, Susan Graham, and Magdalena Kožená (Idamante). Music Director Emeritus James Levine has conducted more than 45 performances of *Idomeneo* since 1982.

Program Note

In 1829, nearly a half-century after *Idomeneo*'s premiere, Mozart's widow Constanze recalled an episode that underscores the special place the opera clearly held in its composer's heart. The young couple was visiting Salzburg, where Mozart introduced his wife to his father for the first time with the hope of patching things up following a period of estrangement. As the family spent an evening making music together, according to Constanze, they sang the quartet from the third act of *Idomeneo* ("Andrò ramingo e solo"). Suddenly, Mozart became "so overwhelmed that he burst into tears and had to leave the room; it was some time before I could console him."

Idomeneo marked a personal and professional watershed for its creator. Mozart, whose 25th birthday coincided with the dress rehearsal (January 27, 1781), had at last received an operatic commission commensurate with his growing mastery, thanks (most likely) to his musician friends at the court of Karl Theodor, Elector of Bavaria. It was during an extensive and revelatory tour across Europe (between 1777 and 1779) that the young composer stopped in Mannheim, where this enthusiastic patron of the arts had built up his court orchestra into an internationally reputed ensemble. Though the permanent position Mozart longed for was not forthcoming—he had grown increasingly desperate to escape opera-poor Salzburg—the Elector commissioned him in the fall of 1780 to write the major operatic entertainment for the upcoming Carnival season.

Idomeneo was an especially exciting prospect for Mozart because of the resources he knew would be at his disposal in Munich, where Karl Theodor had recently relocated his court. The libretto was to be furnished by Giovanni Battista Varesco (1735–1805), a cleric, poet, and musician based in Salzburg. In November 1780, Mozart moved temporarily to Munich to work with the singers as he prepared *Idomeneo*. Because Varesco remained behind in Salzburg, the composer relied on his father, Leopold, to serve as a diplomatic go-between while he tailored the libretto to his vision—and to his practical sense of stage worthiness.

Thanks to this happy accident, the surviving correspondence from son to father gives us a fascinating glimpse into Mozart's creative process. The letters involving *Idomeneo* show his fixation on detail and overall effect alike. They address such topics as the quality of the singers' acting: for example, Mozart complained of the stand-and-sing delivery of the tenor Anton Raaff (Idomeneo would be the final role in his long career). Mozart also repeatedly emphasized the virtue of brevity and directness as he attempted to rein in Varesco's rambling, tendentious text. Thus, he objected to the first draft for the mysterious oracle at the denouement as overwritten: "The longer [the voice] goes on, the more the audience will become aware that there's nothing real about it. If the speech of the Ghost in *Hamlet* were not quite so long, it would be much more effective," noted the composer.

Varesco adapted a pre-existing French text from the early 18th century by Antoine Dancher; it had already been set by André Campra in 1712 in the style of French Baroque opera. Though encountered relatively rarely in classical

literature (most famously in *The Iliad* as a brave warrior), the figure of Idomeneo had become freshly attractive during the Enlightenment as a classical counterpart to the biblical narratives of Abraham and Isaac and Jephtha and his daughter. The scholar Nicholas Till has observed that such myths were valued because they dramatized the Enlightenment conviction in "the superiority of natural law to customary and religious law; for human sacrifice, as a sacramental deed, provides a religious sanction for a basic transgression against nature: murder." Gluck, for example, whose reformist opera Mozart had encountered in Paris, showed a predilection for the Iphigenia myth, involving similar scenarios of human sacrifice, in two of his greatest works.

The operatic *Idomeneo* actually entails a synthetic myth that interlaces the returning warrior's story with the figure of Elettra, who appears as a refugee from Mycenae after her brother Orestes had slain their mother Clytemnestra—still another variant of a sort of human sacrifice, though in this case not of an "innocent" victim. Dancher's original ending was tragic: Idomeneo, having become insane, does sacrifice Idamante, and Elettra thus obtains her longed-for vengeance. The revised version set by Mozart, in contrast, ends with the triumph of both reason and love.

Idomeneo's core conflict—the confrontation between an old order beholden to superstition and a new one motivated by love—must have resonated deeply for Mozart as he stood on the threshold of personal and artistic independence. The son-father scenario, in which many have detected a personal echo of the Wolfgang-Leopold tension, is thus just one instance in *Idomeneo* of the archetypal relationship of submission to a figure of authority. Others are the enslavement of the Trojan prisoners of war by the Greeks and, on the cosmic level, of mortals to the will of the gods. With Elettra, we even encounter the captivity of lovers to the emotions that rule them.

Far from representing the increasingly antiquated conventions of myth-centered *opera seria*, *Idomeneo* prompted Mozart to animate the story's characters and situations by drawing on the musical wisdom he had accumulated to date. Into this score he poured everything he had learned: the lyrical illumination of heightened emotions from Italian opera (his preceding *opera seria*, *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, dated from nearly a decade before); the dramatic naturalness and simplicity of the Gluckistes he had witnessed in Paris, according to which arias are anchored within a clear dramatic context—Elettra's first aria, for example, bleeds into the ensuing storm—while the emotional resonance of the recitatives becomes amplified; but also the beautiful pomp and impressive spectacle of French Baroque opera (for the prominent choruses and ballet music and the divine interventions that erupt in all three acts: the shipwreck, the storm and sea monster, and the oracle).

Mozart similarly drew on his experience composing sacred music for chorus and soloists and on his knowledge of the symphonic orchestra, inspired by the

remarkable ensemble of virtuoso players from Karl Theodor's court (especially the woodwinds—this is Mozart's first opera to include clarinets in his orchestra, while his use of three trombones and two horns endows the climactic oracle scene with its numinous power). As musicologist and biographer David Cairns observes, Mozart's deployment in *Idomeneo* "of orchestral color for dramatic and psychological effect looks forward to the discoveries and experiments of Romanticism."

Idomeneo's variety of scenes and interludes elicited from Mozart music of brilliant, innovative colors. He also uses the principle of contrast to remarkable dramatic effect. Thus the oracle's power is enhanced by its position within the larger context of the final scene, and Mozart does not hesitate to summon the sublime alongside his beautiful melodies—even if that requires imagining sonorities that might be perceived as ugly.

The title character's entrance aria reveals his capacity to feel pity for his victim—not yet identified as his son Idamante—yet Idomeneo remains bound to the old order of blind obedience. His plight results from the warrior's vow, which stands for his superstitious, fear-driven perspective—a fear concretely symbolized by the sea-monster that his son elects to confront. In the end, anticipating the denouement of *The Magic Flute* a decade later, Idomeneo's old order yields governance to the marriage of reason and love represented by the union of Idamanate and Ilia, who herself had overcome her tribal allegiance to Priam and the Trojans. Yet Elettra rages on, the outcast who is still enslaved by passion, prefiguring the coloratura rage and untamed emotions of the Queen of the Night. Elettra exemplifies Mozart's creative reimagining of convention (the stereotype of the Baroque rage aria). The musicologist Julian Rushton likens her final aria to an exorcism. In another sense, perhaps, Elettra is the lurking fury waiting to erupt into revolution by century's end.

The quartet that so moved its composer during that visit to Salzburg two years after *Idomeneo*—"nothing in the entire opera pleases me as much as this quartet," he wrote—is an emblem of Mozart's perfecting of his art. It encapsulates in musico-dramatic terms the moment in the opera when its four principal characters are torn by their individual, conflicting predicaments. This quartet, writes Cairns, "marks a new tone in the tragedy, of transfigured suffering, and so prepares for the turning-point of the drama."

Idomeneo gave Mozart "the chance to give out all that he had learned from life and art, all he had experienced of love and suffering and pity and guilt, his comprehensive understanding of the dramatic, his consciousness of unequalled powers, in an opera that was an answer to prayer."

—Thomas May

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