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Kings, gods, witches, and more

by Jay Nordlinger



Elza van den Heever in Idomeneo. Photo: Marty Sohl / Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera has been staging *Idomeneo*, Mozart's magisterial *opera seria*. In the pit is James Levine, the veteran Mozartean, the veteran everything. I attended the performance of March 13.

Levine began like Levine. Mozart's music had bounce, virility, and command. It was no-nonsense but not unfeeling. The orchestra's sound was fat—substantial—but not un-Classical or un-Mozartean. In short, Levine was conducting like the son of Szell (under whom he apprenticed in Cleveland).

In Act III, his tempos got stately and broad—frankly, they got snoozy. But he woke up in time for an exuberant finish.

The Met had assembled a very, very Mozart-capable cast. Singing the title role was Matthew Polenzani, the American tenor. There have been heftier Idomeneos, vocally. But few so Mozartean.

Few so lyrical, nimble, accurate, and enjoyable. Polenzani gives you an honest-to-goodness trill. And his astonishing beauty of sound continues to astonish, year after year.

As a bonus, Polenzani looked every inch a king, in his purple garb.

Ilia was Nadine Sierra, an American soprano. There have been prettier Ilias—not physically but vocally. Sierra's soprano had bite. It had cutting power. I appreciated this, and the poise with which Sierra handled herself. Her Ilia was direct and clear, with a spine. And plenty pretty, including vocally.

In the trouser role of Idamante was Alice Coote, the British mezzo-soprano. At the outset, she was not at her Coote-ish best. But she was always correct, and she soon gained her full stride. She sang with the assurance that everyone expects of her.

This opera includes what I would call a recognition scene. It takes a while for Idamante and Idomeneo—son and father—to recognize each other, for whatever reason (this is an opera). In this scene, Coote was downright touching.

As Elettra, Elza van den Heever, the South African soprano, looked and acted a treat. She also sang a treat. Should Elettra be so witch-like? I'm not convinced, but I enjoyed van den Heever's take. Her big aria was a mini-mad scene.

The part of Arbace was sung by Alan Opie, a British baritone who will turn seventy-two this week. Why would I mention his age? Only to say, "You can sing at that age"—or at least he can. Moreover, Opie's maturity made him seem all the more appropriate as the counselor needed by Idomeneo.

Mozart gives a chorus plenty to do in this opera, and the Met's did it splendidly. The flute may not have as much to do as in another Mozart opera, *The Magic Flute*. But this player has plenty to do, and the Met's did it beautifully, felicitously.

On Broadway, shows have an "11 o'clock number." Well, in *Idomeneo*, the Voice of Neptune was (finally) heard at 11:25. Doing the singing was Eric Owens, the American bass-baritone, who suited his part. And I thought of something that Ferruccio Furlanetto told me, years ago.

The famed Italian bass was singing Prince Gremin, in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. He said that Gremin was more or less the best role in all of opera. "You play golf in the afternoon. You have a nice dinner. You arrive at the opera house during the second intermission. You sing the best aria in the show, stealing it. You get the girl. And you go home with a healthy check."

The Voice of Neptune is not the equivalent of Prince Gremin—but you don't have to show up until 11:25. And you're out the door by midnight.

Schumann spoke of "heavenly length"—the length of Schubert's Great C-major Symphony. Is *Idomeneo* heavenly? Yes, but damn it's long.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found [here](#).