Storms, Sacrifice, and Ecologic Alarm:

A Cretan King’s Journey from Ancient Troy into the Twenty-First Century

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In the summer of 2019 Idomeneo, rè di Creta, memorably returned to the illustrious stages of the Salzburg Festival. In addition to a spectacular production of Mozart’s masterpiece, Idomeneo featured prominently in the Festival’s inaugural address by Peter Sellars. Tying the opera’s arc to one of the burning issues of our time, the celebrated director spoke fervently of ecologic degradation, especially of the oceans, called for decisive environmental action, and praised the leadership role embraced by the younger generation.

While Idomeneus is mentioned in the Homeric epics and The Aeneid, his story survived in its most consequential version through the Vergil commentary of Servius, composed in the early fifth century C.E. As the approach of Alaric’s Goths intensified the political turmoil and economic crisis in Rome, Servius produced an often-copied teaching aid that affirmed the unassailable authority of the city’s famed Augustan poet. To explain and corroborate Vergil’s brief references to Idomeneus, the grammarian provided a concise narrative of the Cretan king’s return voyage from Troy. In this account, Idomeneus pledges to sacrifice the first living being he encounters should he safely reach the shores of Crete. By chance that person happens to be his own son, yet Idomeneus still seeks to honor his vow. When the plague breaks out (S in Aen. 3.321), or simply in response to his cruelty (S in Aen. 11.264), the citizens of Crete force Idomeneus into exile.

This plotline supplied fertile material for writers in early modern France, where dramatists added characters and sometimes more explicit divine intervention to create complex tragic plots. The opera libretto of Idoménée, written by Antoine Danchet and set to music by André Campra, served as a model for Mozart’s librettist Giambattista Varesco, while the choice of this particular text must have been made at the court of the Bavarian elector in Munich. Though the selection reflected the elites’ fondness for French culture, a significant change was requested, namely a rewrite of Danchet’s ending of bloodshed and heartache inflicted by cruel all-powerful gods. The Munich court’s priorities, the soloists available to Mozart, the composer’s ingenious handling of conventions, and his familiarity with Gluck’s operatic reforms, all contributed to a transformation of the drama. Internal struggles of the protagonists largely replaced in-person divine intervention, while ordinary Cretans received much attention in the form of emotionally charged choruses. In contrast with Danchet’s libretto, which focuses on love intrigues engineered by Venus, the Mozart-Varesco version stresses human agency, natural forces tied to Neptune, and the significance of the king’s ill-advised vow, turning the focus closer to that of Servius’ text. The only speech of a god during the opera is a brief pronouncement by the voice of Neptune in Act III. It brings about a peaceful resolution, but this appears to be largely the result of several protagonists’ virtuous behavior.

Precisely these changes to Danchet’s model became focal points of Peter Sellars’ interpretation. Continuing esteem for Vergil, early modern French classicism, and Mozart’s
glorious music propelled the Cretan king’s story into the twenty-first century. And thus an ancient tale, briefly recounted by a diligent grammarian on the eve of Alaric’s sack of Rome, speaks powerfully to artists and audiences fearing a different but no less terrifying calamity in our own time.

Selected Bibliography:


