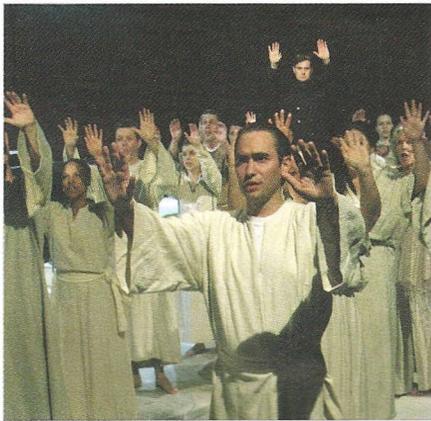


Idomeneo surprises in north London pub

Decent stagings of Mozart's glorious *Idomeneo* are uncommon, but English audiences have been spoiled by not just Opera North's stylish version, but Glyndebourne's sensational offering with Christiane Oelze, Philip Langridge, Anne Schwanewilms and Magdalena Kožena.

Yet to find *Idomeneo* staged upstairs at a north London pub by a small, deeply impressive company from Hampstead – in a production that would not have disgraced ENO or WNO – took one by surprise.

It shouldn't have. Companies out in the sticks (Bampton is a classic instance, una-



fraid to stage Gazzaniga, Storace and Paer) are mounting classical opera that will stand up, musically, to the best. Clonter Opera's *Don Giovanni* was a case in point. Opera South's *Beatrice di Tenda* was another.

Alastair MacGeorge's wise, thoughtful approach can be seen in everything Hampstead Garden Opera does. His exemplary *Idomeneo* programme notes go the measure of the depth and insight of this staging, presented in traditional Greek garb (very successful lighting too) in a serviceable black-panelled space that since 1895 has served as music hall, Masonic lodge (a *Magic Flute* must beckon) and 'a place suitable for balls, Cinderellas and concerts'.

Idomeneo, with its Gluckian antecedents, needs thoughtful understatement; Greek tragedy mediated by Giambattista Varesco's libretto does the rest. Sebastian Harcombe's beautifully stylised presentation set the atmosphere from the very outset; three riveting hours, all mapped, constantly perceptible. To have a young conductor (Katrine Reimers, ex-Guildhall and National Opera Studio) capable of coping with this taxing, potentially exhausting, score was riches indeed. Reimers' young Dionysus Ensemble – despite the odd drifting lower string –

responded fabulously, providing a period feel approaching a period sound. Their flautist (Debbie Martin) was out of this world.

Only recently wooed back to playing leads, and hesitant initially, George Smart made a moving *Idomeneo*: his slight tendency to flatten soon ironed itself out. Everyone, from the two Cretan women to a storm-tossed male chorus, contributed with 100 per cent effort. Hanna Sawle's Elettra was shivering, superb and varied – her 'dearest creature' carried touching Handel echoes. Only her final (second) suicide attempt looked gratuitous.

Polish mezzo Violetta Gawara tended towards rather a stolid Idamante, but one resplendent in his later arias (in David Parry's translation). Arbace and the High Priest struggled a bit, but Matthew Jelf's Neptune seared in a well-managed *deus ex-machina* moment. Julia Hessey's touching Ilia was sheer joy to listen to. Hampstead's other cast was, by all accounts, even beefier.

Opera seria doesn't get much better than this – if only they'd do Camppra's *Idomenée* (1712) as well. But look out eagerly for the same company's comic *L'Elisir d'Amore* in the autumn.

Roderic Dunnett