

Idomeneo

**Hampstead Garden Opera at the
Gatehouse, London N6, April 13**

Hampstead Garden Opera was founded by Roy Budden in 1990. It has mounted more than 30 productions, usually two a year with young professionals. This *Idomeneo* is its 11th Mozart staging, and, I dare say, the boldest. *Idomeneo* is a massive undertaking for a company with slender resources and mostly reliant on individual patrons. Hampstead offered excellence in every department. Not only was Sebastian Harcombe's inventive direction sympathetic to opera seria and Attic tragedy traditions; but also Nicolai Hart-Hansen's angular platforms varied the set with exemplary restraint, while the young orchestra was nursed by the conductor Katrine Reimers (GSMD and National Opera Studio) to rise to a reading of tangible distinction, marred only by a hint of uneven continuo strings early on. *Idomeneo* was given eight performances—a brave undertaking rewarded by several capacity audiences—and double cast. If the team I saw was the 'gentler' one, then no such attribute attached to Hannah Sawle, whose *Elettra* was the most polished and (in coloratura terms) almost brazenly accomplished performance. Though George Smart's *Idomeneo* and Violetta Gawara's *Idamante* were not always dramatically bracing, they were assured in recitative and equally vital (in Smart's case, genuinely involving) in the arias. Matthew Jelf impressed as the Voice of Neptune, sung from a gallery. Yet it was Harcombe's management of his first-rate chorus, in an opera that makes robust demands of them, that lifted this production onto a patently higher plane.

RODERIC DUNNETT