

Gregson's blockings and chorus manipulation were tidy and clever, and the chorus acting not bad. Two classic errors – a bottle balanced vulnerably on a table and cast members lamely pouring nothing into glasses – detracted, as did the mostly imagination-free (uncredited) lighting. But a polished finale, and neat curtain-calls to match, offered final evidence of an unexpectedly first-rate evening.

RODERIC DUNNETT

Ancient and modern

Idomeneo Mozart
HAMPSTEAD GARDEN
OPERA,
THE GATEHOUSE, LONDON

Discovering Hampstead Garden Opera for the first time is like stumbling upon some ancient temple, whose rites and initiations have been going on for centuries, but to which one has not been privy.

Hampstead gave eight sold-out performances of *Idomeneo* at their intimate, black-panelled upstairs room of a pub astride the Middlesex border. What a remarkable asset the company is for a north London audience often starved of good-quality, classical *opera seria*.

Founded in 1990 by Roy Budden and now perceptively led by Alastair MacGeorge, by any standards this scrupulous, talented, critically overlooked company is a serious undertaking to be reckoned with.

Their *Idomeneo* proved a magnificent double-cast undertaking, with Arbace and the High Priest

(Philip Hayes, Alex Routledge) swapping between casts, and ten substantial voices sharing the four main roles plus the cavernous Voice of Neptune.

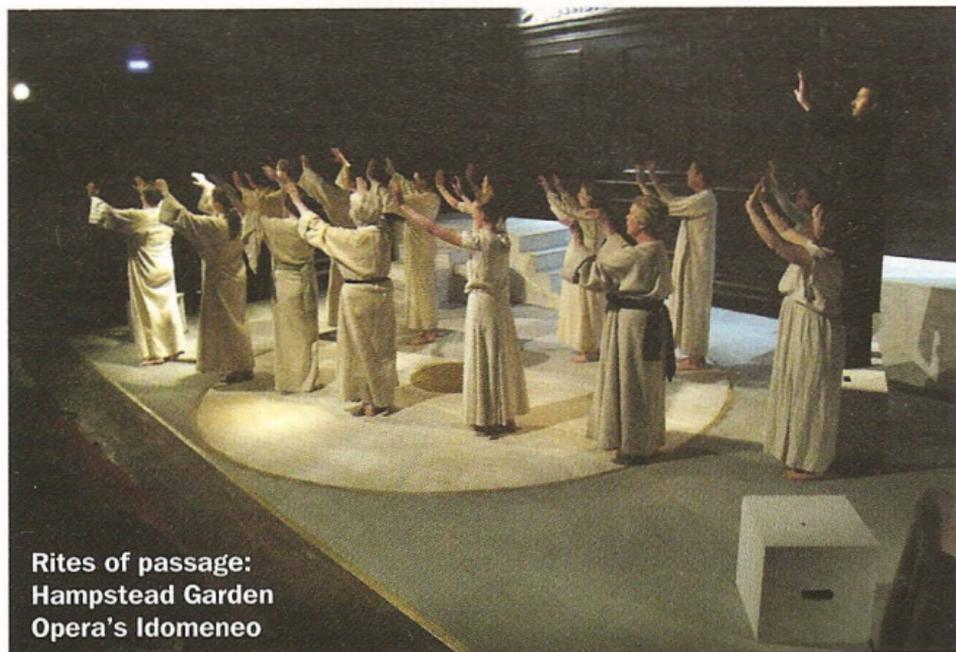
Trinity College Athenian Philip Modino, who was working the camcorder when I attended, reportedly made more of a swash-buckling Heldentenor Idomeneo than the sensitive, understated George Smart.

Smart, along with Violetta Gawara's chaste Idamante, benefited hugely from Sebastian Harcombe's stylised, Greek tragedy staging, whose exquisite moves concealed any acting deficiency. Smart (when tuned) makes a lovely sound, gentle and warm. He was matched by Julia Hessey's first-rate Ilia: another Trinity College product, secure and empathetic. Hers was a touching interpretation that rang utterly true.

But my money was on Hannah Sawle's Elettra: tense, exciting, glorious in every bar of (fiendishly) demanding coloratura, and bringing out the giddy moods through which Elettra is driven.

The other undoubted stars were a 14-strong chorus, whose every prepared gesture was engagingly thought-through; their Mozart singing, heard close up, was electrifying. And the dozen-strong, young Dionysus Ensemble, whose period-like playing (woodwind especially) under the awesomely in-control conductor, Katrine Reimers, mastered this onerous, rewarding score as if it were a five-finger-exercise. Their painstaking, seemingly effortless excellence set the seal on a truly wonderful achievement.

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Rites of passage:
Hampstead Garden
Opera's *Idomeneo*