

Idomeneo



*Dramma per musica* in three acts  
Composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
Libretto by Giambattista Varesco  
Premiere 29 July 1781 in Munich

Written by Glyndebourne Education Department  
and generously funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

## Preparing for a workshop

This pack contains information about the basic storyline and characters of **Idomeneo** - it would be useful for your students to know something of this before the workshop. The entire pack will not take long to read.

## Breaks and refreshments

There will be a break of approximately 30 minutes during the workshop, and about one hour and 45 minutes between workshop and performance at the theatre.

Please ensure that the students bring drinks, snacks and a packed meal as food and refreshments will not be available.

## Parking

Please allow adequate time for parking before a workshop as workshops must start promptly (please make sure you check the start time of your workshop)

## Information

Students below year 10 should not attend the workshop.

If you would like further information, please contact Glyndebourne Education on 01273 812321

## What will happen in a workshop?

Many of the students who will attend our workshops have never been to see an opera before. The workshop will serve as an introduction to opera itself as well as the specific opera to be seen that evening.

The afternoon will consist of:

Warm up activities

Musical exercises

Dramatic exercises

Listening to singers from the GTO company

Discussing the opera

By the end of the workshop, the students will be ready to see and hear and enjoy the opera with genuine understanding.

Students should wear comfortable clothes suitable for physical activities (if you would like to please bring a change of clothes for the evening performance).

## The Characters

**Idomeneo** King of Crete  
*Has just helped the Greeks defeat the Trojans*  
**tenor**

**Idamante** his son  
*He hasn't seen his father for years. He has just fallen in love with...*  
**soprano**

**Ilia** daughter of Priam, King of Troy  
*She is a Cretan prisoner of war and has fallen in love with Idamante.*  
**soprano**

**Elettra** daughter of Agamemnon,  
King of Greece  
*She's taken refuge on Crete following her father's death and is also in love with Idamante...*  
**soprano**

**Arbace** confidante of the King  
**tenor**

**High Priest to Neptune** **tenor**

**The Voice of Neptune** *He took the side of the defeated Trojans in the war and is still furious about the Greek victory...*  
god of the sea **bass**

**Chorus of Trojan prisoners, Cretans, Sailors,  
Soldiers, and a Sea monster**

## Overview

Mozart's first significant opera *Idomeneo* is based on an ancient Greek myth that explores love, jealousy, duty and honour and what happens when you make a promise you are unable to keep...

On his victorious journey back to Crete, King Idomeneo is caught in a furious storm and desperately makes a pact with Neptune, god of the Sea: if saved, he will sacrifice the first person he meets on dry land. This proves to be a little awkward, as this person is his long-lost son, Idamante. Without explaining why, the King banishes his son, telling him to escort the Grecian princess Elettra (who is in love with Idamante) back to the mainland, never to return again. But before they can sail, a huge sea monster, sent by Neptune, attacks the port and begins to wreak havoc across the land. Before setting off to kill the creature, Idamante stops off in the royal garden where he declares his love for the captive Trojan princess, Ilia, who confesses her love in return. Idamante, our hero, defeats the monster and then nobly offers his life to honour his father's debt. But when Ilia offers her life instead, Neptune is so moved by their love, that instead of allowing their sacrifice, he crowns Idamante and Ilia King and Queen.

## Synopsis

*How things look at the beginning...*

The Cretan king, Idomeneo, has just helped the Greeks defeat the Trojans in a mighty battle. Amongst the prisoners of war is Ilia, a Trojan princess, who has fallen in love with Idomeneo's son, Idamante, who returns her affections. To further complicate matters, Elettra (daughter of the Greek king Agamemnon, who has been killed in the Trojan War) has taken refuge on Crete and is also in love with Idamante. Neptune, god of the sea took the side of the Trojans during the war and is still furious at the Greek victory...

### **Act I**

In the Cretan capital, Ilia is consumed with conflicting emotions of grief at the loss of her father and brothers and love for Idamante, who saved her life. Idamante brings news that Idomeneo's fleet has been sighted and, declaring his love for the Trojan princess, he sets the Trojan prisoners free in celebration. Elettra is furious at this insult to Greece, but is interrupted by the arrival of Arbace, the king's confidant, who announces that Idomeneo has in fact been lost in a terrible storm at sea on his return voyage. Elettra reflects on Idamante's love for Ilia and expresses her rage at the thought that a Trojan could soon be the Queen of Crete.

Amid the cries of drowning sailors, the Cretan fleet is destroyed, but the storm suddenly abates and Idomeneo is cast on a deserted Cretan shore. The king unhappily recalls that he has been saved because of the vow he foolishly made to Neptune - to sacrifice, if he were spared, the first living creature he meets on shore. A man approaches – it is his own son, Idamante, but the two have not seen each other since the son's infancy. As soon as the king realises the youth is his own child, he orders Idamante to leave and never to seek him out. Grief-stricken by his father's rejection, Idamante runs off. Meanwhile, unaware of Idomeneo's vow, the people of Crete sing praises to Neptune, who will be honoured with a sacrifice.

### **Act II**

Desperate to find a solution to his crisis, Idomeneo seeks advice from Arbace, who says a substitute could be sacrificed if Idamante were to go into exile immediately and Idomeneo orders his son to escort Elettra home to the Greek mainland. Ilia resigns herself to Idamante's departure, believing that he is in love with Elettra, but he reveals that he is leaving against his will, and once more proclaims his love for her. Secretly reassured by this, she meets and expresses her gratitude to Idomeneo and to the island of Crete for their generosity. But as she leaves, Idomeneo realises his deliverance has cost Ilia her happiness as well as his own. Saved at sea, he now finds a greater tempest raging in his soul.

Elettra is delighted to have Idamante to herself. As they prepare to sail, the people of Crete wish them a safe voyage. Idomeneo bids his son farewell and urges him to learn the art of ruling while he is away. But before the ship can sail, a storm breaks out, and a sea serpent appears among the waves. Recognising it as a messenger from Neptune, the king offers his own life, refuses to sacrifice his innocent son. All flee in terror.

### **Act III**

In the royal garden, unaware of recent developments, Ilia asks the breezes to carry her love to Idamante. Surprising her with his arrival, her love explains that Neptune's serpent is wreaking havoc in the countryside and that he must destroy the beast. Realising they may not see each other again, Ilia confesses her love, but they are interrupted by Elettra and Idomeneo. The king orders his son to leave Crete, telling him that Neptune must be placated, but he cannot bring himself to explain the deal he made with the sea god. In a quartet, Idamante foresees an unhappy life as an outcast, Ilia vows to share his fate and Elettra thirsts for revenge whilst Idomeneo laments his dilemma.

Arbace comes with news that the people, led by the High Priest of Neptune, are clamouring for Idomeneo. The High Priest demands that Idomeneo reveal the name of the person whose sacrifice will appease the god. When the king confesses that his own son is the victim, the populace is horrified. But as the sacrifice is being prepared, cries of rejoicing are heard – Idamante has killed the monster.

Idamante enters in sacrificial robes, saying he at last understands his father's dilemma and is ready to die. After an agonising farewell, Idomeneo prepares to sacrifice his son, when Ilia intervenes, demanding the king take her own life instead. However, the execution is interrupted by the oracular voice of Neptune, who declares that Idomeneo must yield the throne to his son who will marry Ilia. Love has triumphed and Neptune's wrath is appeased. Only Elettra, who longs for her own death does not share in the rejoicing. The people call upon the god of love and marriage to bless the royal pair and bring peace.

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

(b. Salzburg, January 27, 1756; d. Vienna, December 5, 1791)

Perhaps more than any other composer in history, Mozart's life is surrounded by mythology. From his infancy, stories about his abilities were exaggerated and fabricated and his death has provided material for a hugely successful Hollywood thriller. He is perhaps the first composer in Western classical music to have attracted this kind of biographical interest, and it is no coincidence that he is essentially the first free-lance composer, writing what he wanted to write, rather than what he was told to write by a royal or religious patron. With this romantic approach to composition comes a natural interest in the personality behind the music and Mozart's life certainly does not disappoint in this respect.

Mozart confirms (or perhaps even helped to create?) many myths that we have in our society about genius. He was a prodigy - his talent seems to have been innate and present from a very early age. We would like to believe that he didn't ever have to work at his compositions, but rather they were handed down to him from somewhere celestial. He was a passionate individual – he left the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg in a storm after refusing to be treated like a servant. He was a hedonist; interested in the pleasures that life has to offer. And of course he died extremely young at only 36 – and don't "All the best die young"? (James Dean, Bruce Lee, Jeff Buckley, Eva Cassidy, Kurt Cobain etc)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria, in 1756. His father, Leopold, was a violinist, music theorist, composer and teacher. Wolfgang and his sister, Nannerl, both showed astonishing musical talent from an early age. Wolfgang would pick out chords at the keyboard when he was only three years old and, at the age of six, he was discovered writing notes in a mess of blots and smudges, which was proudly announced to be a concerto! At about the same time he taught himself to play the violin, and was soon able to play chamber music perfectly, although his father had given him no lessons.

Leopold Mozart – realising that he was sitting on a gold mine took his two 'prodigies of nature' on several gruelling tours to show them off to the nobility and paying public of Europe. Whilst travelling along poorly kept roads, the young Mozart would spend the time writing music, which he retained in his head until he could write it down at the end of the day. A letter from this time reminds us just how young the performer was – in 1762, Leopold refers to Mozart "cutting a new tooth".

After excursions to Munich and Vienna the family undertook a long journey culminating in triumphal receptions in Paris and London (1763-4). Both children came down with smallpox, but, undaunted, Leopold took them off round Europe again. In 1768, Mozart began his operatic career with, *La Finta Semplice*, aged only twelve. By this time, he was also writing instrumental music; symphonies, wind ensemble pieces and, inspired by Joseph Haydn, string quartets.

In 1770, Leopold took his son on a tour of Italy. During the trip, two particular myths are particularly interesting. Firstly, to prove that it was not his father but Mozart writing such advanced music, the young Wolfgang is said to have agreed to undertake a trial in which he (successfully) wrote an orchestral aria in complete isolation. Also during this trip, the Mozarts visited the Sistine Chapel in Rome. After only one hearing of Allegri's *Miserere* (a 20 minute, 8-part choral work), it is alleged that Mozart was able to write down the whole piece note for note having never seen the score, which had in fact never left the chapel.



At 15, Mozart started his first full-time paid job as music master for the Archbishop of Salzburg. His relationship with the Archbishop was incredibly fiery and after a youth spent rubbing shoulders with European aristocrats and royals, the young Mozart did not take kindly to being treated as a common servant.

In 1777, frustrated with his employer, Mozart visited the court of Carl Theodor at Mannheim looking for a position. Although he was unsuccessful in this, during his four-month stay, he made a number of useful contacts amongst the singers and orchestra and acquainted himself with the progressive musical style. Then in 1780, after leaving the employ of the Archbishop following a serious dispute, he was finally given the opera commission that he so dearly wanted from Carl Theodor, who was now Elector of Bavaria. *Idomeneo* was based on a French setting of an ancient Greek myth and afforded Mozart the opportunity to use chorus, dancers and lavish spectacle.

As was standard practice in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with a new commission, Mozart arrived in Munich a couple of months before the commission was due to listen to the singers, compose or adapt the music to suit their voices, rewrite any numbers they disliked, coach them, supervise rehearsals and direct the first three performances. We know from letters to his father at this time, that this process was far from simple, with the lead tenor, Anton Raaff proving to be very demanding. Mozart also said that the castrato playing Idamante, Vincenzo dal Prato, had faulty breath control and could not read or learn his music. Mozart is even said to have described Raaff and dal Prato as “the two worst actors any stage has ever borne”.

Despite these challenges, the opera opened on 29 January 1781, two days after Mozart’s 25<sup>th</sup> birthday and was very well received. Mozart himself prized the work and his wife later said, “The most happy time of his life was whilst at Munich during which time he wrote *Idomeneo*”. It is now considered to be Mozart’s first operatic masterpiece.

During his initial visits to Mannheim, Mozart had fallen in love with Aloysia Weber, a singer, but when she married someone else Mozart turned his attentions to her younger sister, Constanze. They were married in Vienna in 1782 where Mozart was now desperately trying to earn a living as a free-lance composer.

Perhaps Mozart’s finest operas were written in the last five years of his short life. *Le Nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro) was written in 1786. The librettist was Lorenzo da Ponte with whom Mozart produced two other successful operas; *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan Tutte* (1790).

1791, Mozart’s final year, was one of frantic activity. As well as numerous instrumental works, he composed the (unfinished) *Requiem*, which had been commissioned by an unknown messenger on behalf of an anonymous patron. Work on the *Requiem* was interrupted by another opera, *La Clemenza di Tito*, and when he resumed work on the *Requiem* progress was hindered by the onset of an illness. At the same time, Mozart was also busily working on his final operatic project, *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute). Whilst desperately working on these two compositions, he began to see the visits of the unknown messenger as omens of doom and finally became convinced that he had been poisoned in a conspiracy against him, though this was never proved. He died in Vienna in December 1791, two months after the opening night of *The Magic Flute*, aged only 35. He left no money for a proper funeral and was buried in an unmarked grave.

## Opera Glossary

**aria** A song for solo voice reflecting how the character feels (usually miserable) about what has just or is about to happen.

**auditorium** Space within the theatre occupied by the audience.

**baritone** Middle-range man's voice, lurking somewhere between bass and tenor.

**bass** Lowest male voice. Often plays characters with dubious moral fibre.

**chorus** A body of singers who (mostly) sing and act as a group to make the crowd scenes a bit more plausible. Also the term used for any musical number sung by this group.

**conductor** Hand-waving-head-honcho, positioned to obscure the view of the lady sitting in the centre of the front row. Makes sure everyone is performing the same piece.

**contralto** (or alto) Low-pitched woman's voice. Not to be confused with... counter tenor High-pitched man's voice. Nearest we have nowadays to a castrato (from the verb to castrate...ouch...)

**ensemble** From the French word for "together". When two or more soloists try to have their say at the same time (can get rather messy...). Ensemble for two is a duet, three is a trio, four a quartet and so on.

**finale** The final number of an act - sung by an ensemble (see above).

**intermezzo** A piece of music played between the acts of an opera (usually just long enough for the prima donna to put on her sixth frock of the show).

**interval** A (welcome) break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around, catch up on what's been happening, join the chorus at the bar...

**libretto** The text of an opera. Written by a librettist.

**mezzo-soprano** Female singer who can't quite reach those top notes. Not much glass-shattering action here.

**orchestra** Group of musicians found in the pit.

**overture** Music at the start of the show. Sets the scene, warms up the orchestra and reminds the audience that the performance is about to begin.

**prima donna** The leading woman singer in an operatic cast. Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's wife...

**props** Mobile pieces of the set which help to make it all a bit more believable.

**proscenium arch** Wall in front of the curtain, dividing the stage from the auditorium.

**recitative** The bits which aren't the songs. Closer to the rhythm of speech and often accompanied by just a harpsichord or piano. Used to further the action of the story (we'd never get home if the plot was told through the arias...).

**repetiteur** from the French for to repeat. This tortured soul sits in on rehearsals and pretends to be an orchestra at the piano.

**score** The full score contains all the sung and orchestral parts in the opera. The vocal score has the voice parts and a piano reduction of the orchestra (for rehearsals - see repetiteur).

**soprano** High female voice. Watch out for those delicate window panes...

**synopsis** Outline of the plot. Especially useful during the interval when it is once more light enough to find out what on earth is happening.

**tenor** A high male voice. The good guy, pure of heart and all that.