



IDOMENEO'S VOW

To the modern mind, Idomeneo's vow, the impetus for the entire story of the opera, may make it seem like just another irrational example of the genre, subject to our suspension of disbelief in order to enjoy the music. But the opera reflects the very real ideals and conflicts of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its solutions to the break-up of feudal society. Mozart and Varesco, his librettist, changed the tragic outcome of the original story. Although the opera of the time did demand happy endings, the way this is accomplished in *Idomeneo* was more than an accommodation to the requirement. The opera embodies some of the Enlightenment ideas and attitudes that are part of the foundation of the modern world (although many are under siege in the twenty-first century).

The theory of social contract was the eighteenth century's most workable and lasting answer to the problem of how a society in which the traditional bonds have loosened may be saved from dissolution. (See reference at end)

This theory of social contract was the necessary underpinning of the economic changes that spurred ideological ferment. The expanding middle class was built on trade, which could not flourish under the weight of feudal fealties and religious commitments. Individual responsibility and freedom to make binding agreements were necessary, both to labor and to the new bourgeoisie, and these eventually gave rise to notions of men's right to life, liberty, and, by the end of the century, the pursuit of happiness. Contracts were made between parties of equal power in conditions free of duress. Hence the problem with vows: made to God or a god, an unequal party if ever there were one, and usually made under duress - in the case of Idomeneo, his need to save himself and his crew from the storm at sea.

The other unacceptable aspect of Idomeneo's vow was its demand for human sacrifice. The Enlightenment sought a source of authority in "natural law" rather than religion and custom. Human sacrifice was seen as religious sanction for murder, from which civilized beings naturally recoiled. More than a rejection of the practice, it was necessary to substitute the idea of a just God, who would never demand an act so inimical to innate morality and filial love.

Idomeneo rails against the injustice of Neptune, but the new philosophy demanded human responsibility. Finally, half way through Act Three, Idomeneo confesses the vow made to Neptune. Significantly, it is the high priest who insists that the vow be fulfilled. Although Mozart was devout, he learned both his devotion and a firm anti-clericalism from his father; and of course one goal of enlightened rulers in the eighteenth century was to curb the power of the Church. Ilia now offers herself as a substitute victim (that's

another essay) and incorrectly takes the blame for Neptune's wrath. Incorrectly because the god does not accept her sacrifice. Only Idomeneo can end the conflict by ceding power to the new generation.

Ilia, Trojan captive, has made a journey to enlightenment in the opera. In the first act, she begins by describing her conflict between the need to avenge her people and her love for the enemy, Idamante. She overcomes the need for vengeance (an old-fashioned imperative of the warrior society inimical to the demands of the new) and accepts Idomeneo as her new father in the second act. Eventually, as she interrupts the execution of the sacrifice, she becomes the spokesperson for the new ideology: "The gods are not tyrants; you are all mistaken in your interpretation of the divine will." Now Neptune appears to end the travesty and restore natural law. It is not an accident that he proclaims "Ha vinto Amore" – "Love has conquered."

In the seventeenth century, sexual love was seen as an unruly and dangerous passion, to be brought under control by reason and self-denial. The human sacrifice offered in *Idomeneo* is itself emblematic of the self-sacrifice demanded by order and public duty. But in the latter half of the eighteenth century, bourgeois capitalists desired sanction to enjoy their newly-acquired prosperity. A just and loving god who wanted humans to be happy was one facilitator of this objective. Another was the idea that naturally-ordained human feelings, and especially love in its various forms, motivated men to good, and were conducive to social harmony. Brotherhood was a strong ideal of the Freemasons, to which Mozart belonged, and a cry of the French Revolution. Love in marriage became one of the pillars of bourgeois society because marriage for love and not duty both blessed pleasure and provided restraint. And so began the notion, so problematic in our time, that the patriarchal family, and not the state or the tribe or the feudal manor or the church, is the natural and most fundamental source of virtue and authority in society.

Reference: Till, Nicholas, Mozart and the Enlightenment, W.W.Norton & Co., New York, 1995. Quote, p. 68.

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