



Enlightenment Ideology in Opera *Idomeneo* by Mozart

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Abstract. The ideas of the Enlightenment, which seeped into not only opera but the whole field of music, and even religion, philosophy, science, and society, had a profound impact on people's ideology. Mozart, as one of the most important composers of the Classical period, had operatic works that transcended the values of his time. Thus it is justifiable that his art creation would be a perfect example for modern scholars to re-examine the notion of enlightenment. This article selects the opera *Seria Idomeneo*, composed by the composer Mozart in 1781, to study the ideology that it contains and expresses. This opera was born at an important historical point in the transition from the Baroque to the Classical period in the history of Western music and during the famous European Enlightenment of the time. As the first operatic work by Mozart, one of the most important composers of Classicalism, its representational significance is extremely important. With a pictorial map that Burkholder preselected, there will be more and more further interpretative studies on the phrase, the thought of the liberation of individuality, revealed in this opera is reflected in the music, which can be likened to the free expression of emotions. This article provides a brief overview of the enlightened connotations of Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*, in the hope of establishing a firm foundation for future scholarship on the subject, to better explain the spirit of Mozart's opera as well as his spirit of music.

Keywords: Mozart · Enlightenment · *Idomeneo*

1 Introduction

The Enlightenment and the musical reforms of Gluck that it brought about were important factors that influenced opera in the 18th century. The ideas of the Enlightenment, which seeped into not only opera but the whole field of music, and even religion, philosophy, science, and society, had a profound impact on people's ideology. Mozart, as one of the most important composers of the Classical period, had operatic works that transcended the values of his time. In particular, his first operatic work, *Idomeneo*, was born in 1781. Because of its genre as a formal opera, this work is not yet completely free from the constraints of traditional opera, but the efforts made by Mozart in its libretto, plot, melody, harmony, and orchestra give *Idomeneo* a distinctive musical composition characteristic of the composer's personality, while also permeating and reflecting the Enlightenment humanist ideas brought about by the Enlightenment, a shift in musical thought form and aesthetics that was particularly crucial in the early years of classicism.

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B. Majoul et al. (Eds.): ICLACE 2023, ASSEHR 766, pp. 207–212, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-094-7_25

The scholar will combine his research on the history of Western music and the opera *Idomeneo* with an analysis of the melodic colors, storyline and character singing, and musical characteristics of *Idomeneo*, in the hope of understanding the Enlightenment ideas embodied in *Idomeneo* and gaining a deeper understanding of the social and personal factors that led to the evolution of early opera.

In the history of Western music, the 18th century was an influential period of transformation. It was a period in which philosophy, art, science, and literature experienced a process of transformation from the realm of elite groups to that of the general public, while at the same time, Baroqueism evolved into a historical period of Classical music, made possible by the rise of an Enlightenment movement at the time. There has been a great deal of enthusiasm for the study of Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* in current scholarship, with areas of research ranging from the libretto, performance, libretto, and socio-historical context. This opera was born at an important historical point in the transition from the Baroque to the Classical period in the history of Western music and during the famous European Enlightenment of the time. As the first operatic work by Mozart, one of the most important composers of Classicism, its representational significance is extremely important. However, the relationship between the opera *Idomeneo* and the 18th-century Enlightenment has been less discussed in current research. This study will analyze and discuss this opera based on its plot story, the writing features of the opera's music, and the text of the protagonist's singing, to further explore the kernel of Enlightenment and ideas permeated and implied in the opera *Idomeneo*.

The opera seria *Idomeneo*, composed by the composer Mozart in 1781, is often considered by the public to be Mozart's most significant opera. In *Idomeneo*, Mozart incorporated and absorbed the mature experience and technique of most of the prominent European musicians, as well as incorporating the humanist ideology which emerged from the influential 18th-century Enlightenment. According to Runyang Yu, "For musicians of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the most profound impact of the Enlightenment was a real awareness of the independent value of the artist as an individual" [1]. Further interpreting the phrase, the thought of the liberation of individuality, revealed in this opera is reflected in the music, which can be likened to the free expression of emotions.

2 Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Monteverdi's *L'orfeo*

Compared to the traditional opera seria, *Idomeneo* was still thematically based on history, it depicted ancient Greek mythology, but the various elements that the characters react to each other, such as the relationship between fathers and sons, and the young people's view of love, and in particular, the image of God is portrayed in the opera story, which contained many humanist ideas. In this aspect, *Idomeneo* has differentiated itself from traditional opera seria in terms of its spiritual values.

About the genre of opera seria, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, a well-known historical Baroque opera, has a similar thematic focus to *Idomeneo*. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is based on the ancient Greek myth *Orfeo* and *Eurydice*. *Orfeo*, who was a god of music, had a beautiful singing voice and lyra music which could move everything in the world, moreover he had a deep love, for *Eurydice*. On a lovely, balmy day, the couple was sitting peacefully by the river when the unfortunate event occurred, *Eurydice* was attacked by a

poisonous snake and departed from Orfeo permanently. Devastated by such a break-up, Orfeo decided to go to hell to find his wife and bring her back to life again. Although in traditional ancient Greek mythology, this moving love story ends in tragedy, in Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*, he ends with a few alterations. The sun god arrived at the side of the both sorrowful and contrite Orfeo and turned him into a constellation so that the eternal and harmonious light he emitted could be with Eurydice's soul. While this not-entirely-happy ending brings some comfort to the audience, the god seems to have a touch of warmth. Ultimately, however, this opera, which was composed in the early 17th century, is still dominated by the Renaissance ideological rendering. In this system of ideas, God, is always solemn and without any error, always dominant and unresisting. And ordinary people, in the face of the tragedy that occurred, could only submit to God's commands and not disobey god.

Mozart's *Idomeneo*, on the other hand, is still a serious, formal opera seria based on ancient Greek mythology, but from it, Mozart seems to be more interested in expressing another ideological connotation. As Joseph Kerman said: "Idomeneo's basic theme is a dynastic allegorical drama about the entanglement of young and old and the difficult balance of power between the two generations" [2]. Further reflections in the opera, such as the pure love of Idomante and Ilia, demonstrate the loyal and trusting side of humanity, while Alethela shows the other side of love, such as jealousy and resentment. The relationship between father and son is the main one in *Idomeneo*, particularly in the case of *Idomeneo* and *Idomante*, where the difference in ideology between the two generations is evident. *Idomeneo*'s act of sending *Idomante* away to protect him is not understood by *Idomante*. *Idomante*, on the other hand, is eager to confront the gods directly, rather than running away from reality as his father did, until *Idomante* learns the truth and the father and son reconcile their previous conflict.

At the end of the opera, the spirit of reconciliation is subtly embodied. Mozart concluded with a happy ending in which the young prince *Idomante* inherits his father's crown and *Idomeneo* lives out his old age in peace and comfort. This ending, sensible and moving, most importantly re-creates the noble spirit of humanity in the opera *Idomeneo*. The ideology preached by the Enlightenment was also infiltrated at the same time. The ideology preached by the Enlightenment was simultaneously infiltrated, as was the essence of the Enlightenment: secular, empirical, enlightened, egalitarian, and humanist [3].

3 *Idomeneo*'s Unique Tonal Colours

In the music of some prominent classical composers, such as Gluck, Haydn, and Mozart, it is obvious that the form of music became free from excessive and unnecessary ornamentation. In this case, classical music takes on some noble qualities, such as perfect harmony of form, simplicity, calmness of expression, and variety in the unity of lyrics and music [4]. In Mozart's opera music, this harmonious unity is reflected the full and is marked by Mozart's forward-looking personal musical style. In the early days of opera, the problem of how to divide the music of an opera into inconsistent pieces was a problem that troubled composers of the time. Mozart was the first to propose the most effective and straightforward solution to this problem, and that was to unify the key. In *Idomeneo*, the dominant key throughout the piece is D, around which the opera unfolds,

proceeds, changes, and eventually returns to the end of D [5]. This approach brings a great deal to the overall unity of the opera and the understanding of the audience. Furthermore, in *Idomeneo*, Mozart introduced several recurring, memorable, and characteristic fixed melodies, throughout the opera, to deepen the audience's impression of the music, which are called musical motifs [6, 7]. Usually short they are small and appear irregularly throughout the play, serving to deepen the musical impression and to make the music of the different divisions of the entire opera more unified and complete in its presentation of the same theme.

4 Chanting and Accompaniment of the Main Character Idomeneo

In an opera, the music is extremely fundamental to the music's spirit, and the poetry needs to be completely subservient to it. This idea permeated Gluck's operatic reforms in the 18th century. Mozart, for his part, was heavily influenced by Gluck at the time. In *Idomeneo*, the king, who is experiencing dramatic events and struggling deeply with his own emotions and responsibilities, is the principal character of this opera. In the opera, there are 32 songs, in which Idomeneo performs mainly in arias and cantatas. The lyrics are an impressive means of describing the role of the king [8].

In the opera *Idomeneo*, one of Mozart's most remarkable aspects is how the characters sing in perfect harmony with each other and with the libretto and music. The rhythmic and emotional character of the lyrics blend with the music and harmonize with each other, displaying a harmonious unity that was lacking when composers of the previous era were writing. This is a moment when the poetry is at the service of the music.

Idomeneo's lyrics are simpler and more accessible than the ornate staging and showy lyrics sought by the Baroque composers. Mozart's attempt to use plain, simple language to get to the heart of the matter, combined with *yi* with the right music, allows the audience to feel the complex emotions of the characters, which makes the arias even more moving. For example, in the first act of the opera, the main character, King Idomeneo, sings the aria "How horrible, how sorrowful! A simple, colloquial phrase, but one that has a great impact on the king's aria. It is performed with a gradual progression of emotion sung by the protagonist Idomeneo, with the accompanying music building up at the same time, reaching an emotional climax at the end of the line. This phrase also vividly illustrates the range of complex emotions that King Idomeneo feels when he realizes that he has had to kill his son by hand. The character's psychology of fear, helplessness, anger, grief, and struggle is perfectly expressed in the music and lyrics. In the phrase "How many times this heart must die of torture" [9]. The accompanying music behind this line is very interesting, it has a repetitive rhythm and pattern with the main melody and appears again after the character has finished singing, deepening the audience's musical impression and reinforcing the emotional content of the protagonist at the same time.

In his book *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau, a representative of the 18th century Enlightenment, mentioned that the art of the musician is never in the imitation of the object but in the ability to bring the mind closer to the mood created by the existence of the object itself [10]. Mozart's operas were not necessarily directly inspired by the ideas of the philosopher Rousseau, but he was heavily influenced by the composer Gluck, and he was convinced by Gluck's idea of seeking the best expression

of emotion in simplicity and nature, which he practiced and developed to form Mozart's unique musical style.

5 Enlightenment Ideas in *Idomeneo*'s Music

Not only in the content of the script but also the ideas brought about by the Enlightenment can be glimpsed in the artistic style of *Idomeneo*'s music. Some of the leaders of the Enlightenment also expressed their positions distinctly on art as well as aesthetic theory in the 18th century. Unlike the Baroque musicians who tended to use the flamboyant Rococo style, they opposed the aristocracy of art, criticized the excessive flamboyance of late Baroque art and the artifice of the Rococo style, and advocated an art style that was simple, natural, realistic, and oriented towards the people, as well as emphasizing the principle that art imitates nature. The Enlightenment thinkers, represented by Rousseau, advocated that music should be beautiful in its naturalness, simplicity, and emotional expression, this idea had a profound influence on Gluck's reform of opera. The music in opera, as Gluck emphasized, should always be in harmony with the content of the plot, that is to say, music should return to its inherent function. This idea also profoundly influenced Mozart's opera writing. *Idomeneo* is an opera that represents Mozart's synthesis of the experience of the best musicians of the 18th century and incorporates his characteristic style. Cairns' words can serve as a sufficient explanation for this view: "*Idomeneo* is a classic example of Mozart's ability to take complete artistic freedom into a mode and make it his own" [6].

6 Conclusion

The Enlightenment thinkers believed that freedom was a natural quality in human nature and that "people were originally born to be free". So, too, opera, the musical art that people use to express their natural humanity, must be free and unconstrained by stereotypical rules. Mozart's *Idomeneo*, born at the height of the Enlightenment, has a timeless value that transcends the ages. As Mozart's first and most important opera work, it has a great deal to offer. Whether it is the enlightening themes of humanity and reconciliation within the drama or the natural flow of emotion that characterizes the music, it deserves to be explored further. This article merely provides a brief overview of the enlightened connotations of Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*, in the hope of establishing a firm foundation for future scholarship on the subject, to better explain the spirit of Mozart's opera as well as his spirit of music.

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