

Opera
By Paul Feigelfeld

WHEN THE CURTAIN FALLS



All images: *Idomeneo*, Felsenreitschule, Salzburg, 2019

Can opera disentangle the mess we are in? Teodor Currentzis and Peter Sellars's production of Mozart's *Idomeneo* at the Salzburg Festival performs the contradictions of hope in the face of climate catastrophe.



Jonathan Lemalu (*Nettuno/La voce*), Russell Thomas (*Idomeneo*), musicAeterna Choir of Perm Opera

There is no escape, there is only escapism. There is no refuge, only refugees. Capitalism has brought forth capitulationism: the inescapable idea that it is the system to end all systems, the outer limit of imagination, the end of the End of History; that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism; that there is not only a moral but a divine and technological law currently driving the world into the bleakest of all possible futures. Everything has become techné. What has determined our condition for so long are the false gods of ecological homeostasis, permanent economic growth, and a social pseudo-equilibrium purported to reflect a Darwinian “natural order” yet firmly held in place by an inherently right-wing cyberneticism largely oblivious of itself.

We have seen countless biennials, publications, conferences, and generously funded research projects dealing with the field that has become established as “capitalism and the Anthropocene”. Outside the world of intellectual journalism, which tends to revolve around its own centre, we tend to ignore theatre, classical music, and opera, or to dismiss them for their incapacity to reflect the times in which we live, either on the grounds that they are

too old-fashioned or that they are trying too hard to be contemporary. The people working in these classical art forms contribute to the problem, too: transpose classical tropes such as the myth of Medea to the present and you might be scorned as a sell-out, or a traitor who's defected to Team Netflix.

Yet the Salzburg Festival is among the world's most renowned and prestigious events, a place where literal kings and queens, heads of state, leaders of industry, and the highest luminaries of art and culture swarm the strange concrete arena that has seemingly grown out of the bottom of the Mönchsberg, a protuberance that brings to mind the famous slab of molten corium in Chernobyl – the most radioactive sculpture in the world, known as the Elephant's Foot. The latent power here is enormous. But, of course, most of the elite come here to be entertained and confirmed in their conservative values. What was initially conceived as a democratic, public-oriented festival by Max Reinhardt and Hugo von Hofmannsthal nearly a hundred years ago has long since become a very closed circuit, mimicking the old courtly systems of the plebs watching the gentry watching plays about the plebs watching the gentry. It's glamorously troubling.



Ying Fang (Ilia)

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Plastic entities come alive as illuminated phytoplankton or billowing jellyfish, only then to die off.

The Festival's opening performance this year was a new production of Mozart's *Idomeneo*, conducted by Teodor Currentzis and directed by Peter Sellars, in which the four main characters – the Cretan leader Idomeneo, who is on his way home from the Trojan war; his ill-starred son Idamante; the Trojan princess Ilia, the object of Idamante's love; and Electra, who is, in turn, in love with Idamante – negotiate survival, asylum, desire, and sacrifice. The wrathful Neptune and the sea serpent who is his agent in Mozart's original are here climate change and politics itself.

The staging and props land us in a world of military exclusion zones, plastic debris, and plankton, all of which have become indistinguishable strata of existence. Military blockades are continuously moved around the stage to direct both choir and protagonists; plastic entities (large, small, and in-between) come alive as illuminated phytoplankton or billowing jellyfish, only then to die off. What might have been clearly separated categories of war and peace, land and sea, organic and artificial, big and small, all become hard to grasp. The deeds of humans and gods are likewise muddled and indistinct: For Idomeneo, the old gods clearly exist, and

he must cooperate, obey, sacrifice to, identify with, and act like one of them to set things straight. Their politics are his actions. The representatives of the new order (the generation of Idamante, Electra, and Ilia) are already, like Mozart himself, the immaculate child-parents – at once offspring and progenitors – of the Enlightenment.

On both these levels, Sellars drives the opera onto the rocks of his own solutionism. Civilisation, here comprised of two rival armies (both embodied in the choir of Currentzis's ensemble music *Aeterna*), slows down to a zombie pace; the esprit de corps/choir fades, suffocating under the set design; movements and song grind to a halt. Mass extinction takes over the stage, corpses strewn everywhere. But in the face of all this death, Sellars then suggests, harmony and resurrection can be found, both musically and politically, in the stable constellation of the four protagonists once they bring their individual desires into alignment and subscribe to the restoration of the natural balance. As nature begins to heal, humankind – now one giant zombie army, albeit with a beautiful choral voice – rises up again (think of the horror director George A. Romero's line, "when there's no more room in hell, the dead will



Paula Murrhiy (Idamante), Russell Thomas (Idomeneo)

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walk the earth"). In a way, it doesn't seem to occur to Sellars that this is a weird turn, to say the least.

The end of the opera ushers in a kind of simulation we could decode like this: American predominance wanes, new alliances with China emerge, climate-change politics succeed. It is the dawn of a better world where races, genders, organisms, and environment sway softly, all – to borrow a phrase – watched over by machines of loving grace. The *deus ex machina*, after all, is a theatrical machine. In a final shift, Sellars then moves away from words towards the ritual dances of two performers, one from Hawaii and one from Kiribati in Micronesia, which in their weirdness evoke the brownface antics of Sellars's not-so-distant relative Peter Sellers in *The Party* (1968), especially when you glance at the audience's delighted yet horrified reactions. Sellars strangely mixes up postcolonialism and decolonisation here: Noble-savage savants and their ancient knowledge are at the same time cast as the inventors of the rituals of the future. In the end, a model UN ensemble of soldiers, headscarf-wearing refugees, gods, kings, princesses, and heroes somehow pulls it off that restoration, revolution, death, and resurrection all become one. It can be that easy.

Sellars clearly means well, and there may be no better place than the Salzburg Festival to address the old elite. Nonetheless, the effect is largely the pacified conscience of having sat through three and a half hours of world-class opera and accepting the message as part of that. It's still easier, for most, to kill your children than to change politics – we witness this daily in the attacks against Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future protesters. If Idomeneo is troubled by the sacrifice of his son to the gods of old, like Abraham in the Old Testament, he is perfectly willing to carry it out: it's tradition, after all. Sellars, I think, is sacrificing something else to the old gods of Salzburg: the potential of actually handing over the stage to pressing global issues, their protagonists, and a trajectory with a goal but no end. Instead, all these problems are neatly compressed into two acts, a few soundbites for the press, pictures of plastic waste in the program, and tickets sold for a few hundred euros apiece.

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