

Peter Sellars directs Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Idomeneo* as the Opening Opera Premiere of the 2019 Salzburg Festival



Peter Sellars talks about his new staging of Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Teodor Currentzis will be the conductor. Photo: SF/Anne Zeuner

(SF, 4 January 2019) The opening premiere of the Salzburg Festival will be Wolfgang A. Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* on 27 July 2019. At the 2017 Festival, Teodor Currentzis and Peter Sellars staged Mozart's late opera *La clemenza di Tito* as a touching vision of the power of justice and reconciliation. Now the ingenious duo returns to stage another *opera seria* by Mozart, the utopian work of a 25-year-old composer. Teodor Currentzis conducts the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra and the musicAeterna Choir of Perm Opera. The cast includes Russell Thomas (*Idomeneo*), Paula Murrihy (*Idamante*), Ying Fang (*Illia*), Nicole Chevalier (*Elettra*) and Jonathan Lemalu (*Nettuno / La voce*). The Samoan-born artist Lemi Ponifasio, whose career has taken him all over the world, will be the choreographer. In an interview, Peter Sellars discussed the utopian aspects of his production.

Mr. Sellars – you are returning to Salzburg, to the Felsenreitschule. The Festival's artistic director Markus Hinterhäuser has entrusted you with another *opera seria* by Mozart. What do you see in *Idomeneo*?



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When he writes this opera, Mozart is 25 years old. The commission brings him into contact with the greatest set designer in Europe, Lorenz Quaglio. So he has this huge opera with a major set designer, a ballet company, all these artists, and the orchestra is the most avant-garde in Europe: the musicians from Mannheim. So he says: *We'll come to Munich and show what a new generation can do.* This opera also contains this classic struggle between father and son – basically, Mozart is telling his father that it's time to let the younger generation take over. Mozart is writing music here that nobody else alive could write – and at the same time announcing a new generation of musical language.

The libretto is based on Greek mythology, on Homer, on Sophocles: the Greeks thought they had won the Trojan War and were very proud of themselves. And on the way home, the ocean said: No, you didn't win. Everybody lost. And the ocean started breaking their ships apart. That story about the sea and its answering back to human pride is incredible. Mozart wrote such incredible music for the ocean, here in Salzburg, where he never saw the ocean in his life! One passage in the libretto reads: *Saved from the sea, I have a raging sea, more fearsome than before, within my bosom. And Neptune does not cease his threats even in this.* That is what Mozart's music is about.

In your productions, you seek to establish valid references to world events. How current is *Idomeneo*? What does this opera have to tell us?

Basically, where we are with global warming is exactly where Mozart was with this opera: an older generation still not getting it, and a younger generation already on the case in very exciting ways. And we're at this moment where the leadership is moving forward. This opera allows an angry 25-year-old of 1781 his say in Salzburg in 2019.

Surely you know that Mr. Trump has removed the United States from the discussion of global warming. And the top two polluters in the world are China and the US. I live in California, and the Governor of California, Jerry Brown, held a Climate Change Conference in September with China and 43 other countries. There's a young Chinese singer named Ying Fang who will sing the role of Ilia here this summer – and I presented her singing Mozart's arias at this climate change conference, surrounded by photographs and images of climate change by artists from all over the world: of the violent oceans, the melted glaciers, the flooding, the incredible effects that are going on at this moment. It's not that climate change will happen: it is already deeply, deeply happening. We presented Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* as the opera that describes the angry oceans, what it means to negotiate with the oceans for the future of the next generation. Because Salzburg is one of those cities where people come to discuss large questions.

At the end, when Neptune has seen enough, the entire stage is flooded. George Tsypin (the set designer) has this incredible footage of the plastic that is destroying the ocean right now and is in every one of our bloodstreams at this moment. This visceral image will be projected onto the stone here – which is transformed into an underwater ruin. What we're really putting on stage is the city of Atlantis, the strange underwater city of mythology. The arches of the arcades become an underground ruin of a previous civilization: magical, strange and beautiful.



Peter Sellars at the Felsenreitschule. Photo: SF/ Anne Zeuner

Is there a connection between *Idomeneo* and *La clemenza di Tito*?

Yes, our production actually follows on from our production of *La clemenza di Tito* here in Salzburg, and we begin with almost the same images. At the end of the Trojan War, the Trojans are losing and running for their lives and being captured as prisoners of war by the Greeks. So we'll use those same horrible little fences. The overture will be the same: of people running for their lives, being trapped and being put in a prisoner of war camps ... until finally Idamante decides: *Now I will break their bonds and give them consolation. [...] Loosen their fetters, and today the world, o faithful subjects of Sidon, shall see two glorious peoples united in the knot of friendship, bound together in perfect harmony.* And then they all sing together: *Let us enjoy peace, let Love triumph, now every heart will rejoice.* While *La clemenza di Tito* was his last opera, here we have the first *opera seria* by Mozart, written when he was 25: it's all there.

In *La clemenza di Tito* you cut recitatives and interwove the music with other pieces by Mozart – from his Mass in C minor and the *Masonic Funeral Music*. How are you and Teodor Currentzis going to deal with the recitatives in *Idomeneo*?

As many secco recitatives as possible will be cut, so that the music is orchestral from beginning to end. Which means that the usual quality of these Enlightenment operas – the fact that everybody explains what they're about to do before they do it – is gone. The audience has no idea why people are doing anything. So it becomes much more like a movie: you're plunged into the situation. It creates suspense.

One small piece of music from a work Mozart wrote six months before will be added, *Thamos King of Egypt*, a shocking chorus where the bass says: *Ye children of the dust, tremble and quake, e'er ye rise up against the god! We will insert that after the big ceremony that ends Act One, and that will take us directly into Act Two.*

Once again, you are staging a production at the Felsenreitschule – what makes this performance venue so special?

The Felsenreitschule is the only opera house in the world where the set we have imagined and planned can be built. And what's so great is it's not an opera house. The



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Felsenreitschule is something else. The way the stone testifies to something real is very beautiful. And so we can make this an opera about real things. When you talk about the voice of the ocean, the voice of the earth: this rock is right there. And I have to say that every George Tsy-pin set in the Felsenreitschule is something quite miraculous. George finds there's a voice of the rock that lets the rock speak really powerfully. All night long, things will be floating up, floating down across this entire surface, so as we shape the whole piece it's all in flow – which is what Mozart's music is.

Women play a special role in this opera. What space will you give them?

The two women are Electra and Ilia. The opera starts with Ilia, the refugee, the war refugee. You start with the person who lost everything, who has no home, who has nowhere to go – and of course that is going to be the person who saves everybody's lives at the end of the night. The other woman is Electra, who comes from killing her own mother, from watching her mother kill her father and watching her father kill her sister. How much trauma can one person live through? How can you not be touched by that?

Mozart shows you two traumatized women. He gives you two pictures of trauma, of what it means that a war doesn't just end. Mozart tries to write music that is about healing and helping people recover from nightmares that none of us can imagine. It is Idamante who finally says: *Let it suffice Greece to have seen her enemy vanquished. Prepare yourself, o princess, to see a deed more worthy of me, to behold the vanquished happy.* That is Mozart's big project.

Your artistic team includes the choreographer Ponifasio, whose work is renowned throughout the Pacific region. How did you hit upon the idea of this collaboration?

Lemi Ponifasio is Samoan and has created an astonishing body of choreography that comes from Pacific island ritual. His dancers are Samoan and Maori – and from Kiribati: the first island to disappear. With global warming and the rising of the ocean level each year, the people of Kiribati have now all moved to New Zealand, because they cannot survive. The ocean comes in now and puts salt in all of their fields. They can grow nothing. I have worked with Lemi Ponifasio in New Zealand with Kiribati artists, and I'm thrilled that he is coming here to Salzburg with two of his dancers. These people have made huge sacrifices. They understand how you engage with the ocean in dialogue, they understand that the ocean is ancestors. They know what it is to make an offering in dance and in music.

At the end of *Idomeneo*, Mozart also writes sumptuous ballet music. How does that fit into your concept?

The opera ends with twenty-one minutes of ballet music – and this is some of the most exciting music Mozart wrote in his entire life. It is so thrilling because – to the best of our knowledge – it didn't have to go through his father. The librettist who wrote the text for the opera, Giambattista Varesco, lived here in Salzburg, and Mozart was writing in Munich. He always had to write a letter to his father here in Salzburg, who had to go and talk to the librettist and then write back to Mozart. So everything in the whole opera had to go through Mozart's father – except the ballet music. And the music is so exhilarating, so wild, fast, alive with energy, young – everything the old generation could never do. And Mozart had this orchestra that could do anything, and took them to a place they had never been.



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Just imagine Teodor Currentzis conducting that with the Freiburg Orchestra! It will be sensational. And instead of having a ballet on stage, what we're going to do is get footage of the big, incredible project of cleaning up the island of plastic in the Pacific Ocean which started this year. I want the evening to end with these images of what can be done right now to clean the ocean.

I have taken all of this from Mozart's incredible Enlightenment idea that the world doesn't have to end in tragedy. If you can actually let young people who have ideas take over, then the world goes forward. There will be a future. And the future is amazing. And it's happening right now.

As you just mentioned, Teodor Currentzis will conduct again and the musicAeterna Choir from Perm also returns to the stage. How would you describe your collaboration?

I loved rehearsing with Teodor Currentzis and am looking forward to a new joint project! The incredible chorus from Perm will be back – and as you know from *Clemenza*, this chorus can do incredible things. This is Mozart's greatest choral opera, and what I can do with the Perm chorus is amazing. And we have the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, who are super alive and ready to jump into this.

The cast of singers also includes a familiar name...

Yes! We have Russell Thomas as Idomeneo. He was a convincing Titus in *La clemenza di Tito* and I am delighted to have him back in Salzburg. We have the beautiful Paula Murrin as Idamante – and they already know each other, because when we did *Titus* in Amsterdam, Paula stepped in as Sesto, so the two of them already have this incredible working relationship which we can build upon.

There is another special feature: I will have Neptune on stage, embodied by the Samoan singer Jonathan Lemalu, who in turn already knows the dancers. He will be on stage in Idomeneo's arias as well, so Idomeneo is not just standing in space, there's an actual negotiation with Neptune.



Russell Thomas is Idomeneo. Teodor Currentzis conducts Mozart. Paula Murrin is the son Idamante, who is supposed to be sacrificed. A generational conflict rages within a natural disaster. photos: Fay Fox, Olya Runyova, Barbara Aumüller



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Idomeneo

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Dramma per musica in three acts K. 366 (1781)

Libretto by Giambattista Varesco

Based on Antoine Danchet's libretto for the *tragédie en musique Idoménée* by André Campra

New production

Premiere: Saturday, 27 July

Additional performances: 2, 6, 9, 12, 15 and 19 August

Felsenreitschule

Teodor Currentzis Conductor

Peter Sellars Director

George Tsy-pin Stage Sets

Robby Duiveman Costumes

James F. Ingalls Lighting

Lemi Ponifasio Choreography

Antonio Cuenca Ruiz Dramaturge

Russell Thomas Idomeneo

Paula Murrihy Idamante

Ying Fang Ilia

Nicole Chevalier Elettra

Jonathan Lemalu Nettuno / La voce

Brittne Mahealani Fuimaono, Ioane Papalii Dancers

musicAeterna Choir of Perm Opera

Vitaly Polonsky Chorus Master

Freiburg Baroque Orchestra

Ouverture spirituelle · Lacrimae

***Lagime di San Pietro* – Los Angeles Master Chorale**

Orlando di Lasso

Lagime di San Pietro

Performances: Sat 20 July - Sun 21 July

Kollegienkirche

Los Angeles Master Chorale

Peter Sellars Director

James F. Ingalls Lighting

Danielle Domingue Sumi Costumes

Grant Gershon Conductor



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Peter Sellars bei den Salzburger Festspielen:

44x insgesamt bei den Festspielen
 13x Schauspiel
 29x Oper
 2x Konzert

1992	
Felsenreitschule	SAINT FRANÇOIS D'ASSISE Olivier Messiaen
4x	Neuinszenierung Koproduktion mit Los Angeles Philharmonic und der Opéra de la Bastille, Paris Dirigent: Esa-Pekka Salonen Regie: Peter Sellars Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra
1993	
Lehrbauhof, Stadtkino	THE PERSIANS Aischylos
13x	Neuinszenierung Koproduktion mit MC93/Bobigny, Paris, und SZENE Salzburg Regie: Peter Sellars Musik: Hamza El Din
1994	
Großes Festspielhaus	OEDIPUS REX Igor Strawinsky Szenisches Oratorium von Jean Cocteau nach Sophokles In einer Fassung von Peter Sellars Neuinszenierung PSALMENSYMPHONIE Igor Strawinsky
3x	Dirigent: Kent Nagano Regie: Peter Sellars Wiener Philharmoniker
1997	
Großes Festspielhaus	LE GRAND MACABRE György Ligeti
4x	Neuinszenierung Koproduktion mit dem Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris Dirigent: Esa-Pekka Salonen Regie: Peter Sellars Philharmonia Orchestra
Residenzhof 12. August	Zeitfluss 97 SILENCE John Cage RAGA PERFORMANCE Dagar Inszenierung und Rezitation: Peter Sellars



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Mozarteum, Großer Saal 16. August	Liederabend DAWN UPSHAW Werke von Hugo Wolf, Olivier Messiaen und Johann Sebastian Bach Sopran: Dawn Upshaw Klavier: Markus Hinterhäuser Regie: Peter Sellars Camerata Academica
1998	
Felsenreitschule	SAINT FRANÇOIS D'ASSISE Olivier Messiaen
6x	Neueinstudierung Dirigent: Kent Nagano Regie: Peter Sellars Hallé Orchestra Manchester
2000	
Felsenreitschule	L'AMOUR DE LOIN Kaija Saariaho
5x	Uraufführung Gemeinsames Auftragswerk und Koproduktion mit dem Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, und The Santa Fe Opera Dirigent: Kent Nagano Regie: Peter Sellars SWR Symphonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg IRCAM, Paris
2017	
Felsenreitschule	LA CLEMENZA DI TITO Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
7x	Koproduktion mit De Nationale Opera, Amsterdam, und der Deutschen Oper Berlin Dirigent: Teodor Currentzis Regie: Peter Sellars musicAeterna