CHAPTER I

# *Introduction*

## SCANDAL AS A NON-EVENT?

The most sensational theatrical scandal of the year 2006, in Germany and internationally, turned out to be a non-event. On September 26, the General Manager of the Deutsche Oper Berlin announced that, as a precaution against possible Islamic protests, she had cancelled the scheduled performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo*.[1] Kirsten Harms explained that she had been alerted by the Berlin office of criminal investigations (Landeskriminalamt) regarding a phone call from a concerned opera-subscriber, who wondered if the programmed production of the opera, which had been performed without incident in 2003, would under current political conditions cause disturbances by Muslim extremists. Following a police assessment of the situation, the Manager was notified by Berlin Senator Ehrhart Körting, Berlin's chief security official, that his office feared a "security risk of incalculable dimensions" ("Sicherheitsrisiko von unkalkulierbarem Ausmaß") if the performance should be mounted. In view of the months of tension in Europe following the publication in September 2005 in a Danish newspaper of cartoons depicting Muhammad,[2] a bombing attempt by young Islamic terrorists on a German train, and the reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's September speech at the University of Regensburg, which cited a quotation that infuriated many Muslims, Ms. Harms cancelled the performance.

Mozart and Muslims? The opera was commissioned in 1780 for the Residenztheater in Munich by Prince Karl Theodor, Elector of the Palatinate, who specified the subject: the legend of the Homeric hero Idomeneus. According to ancient sources—notably Servius's fifth-century commentary on *Aeneid* 3.121[3]—Idomeneus, the King of Crete and a hero of the Trojan War, was caught with his fleet of eighty ships in a great storm on the voyage back to his home-island.[4] In his appeal to Poseidon, the God of the Seas, Idomeneus vowed—alluding implicitly to a common

cultural theme also evident, for instance, in the story of Jephthah (Judges 11–12)—to sacrifice the first living creature he should encounter upon reaching Crete. This turned out to be his son, who had come down to the shore to welcome his returning father. When Idomeneus carried out his horrendous vow—or, according to another version, failed to do so, causing the land to be afflicted by a terrible plague—the King was driven into exile by the offended citizens of Crete (to the land of the Sallentines in Italian Calabria, where he established a new kingdom). Servius's account, repeated in such widely consulted eighteenth-century handbooks as Benjamin Hederich's *Gründliches Mythologisches Lexikon* (1724) and John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788), was first popularized by François de Fénelon in his political-pedagogical romance *Télémaque* (1699), in which the young hero, in the course of his travels, visits Crete and learns there of Idomenée's tragic fate (Book 5), which Fénelon recounts at leisurely length. Fénelon's version was dramatized by Prosper de Crébillon ("Crébillon *père*") in his tragedy *Idomenée* (1705), which complicated the plot with a love intrigue, having father and son fall in love with the same woman. The son, learning of his father's unfulfilled vow, sacrifices himself in the last scene in an act of suicide. A few years later, Antoine Danchet took Crébillon's version as the basis for the libretto he wrote for André Campra's *tragédie lyrique, Idomenée*, which had its premiere at the Paris Opéra in 1712 and was successfully revived, with minor changes, in 1731. Danchet entangled the traditional tale further by introducing Electra as Ilione's jealous rival for the affection of the King's son Idamante. Idomenée, torn between love and jealousy, decides to save his son and keep Ilione for himself by sending Idamante to escort Electra back to Argos. But another frightful storm prevents their trip, and the god Proteus threatens that a dreadful sea-monster will devastate Crete if Idomenée fails to keep his vow. Idamante slays the monster, brings peace to Crete, and Idomenée renounces both throne and Ilione in favor of his son. But in the last act, just as the young couple are celebrating their marriage, Nemesis appears to warn that the gods are still not appeased. Idomenée is struck with madness and in a seizure kills his son. When he recovers his sanity, his attempted suicide is prevented by the people: it is his punishment to go on living.

Mozart engaged Abbate Gianbattista Varesco, the court chaplain in his hometown of Salzburg, to prepare an Italian-language libretto based on Danchet/Campra's *Idomenée*. But the cleric softened the ending, giving it a Judeo-Christian twist by analogy with Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) and an entirely un-Homeric and non-tragic ending. Although he omits the jealousy motif and the figure of Electra,

he follows *Idomenée* up to the moment when a storm prevents the son's departure. At that point, Varesco departs dramatically from his French source. Idomeneo confesses his sin of omission to the High Priest, whereupon Idamante volunteers himself as a sacrifice. When Trojan princess Ilia offers to take his place, the gods proclaim through an oracle that they will forgive all if Idomeneo abdicates in favor of his son and if Ilia marries the new king. By omitting Danchet's tragic finale, Varesco succeeds in providing a happy ending to the originally, and traditionally, tragic episode. Composed in less than two months, Mozart's first major opera (K. 366) had its premiere on January 29, 1781, to the great satisfaction of the elector, who pronounced it "magnificent."[5]

The action, which takes place in Homeric Greece almost 2,000 years before Muhammad's time, obviously has nothing to do with Islam. The potentially offensive scene does not occur at all in Mozart's libretto but was added by the opera's director, Hans Neuenfels, who took a number of other liberties with the text. He cut the libretto extensively and added a group of zombie-like figures, Ilia's dead relatives, who follow the princess and, gesturing toward their war wounds, silently reproach her for falling in love with an enemy; the oracle announcing the gods' forgiveness is broadcast through a loudspeaker; two figures, in the illusion-shattering manner of Brecht, hold up a banner bearing the famous quotation from Sophocles' *Antigone*: "Wonders are many, and nothing more wonderful than man." At the end, as the final strains of Mozart's music die away, Neuenfels tacks on an epilogue that is anticipated or suggested by nothing in the text. Idomeneo comes back onstage alone, carrying a blood-soaked bag on his shoulder. Opening it with almost hysterical laughter, he takes out one by one the decapitated heads of Poseidon and three other founders of world religions—Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad—who were all hovering in the background during Act III. Displaying them in triumph, he places them on chairs, a man who has liberated himself at last from the cruel demands of the gods. Neuenfels called the scene his personal protest against organized religions.[6] As his lawyer explained, the severed heads were meant to make the point that "all the founders of religions were figures that didn't bring peace to the world."[7] (The irony is delicious because Varesco/Mozart, first among the various versions since antiquity, specifically added the implicitly Judeo-Christian dimension of forgiveness.)

Think what one may about directorial liberties and the merits of this particular production, the cancellation of the opera produced a flood of criticism in Europe and around the world. In Germany figures ranging from Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Interior Minister Wolfgang

Schäuble, to Mayor Klaus Wowereit of Berlin and Michael Naumann, the former German Minister of Culture and current publisher of the national newspaper *Die Zeit*, expressed their dismay. "If we're weighing security questions against artistic freedom," said Monika Griefahn, the cultural spokeswoman for the Social Democrat Party, "I have to ask myself if the fundamentalists haven't already won."[8] Editorial voices from New York to England and Italy protested the decision in similar terms.[9] The day following the announcement, Minister Schäuble, a prominent advocate of ethnic and religious harmony, sponsored a conference of German political personalities and leaders of the Muslim community in Germany, at which the conferees unanimously voiced their hope of seeing the opera rescheduled.[10] On October 1, the opera company hosted a panel discussion of the incident featuring prominent figures from politics and culture.[11]

As it happens, the opera was subsequently reinstated in the schedule. A month after his initial phone call, Senator Körting informed Ms. Harms by fax that the Landeskriminalamt, judging by the indifferent response in the Muslim world, found no further cause for alarm. (Aktham Suliman, the German correspondent for Al Jazeera television, explained that "Opera is a Western institution, which scarcely plays a role in the Arabic world."[12]) The director himself acknowledged that the only threats he had received, despite his avowed polemical intention in the added scene, were neither religious nor political but entirely aesthetic in nature.[13] In fact, the only act of protest appears to have been the loss, or theft, of the four decapitated heads, which disappeared from the props room and had to be fashioned anew.

The performance on December 18, attended by many political figures including Minister Schäuble, Mayor Wowereit, and the head of the Turkish community (though boycotted by the Muslim Council), took place under heightened security measures, with uniformed police officers along with television crews stationed outside in the broad Bismarck Strasse, while riot vans parked at the ready in the side streets. The whole affair presented a rather farcical and anticlimactic spectacle. Few opera-lovers bothered to attend; some 100 tickets remained unsold. The vast auditorium of the Deutsche Oper was largely filled by politicians and their bodyguards, by police in plainclothes, and by celebrities and journalists, all of whom had to enter through airport metal detectors and present their handbags for inspection. The critic for the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* (December 12) noted wryly that never before had the house been filled with so many people who were now attending an opera for the first time. If anything was scandalous, it was the performance itself, which was unanimously savaged

in the reviews. The taste of the production was questionable, the singing was weak, and the conductor succeeded in making Mozart's revolutionary music with its powerful orchestral storm and emotional arias, which shattered the traditional form of *opera seria*, lethargic and even boring.[14] (The police turned out in full force again for the second presentation of the opera on December 29, which was boycotted by a small group of silent Muslim protestors outside and also failed to sell some 400 tickets.)

## ART AS PROVOCATION?

Neuenfels protested the cancellation of his production, reasoning that "it's a question of defending our Western understanding of culture" ("*unseres abendländischen Kulturverständnisses*").[15] Neuenfels has reveled in and indeed furthered his career as a director through controversy. Simultaneously with *Idomeneo*, for instance, he staged a production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at Berlin's Komische Oper, featuring a Papageno sporting one hand and one predatory claw and a Papagena from whose womb dry sand flows during the famous love duet, and in which a troupe of actors carry on a cynical running commentary on Tamino's progress through fire and water to enlightenment. It should be stressed that it was not the display of decapitated heads per se that was offensive—think of the bloody heads that are routinely featured at the end of Richard Strauss's *Salome* or Hans Werner Henze's *Bassariden*—but the fact that they are the heads of venerated religious founders.

The so-called *Regietheater*, in which the director feels free, indeed obliged, to tamper with the production, whether Aeschylus or Shakespeare or Mozart, and to adapt it to his own political or other views, has dominated the German theater for several decades. Like Neuenfels, Frank Castorf, since 1992 Managing Director of Berlin's prizewinning Volksbühne, achieved his controversial acclaim with often outrageous productions of classical works, in which the actors appear naked and even drunk on stage, omit large chunks of the text, abuse the audience, and generally politicize their plays. This attitude had reached such a point by 1993 that the German Academy for Language and Literature sponsored an essay contest to consider whether "the director's theater is pursuing the execution of the classics" ("*Betreibt das Regie-theater die Hinrichtung der Klassiker?*").[16]

The attitude is by no means unknown in the USA. Almost simultaneously with the Berlin scandal (on October 10, 2006), the American entertainer Barbra Streisand, a self-proclaimed professional liberal, took advantage of her captive audience of 20,000 in New York's Madison

Square Garden to lampoon the then administration in an onstage skit involving what was supposed to be a comic duet with an impersonator of President Bush. When one concertgoer yelled out an objection, the aging diva replied with an obscenity, outraging many members of the audience. Later Streisand apologized for her outburst but sought to justify the parodic sketch by stating that "The artist's role is to disturb."[17] This phrase—actually cribbed from the painter Georges Braque, who famously stated in his illustrated *cahiers* that "it is the function of art to disturb" ("*L'Art est fait pour troubler, la Science rassure*")[18]—is common among present-day performers in the various media. Ulrich Khuon, Managing Director of Hamburg's Thalia Theater, which in the fall of 2006 produced a play depicting Osama Bin Laden as a comical drunken marionette, participated in the October podium discussion at the Deutsche Oper and used virtually the same words, insisting that art, by its very nature, "must disturb."[19] It should be stressed that this view goes well beyond Diaghilev's oft-quoted advice to the young Jean Cocteau—"Surprise me" ("Etonne-moi")—or what Susan Sontag in a well-known essay calls art's "capacity to make us nervous" or to "induce contemplation, a dynamic contemplation."[20]

Such opinions have been expressed so frequently and so routinely in recent decades by practitioners of every medium that they have become almost wearyingly commonplace—and unthinkingly accepted.[21] Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein told an interviewer that "the problem for a hopeful scene-making artist in the early sixties was how best to be disagreeable. What he needed was to find a body of subject matter sufficiently odious to offend even lovers of art."[22] Robert Rauschenberg coined the familiar phrase that justified the provocations of Pop Art: "If the painting doesn't upset you, it probably wasn't a good painting to begin with." The abstract sculptor George Sugarman, who aroused bitter opposition from federal judges with his design for the courthouse in Baltimore, Maryland, wondered: "Isn't controversy part of what modern art is all about?"[23] The performance artist Karen Finley, who gained notoriety by smearing her nude body with chocolate syrup while screaming her political opinions at the audience, claims that art depends upon "its shock value."[24] Products of this conviction have been labeled "disturbatory art [ . . . ] objects intended to bruise sensibilities, to offend good taste, to jeer and sneer and trash the consciousness of viewers."[25] The view received academic validation when the Curtin University of Technology in Australia proclaimed November 11, 2006 a "Humanities Day of Provocation," including an exhibition at which five artists "embraced the ethos of the day" in their displays.[26] We have come a long way from the Romantic conception of the museum as a

"temple of art."[27] The fact that such "art" has lost its ability any longer to shock anyone has struck some observers as a symptom of the "brutalization" of what in Germany is sometimes called our contemporary "nonsense society" ("Blödsinn-Gesellschaft"), which complacently accepts any idiocy, any perversion, any vulgarity that invades our television screens.[28] This almost indifferent acceptance, in turn, drives performers intent on celebrity to more and more radical extremes.

But is provocation truly the function of art?[29] Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) famously defined beauty as "a form of purposefulness [ . . . ] without the idea of a purpose" (Book 1, §17].) In fact, the notion is a relatively recent development in the history of aesthetics and essentially a product of the nineteenth century. For at least two millennia it was held to be the "function" of art, insofar as it can be said to have one, to please its public. Horace in his *Ars poetica* coined the phrase that long defined the poles of the discussion. "Poets," he opined, "wish either to benefit or to amuse or to speak words that are at once both pleasing and appropriate to life" ("*aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae*") (vv. 333–334). He summed up his aesthetic creed in the oft-quoted phrase: "He who has blended the useful with the pleasant will carry off every vote, at once delighting and teaching the reader" (*omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, / lectorem delectando pariter et monendo*") (vv. 343–344).

For centuries, writers and artists sought to achieve the Horatian synthesis: to create a beauty at once instructive (*utile*) and lovely (*dulce*), as in Greek drama and Roman epic, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in Gothic architecture, in the hundreds of Renaissance paintings and sculptures with religious subjects that fill our museums today, or in the plays and novels of European Baroque classicism. In the mid-eighteenth century, the influential German critic Johann Christoph Gottsched opened his manual of poetics (*Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 1730) with a translation of Horace's still authoritative *Ars poetica*. Even at the end of that period of idealism Hegel could still maintain in the introduction to his *Lectures on Aesthetics* that art "fulfills its loftiest responsibility when it takes its place in a common union with religion and philosophy and becomes a means of bringing to consciousness and expressing the *divine*, the most profound interests of humankind, the most comprehensive truths of the spirit."[30]

But the nineteenth century, as René Wellek persuasively demonstrated, gradually "lost its grasp on the unity of content and form" and moved toward the opposed poles of didacticism or of "art for art's sake."[31] The Young Hegelians and leftist Marxists, among others, advanced the view

that art's essential purpose was propagandistic, provoking Edgar Allan Poe in *The Poetic Principle* (1850) to rail in reaction against "the heresy of 'The Didactic,'" which in his opinion had corrupted poetic literature.[32] At the end of the nineteenth century these opposing views were exemplified in a sublimated form by the pure poetry of Mallarmé and his followers, on the one hand, and the message-novels of Zola on the other[33]—a polarization that we will see illustrated in Chapter 3 in the plays of Alfred Jarry and Gerhart Hauptmann. The situation exemplifies perfectly what Thomas Mann, in his *Doktor Faustus*, diagnosed as "the contrast between aesthetics and morality, which to a great extent dominated the cultural dialectic of that epoch."[34]

While many of the great modern classics again achieved a synthesis of form and content in the works of T. S. Eliot, Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, and others, the opposing poles continued to be represented by, say, the so-called "tractor novels," patriotic ballads, and propagandistically representational paintings of fascism in Italy and Nazi Germany as well as socialist realism in Russia and Communist East Germany and, at the other extreme, by the nonsense of Dada, concrete poetry, or the most radical works of abstract expressionism. The artist Ad Reinhardt, despite his leftist-activist ideas, sought to expunge all ideas, emotions, and values "so that his art would have no subject matter and no social or practical value."[35]

The contemporary notion that art, while demanding absolute freedom, has as its principal function to provoke the public, amounts paradoxically to an uneasy and unsynthesized pairing of the two poles. The directors and performers want to impose their religious or political views didactically on their paying audiences. At the same time, they claim an absolute freedom to do so, with none of the controlling restraints of reason or good taste. Ironically, the result is often enough a conspiracy of understanding between the directors and their audiences, which mitigates against any challenging scandal since scandal always arises from a conflict of views.

## FREEDOM OF ART?

The controversy surrounding Neuenfels's (*not* Mozart's!) *Idomeneo* raises an interesting question. The immediate discussion revolved almost exclusively around the issue of freedom of art. Although many critics felt that Neuenfels's production was aesthetically indefensible—the reviewer for the national weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* (September 30, 2006) called it "idiotic" and "nonsense" (*Quatsch*)—with one voice they defended the

right, indeed the responsibility, of the opera company to proceed with the production in the face of threats: to defend the freedom of art. To be precise, however, the freedom being defended is not of art but of expression, a principle implicit in the First Amendment of the American Constitution and explicit in Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the German *Grundgesetz:* "Art and science, research and teaching, are free."

Historically, the freedom of art has involved its form, not its content. Mozart's *Idomeneo* employs a traditional content and, indeed, one specified by his patron; its revolutionary nature resides wholly in the boldness of the composer's radical transformation of *opera seria* and the librettist's accommodation of the ending to the prevailing Christian ethos. By analogy, Greek tragedy was based in almost every case on traditional mythic themes; its advances involved the gradual addition to the number of actors, the ensuing inversion of importance between choral odes and action, and the emerging centrality of individual psychology versus mythic universality. In fact, it might well be argued that art has never been free in the sense implied by many contemporary statements, always subject as it is to the prevailing social circumstances, whether tribal, imperial, civic, religious, courtly, national, conservative, or liberal. This reality is recognized by the contemporary German composer Siegfried Matthus, who wrote in a piece entitled "Art Has Never been Free" that the mistaken belief stems from a false conception of art, pointing out that it "is always bound to the social circumstances of its immediate present."[36] As Samuel Johnson quipped in a 1747 prologue, "The Stage but echoes back the publick Voice."[37]

A glance at the Old Testament and other ancient religious texts reminds us that literature is closely tied in its origins to religion and social ethics. Think of the Psalms or the Song of Solomon. Ancient Greek drama grew out of ecstatic rituals celebrating the god Dionysus, and theatrical performances in Hellas long retained a pronounced sense of communal celebration—what Thomas Mann called art's "collectivism, its social affect" ("soziale Ergriffenheit")[38]—that still underlay the medieval Christian mystery plays. Virgil's *Aeneid* was composed to commemorate, in all its ambivalence, the founding of Rome and the continuity of its ruling family, from the Trojans down to Augustus. Six of Horace's finest poems are the so-called Roman Odes, which deal with the moral condition of his society. Medieval European literature, architecture, painting, and sculpture are unimaginable without the authority of the Catholic Church and its subject matter (the Bible and Christian legends). Music itself was subordinated to words and the needs of the Church until, in the seventeenth century, the radically new form of the sonata began to emerge—that is,

a "pure" music of sound produced for its own sake. It was only around the mid-eighteenth century that art and religion were "functionally differentiated" into independent social partial-systems.[39] It is no accident that the term "aesthetics" to designate the philosophy of art as thus newly conceived was coined in the mid-eighteenth century (by A. G. Baumgarten in his *Aesthetica* of 1750–1758).

From the Renaissance to the late eighteenth century, poets and artists had to satisfy their patrons. During centuries of princely and churchly control, essentially three issues determined the suitability of any stage performance: the interests of the ruling houses; the question of blasphemy; and the text's suitability for viewing by subordinates.[40] Musicians and poets were virtually domestic employees. Claudio Monteverdi composed the first European operas as a servant of the Duke of Mantua, while Torquato Tasso was sequestered by the Duke of Ferrara in punishment for insubordination. Think not just of Mozart's commission for *Idomeneo* but also of Bach in the employ of the Dukes of Sachsen-Weimar and later the City Council of Leipzig; of Handel, who depended on the largesse of the English nobility to subsidize his work; or of Haydn, who for thirty years composed many of his finest works as court musician at the "Hungarian Versailles" of Prince Esterházy. Not until the late eighteenth century did Benjamin West and John Henry Fuseli seek to assert their financial independence as artists by charging admission to see their paintings.[41] As a modern critic has observed, "paintings and sculpture do not become 'art' until they are exhibited in public places. This concept was epoch-making. It changed the past of the arts as well as their future."[42]

It was only in the nineteenth century, when religious and noble patrons gave way first to secular ones and then to paying audiences; when the first public museums were opened in Paris, London, and Berlin; when exhibitions and salons made art available to interested private customers; when notes on art were regularly featured in newspapers and magazines; and when music was liberated from the constraints of church and court, that artists became "free" to do what they wished—as long as their art satisfied their new constituency, the general public, and later, according to the composer Hans Werner Henze, "the masses, the only public that counts."[43] As Walter Panofsky wittily remarked, the concept of *lèse-majesté* no longer existed because "the majesty was now called 'the people.'"[44] Michael Kammen has demonstrated in striking detail how the recent phenomenon of blockbuster shows in museums and galleries resulted from the desire—more, the urgent need!—to attract larger audiences whose steadily increasing fees replace the earlier support of wealthy patrons and donors.[45] The