

The Magic Flute

By Kathleen E. Watt

In 1791 Vienna, the Enlightenment was in full bloom, and at 35, Court Kapellmeister Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a lusty participant. By the end of that year, which for the young composer began in a whirl of breathtaking creativity, Mozart would be dead. But during that year, Mozart produced some of his most beautiful and powerful works, perhaps more by Fate than by coincidence. Even the most skeptical of scholars speculate that some prescience of his own death must have pressed Mozart to finish.

Despite years spent in and around the royal courts of Europe, the irrepressible Mozart never succeeded in securing a lucrative permanent post from that aristocratic peerage upon whose patronage any eighteenth-century musician depended. Moreover, the liberal Emperor Joseph II, one of his most faithful patrons, was succeeded in 1790 by the penurious Leopold II, who paid Mozart a pittance in the largely ceremonial post of Court Kapellmeister, oblivious to his musical gifts. Thus it was, that by spring of 1791, his commissions dwindling and ever deeper in debt, with a chronically ailing wife and small children to support, Mozart badly needed some good fortune.

It arrived in the form of Mozart's friend and fellow Freemason, the Viennese actor-singer-writer-impresario-scalawag Emmanuel Schikaneder, who asked him to collaborate on a *Singspiel*, or popular German opera. Schikaneder had cobbled a fantastical libretto for *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*) from age-old fairy tales and newly excavated "Egyptian mysteries," which incorporated everything audiences loved—good versus evil, noble lovers, burlesque characters, exotic settings. Slated to be presented in Vienna's suburban Volkstheater an der Wieden, this commission could be a definitive stroke for vernacular German opera (one of Mozart's favorite causes), as well as promising box office cash. Mozart recognized his opportunity.

But it was an opportunity fraught with challenges. What about the capricious plot reversals? Is the Queen of the Night the distressed mother of Act I, seeking a hero to

save her imprisoned daughter? Or is she the vengeful sorceress of Act II? Is Sarastro a merciless abductor of innocent virgins, or the benevolent High Priest of Isis and Osiris? Only the maliciously consistent Monostatos actually is what he appears to be—but at whose bidding? The Moon's or the Sun's? And those incessant comings and goings of supernatural trios bearing magical instruments—are they divine or diabolical? Add to these shenanigans a flying machine and the many thunderclaps and lightning bolts of Schikaneder's extravagant stage directions, and a lesser composer might well have produced little more than a trifle of grotesque proportions.

More challenging still is the Masonic symbolism scattered liberally throughout the opera. Freemasonry and its symbols originated among medieval guilds of stonecutters and wall builders as a code of moral principles to live by, in a world where treachery ruled the courts of kings and bishops as surely as bandits ruled the highways. Its tenets were disguised in a cabala of numbers and glyphs of mason's tools, expressing ideas that in plainer speech might well inflame a volatile aristocracy.

So also did this symbolic language serve Mozart and Schikaneder, for much the same reason. Their references to walls and foundations, for example, carry deliberate subtext. Trials of forbearance, fire and water, earth and air—all are in the Masonic seeker's path to mature selfhood. Masonic numerology assigns to the number three the quality of spiritual manhood, and so *The Magic Flute* employs the number three in dozens of ways. Three Ladies appear in Act I with three silver weapons to slay the serpent in three deft whacks. Three Spirits deliver magic bells to Papageno, with which he saves himself—thrice. Six lions (twice three) draw Sarastro's chariot. "Der dreimalige Akkord" (the thrice-repeated chord) majestically begins the Overture, in Mozart's "Masonic key"—E-flat major, whose signature is three flats.

But why did Mozart weight a popular comedy with this heavy baggage? It is telling that, in both the Old World and the New, many giants of the Enlightenment (and of the seismic upheavals that followed it)—Voltaire, Goethe and Haydn, Washington, Franklin and Jefferson—were Freemasons. In the eighteenth century, the idea of inalienable human rights was new to the world. But it was the essence of Freemasonry, and Mozart meant to convey it.

For all these layers of meaning, it's Mozart's music that ultimately delivers the magic. Within the tight architecture of Classical forms, Mozart achieves musical expression so specific that even without text we know the condition of his characters. "The orchestra must live the same imaginary life as the singer," wrote Mozart. Hear the orchestra trying to catch its breath under Tamino's tender rhapsody, "Dies Bildnis". How could we not know that this prince is idealistic, ardent—young? When Mozart chooses G minor, his "tragic key," for both suicide ruminations in Act II—Pamina's limpid, aching "Ach, ich fuhl's" and Papageno's feint, "Gute nacht, du falsche Welt"—their anguish falls upon our ears. When he deploys pyrotechnical coloratura in "Die Hölle Rache," it has a purpose—this Queen is unmistakably enraged. And when the Two Armored Men sing of achieving freedom by overcoming fear of death, their open octaves are underscored by a Baroque chorale tune as orchestral counterpoint, expressing unspoken volumes. What a window this is upon the heart of Mozart, who wrote serenely and knowingly to his frequent collaborator, librettist Lorenzo DaPonte, late in 1791: "I have nothing more to fear...No one can measure one's own days; one must resign oneself; it will be as providence wills."

To be sure, *The Magic Flute* was a hit from its very first performance, on September 30, 1791. But it was so much more. Entertaining as it always is, the opera's deeper theme concerns the soul's progress through experience to spiritual maturity. By 1791, Mozart knew that in life, things almost never end as they begin, that almost nothing is in maturity what it was in the blush of youth. Illusion is displaced by disillusion, and then replaced with wisdom. The Sun gives way to the Moon before the day breaks anew. The arc of a lifetime, as Mozart knew unusually well, often embraces a parade of fantastic characters, exchanging roles against a dreamscape of bizarre reversals. Something like the plot of *The Magic Flute*.

The Magic Flute's lessons are many, but none is more central than this—that along a spiritual path, enlightenment visits as if by magic. One has only to listen for the music—as we cannot help but do, for the sheer pleasure of it, in this sublimely transcendent last opera of Mozart.