

## Mozart's Greatest Hit: *Die Zauberflöte*

People love magic. Just put the word “magic” in the title and you grab attention. So it was with the opera called *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*), Mozart's most frequently performed stage work, of which we present excerpts today. The flute plays a pretty small role in the plot of the opera, but the original authors knew the power of the word.

That this work still attracts audiences today is not because of the word in the title. It is rather because of the artistic magic of Mozart's music. But to appreciate that it helps to have an understanding of how the work came into being, and of the story Mozart set to music.

### The work

It might be said that *Die Zauberflöte* is not an opera at all, more akin to *Oklahoma!* than to *Die Meistersinger*. Its story is carried by spoken dialog, with arias, songs and ensemble numbers inserted here and there. The German for this style is *Singspiel* (singing play); we call it a musical show. But, then as now, the success of any such offering depends on the quality of the music. That is certainly true of *Die Zauberflöte*.

In the early 1790s Vienna had numerous venues for stage productions. For the nobility there was the *Burghtheater* near the imperial palace; for productions appealing to the educated bourgeoisie, there was the *Kärntnertor Theater* just inside the city walls (where Hotel Sacher stands today). For the general public there were theaters in the suburbs, outside the walls.

Emanuel Schikaneder performed in and produced plays and operas in many places, including Salzburg where he befriended the Mozart family. In 1789 his estranged wife invited him to create a theatrical troupe in a large suburban building she had inherited, called *Theater auf der Wieden*. Schikaneder assembled an orchestra of about 35 and a set of players with a diverse range of acting and singing talents. He produced operas and *Singspiele* in German, including Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, usually casting himself in a leading comic role. Several in the company had connections to Mozart: the tenor Benedikt Schack was a close friend; the soprano Josefa Hofer was Mozart's sister-in-law; the bass Franz Gerl was a Salzburg native; his wife was a soprano in the company. Besides their connection through music, Schikaneder and Mozart were both Freemasons.

Appealing to the contemporary taste for fantasy stories, Schikaneder produced a work about the fairy king Oberon. Another fairy tale was the basis for an opera with music written by a committee of



Statue over the *Papageno Door* at *Theater an der Wien*, founded by Schikaneder in 1801 and still an important opera house

composers including Mozart. The theater was well equipped to entertain the audiences with special effects, using trapdoors, a thunder sheet, various lighting devices and some pyrotechnics..

In the spring of 1791 Mozart agreed to set to music a new fantasy story, jointly written by Schikaneder and another member of the company. As usual, Mozart was short of money, so the prospect of writing for a company that attracted enthusiastic audiences was persuasive, although he had already started work on the *Requiem*. In August he had to interrupt everything to rush through the composition of his final opera, *La Clemenza di Tito*, for an imperial coronation in Prague. This pushed the premiere of *Die Zauberflöte* back to 30 September, a little more than two months before Mozart's death.

Mozart conducted the first few performances himself, and attended them regularly until he fell ill. His music was tailored to the performers at hand. For Frau Hofer, who had an agile voice and high range, he gave the Queen of the Night arias reaching the F above high C. For Herr Gerl, he gave Sarastro a piece ending on F four octaves lower. Frau Gerl was given Pamina's heart-rending aria of rejection. The choice of the flute as the title instrument may have been prompted by the fact that Herr Schack was an accomplished player, perhaps the last Tamino who actually played the notes usually heard from backstage. The comic role of Papageno was taken, of course, by Schikaneder, a skilled actor with limited vocal capacity.

The work was a great success with audiences, partly because they loved the special effects and the antics of Papageno. Critics were kind to the music but savaged the libretto. Unfortunately the production's substantial profit accrued only after Mozart's death.

## The story

What is the fantasy about? Symbolically, the struggle between two factions, represented by night and day, in which light prevails over darkness. Musical pundits have speculated for over two centuries about what the light and darkness "really" represented in the minds of the authors. For now what matters is that darkness is personified onstage by the Queen of the Night, and light by Sarastro and his *Eingeweihten* (Initiates) who constitute the male chorus.

The background to the story is not revealed until the second act, only in a bit of dialog that is often shortened or even cut in performance. Before singing her big aria, the Queen explains to her daughter Pamina about her dead husband's will, dividing his powers. She was given his special possessions (including the flute) to help her and her daughter, but his real power, signified by the *Siebenfachen Sonnenkreis* (seven-fold circle of the sun), was passed to Sarastro—"because he will wield it like a man, as I did." Telling her not to ask why, "since the feminine spirit cannot understand these things," he directed her and her daughter "to let wise men lead them." Furious that she was denied the *Sonnenkreis*, the Queen rejected these admonishments and took on the power of the night against Sarastro. In response, Sarastro abducted Pamina, to keep her from her mother's influence. All this happened before the curtain rises.

The action begins with Tamino, a traveling prince, fleeing a serpent. He faints, but is killed and cut into three parts by the Three Ladies, agents of the Queen. (The number three, important in Freemasonry, occurs often, starting with the three chords that open the overture.) Waking, Tamino meets Papageno, the Queen's bird-catcher, who introduces himself in *Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja*

(The bird-catcher am I indeed), a song in simple folk style. He represents Everyman, content in his work, longing for a girl to be his, and prone to let his mouth get him in trouble—it is soon sealed with a padlock by the Ladies for telling Tamino that he killed the serpent.

The Ladies show Tamino a portrait of Pamina, urging him to rescue her from Sarastro. Enraptured, he sings an aria in Mozart's mature style, *Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön* (This portrait is enchantingly beautiful), and agrees to the task. The Queen appears amid thunder and other special effects. In her dramatic scena, *O zitt're nicht* (Oh tremble not), she promises Tamino Pamina's hand if he succeeds—and then she quickly vanishes.

In a wonderful quintet starting with Papageno's mouth sealed, *Hm! Hm! Hm! Hm!*, the Ladies take off the lock, give Tamino the flute and send him on his journey—accompanied by Papageno, to whom they give a magic glockenspiel. They are told that if they need guidance they will be helped by the Three Boys. This trio—in Vienna always sung by members of the Vienna Choir Boys—seem to be independent spirits. The quintet ends quietly with *Auf Wiedersehen!*

Papageno finds Pamina and scares away her keeper, the Moor Monastatos—who, being both black and Muslim, is shunned by all parties. Papageno reveals that a prince is coming to her rescue. They sing a folk style duet about love and marriage, *Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen* (Men who feel love), then run off.

Meanwhile, the Boys have left Tamino at the three doors to the quasi-Egyptian temple (more Freemasonry) of Sarastro. A priest greets him at the middle door. When Tamino says he has come to rescue Pamina from an evil tyrant, the priest asks where he got that idea. "From an unhappy woman, bowed down by her grief." The priest's response: "So a woman has thus deceived you? A woman does little, chatters much. Do you, young man, believe such tongue-play?"

Pamina is recaptured along with Papageno. When she tells Sarastro she longs for her mother, he replies that her mother is a too proud woman, that a man must lead her heart, because "without a man to care for her a woman steps outside her circle of competence." When Tamino is brought in the young people immediately fall in love. Sarastro orders that the two men be purified. Tamino submits and they enter the temple. End of act one.

There we have it. A man with a pure heart can lead a woman to wisdom and light; if she asserts her independence she will fall into confusion and darkness.. Tamino realizes—too quickly for integrity of the plot, as critics have noted—that it is his duty thus to lead Pamina.



Lucia Popp as Queen of the Night

As Mozart's music kept the opera popular despite the defects of the book, pundits looked for a deeper and less overtly sexist meaning for the text. They invented various allegorical references: Sarastro (Italian for Zarathustra, a favorite seer of German intellectuals) represents the Enlightenment, the Queen is Dogmatic Reaction—or perhaps she is the Empress Maria Theresa, who had to fight wars to keep her throne because she was female, but who also tried hard to suppress the Freemasons. And so on. But Schikaneder was no philosopher; he just wanted a production that would sell. His audience in the *Theater auf der Wieden*, largely sharing the biases of the text, needed no deeper meanings.

The second act works these ideas out to a happy conclusion for everyone except the Queen and her adherents. At the beginning Sarastro sings a solemn aria, *O Isis und Osiris*, invoking the Egyptian sister-brother gods (Freemason symbolism again) to grant the young pair wisdom and lead them to the light. This piece ends on the low F. (In a later aria he asserts that in his temple all strife is subdued by love and friendship. Perhaps so, if you are one of the *Eingeweihten*.)

Monastatos, lusting after Pamina, finds her sleeping and sings his rapid aria, *Alles fühlt der Liebe Freuden* (Everyone feels the joys of love), about how even a black man has such desires. As he approaches to kiss her, the Queen bursts in once more. Learning from Pamina that Tamino has betrayed her, she gives her a dagger to kill Sarastro. In her famous aria *Der Hölle Rache* (The vengeance of Hell) she insists that Pamina carry out her order. It is superb melodrama: the arpeggios reach the high F several times; finishing on an unresolved dominant chord, she vanishes quickly as the orchestra plays the resolution.

Receiving instructions for the purifying trials, Tamino is told “Beware the treachery of women; that is our Order's first command.” (One can perhaps understand Maria Theresa's zeal.) As the first of the trials Tamino is forbidden to speak. When Pamina enters she thinks she is being rejected, singing an aria in Mozart's best tragic style, *Ach, ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden* (Oh, I feel it, it has vanished). In despair, she plans to kill herself with the dagger, but it is snatched from her by the Boys. After he passes the trial of silence, Tamino is restored to her, and they go together through the



Sarastro and the *Eingeweihten* praise Isis and Osiris



Tamino and Pamina

trials by fire and water. During these he plays the flute to ensure their safe passage—or, in many productions, holds it in front of him while it plays itself.

Through all this turmoil Papageno comes and goes. He is offered a beautiful young wife if he passes the trials; he says he'll remain single. But he doesn't mean it: in *Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen* (A girl or a little wife), a folk style song with accompaniment by his glockenspiel, he expresses his desire for a mate. He is spared the trials, but the woman he is given is an old wretch—although she claims to be 18. After some back and forth, he plans to hang himself for lack of love. The Boys advise him to play his glockenspiel instead. When he does, a beautiful girl appears, dressed just like him. It is the old woman, changed into Papagena. They sing a delightful duet of recognition, plan their life together, and run off, a happy pair untroubled by the weighty affairs of their betters. (Years later, Schikaneder said he had devised the stuttering opening of the duet during the rehearsals; Mozart immediately appreciated it and wrote new music for it.)

The Queen and her band (now including Monastatos) make one last attempt to overthrow Sarastro, but are beaten and banished to eternal darkness—within only a few bars of music, a final insult.

This leaves only a splendid final chorus, praising Isis and Osiris once more and hailing the happy pair. Darkness has yielded to light in the union of Pamina and Tamino. Curtain.



Papagena and Papageno

### More about the music

The vocal numbers we perform have been mentioned. Their styles were chosen by Mozart to suit the characters, and to play to the strengths of the original cast. There are other duets and ensembles, of typical Mozartean excellence. In the orchestral interludes Mozart displays mastery of a wide variety of styles: a Bach-like chorale, a solemn and archaic march for the priests, and so forth. Then there is the overture.

After three solemn chords the overture moves from a smooth slow introduction into a rapid allegro. The main thematic figure, presented in fugato, consists of six repeated 8ths plus a turn. (Rossini used a similar figure in the long crescendo in his overture to *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, about 25 years later.) At the end of the exposition the orchestra stops and the three solemn chords are played again in the winds. The allegro resumes with a brilliant contrapuntal development section, and the recapitulation sneaks in gently. All told, this overture is another of those small masterpieces that Mozart composed rapidly in the last few days before the dress rehearsals.