

Mozart's Magic

Die Zauberflote was written during the last year of Mozart's life, and its premiere took place just ten weeks before his death on December 5, 1791. In German, with spoken dialogue, it was called a *singspiel*, which generally meant a dramatic work with spoken dialogue and many popular songs, and, occasionally, more ambitious music. The Emperor Joseph II had tried to establish the genre at his court in Vienna, but his attempt failed, and the *singspiel* continued to be enjoyed as a popular entertainment in theaters outside aristocratic patronage, although the audience frequently consisted of all classes.

Situated in the suburbs of the city, such was the Freihaustheater auf der Weiden for which the opera was written by its impresario Emmanuel Schikaneder. Mozart had met Schikaneder in Salzburg; he was a one-man travelling theater, having filled the roles of playwright, composer, actor, singer, producer and manager in his long career. He later wrote that he and Mozart had worked together on the opera, and its superiority over his other efforts testifies to this. He and Mozart were both Freemasons. There is no doubt that the Temple Brotherhood in the opera represents the Order of Freemasonry, for the frontispiece of the original libretto was illustrated with Masonic symbols.

According to Edward Dent ([Mozart's Operas](#), Oxford U. Press, 1947) the early history of Freemasonry is obscure but it eventually evolved into a social and philosophical society, described by Sir Alfred Robbins in *English-Speaking Freemasonry* (London, 1930) as

...[A]n organized system of morality, derived from divine wisdom and age-long experience, which, for preservation from outside assault and inner decay, is veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.

The German definition defines a group of men who "work for the welfare of mankind, striving morally to ennoble themselves and others, and thereby to bring about a universal league of mankind, which they aspire to exhibit even now on a small scale."

The movement was absolutely in tune with the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment, and extremely popular both for its high ethical ideals and for the opportunity it provided for social climbers and careerists to mingle with the higher classes. It was opposed by the Catholic Church for its pagan symbolism and its acceptance of men of all faiths on an equal basis; it was persecuted by Joseph II's mother, Mary, a devout Catholic. Joseph, however, was not opposed, and the Masonic influence in Vienna was so strong that the papal bull against the order was not promulgated there.

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Although Mozart himself was a Catholic he had learned an extreme anti-clericalism from his father; on the other hand, he belonged to a lodge at which there was a strong Catholic influence and he was spared a conflict.

One lesson of *The Magic Flute* might be “Don’t judge things by their first appearances.” The story begins with Prince Tamino on a chivalric quest to slay the serpent, and ends with a moral and philosophic quest for knowledge and wisdom. The Queen of the Night is initially a distraught mother begging for the prince to rescue her abducted daughter, only to become the vengeful sorceress demanding that Pamina murder Sarastro. Pamina herself begins as a frightened child seeking guidance, and ends as the one to lead Tamino through the trials. (A definite departure from Freemasonry which was clear in its insistence that women were lesser beings; and thus Sarastro’s admonishment to Pamina that she must be guided by men.) The authoritarian Sarastro himself, who has failed to protect his charge from the evil intentions of his servant, Monostatos, must give up his own desire for Pamina, and cede moral leadership to the next generation. And this ending is entirely in keeping with Mozart’s belief in companionate marriage between two people who freely love and have chosen each other, celebrated in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

So many transformations led some commentators to believe that after Act I had been written, the story was changed while leaving the inconsistent first act intact. But another take is that these transformations are deliberate and are an allegory of the true nature of Freemasonry revealed against the slanders of its detractors. Of course, the more universal story, carried by these archetypal characters, is the age-old one of the successful attainment of love and wisdom through the trial of goodness and strength.

In any case, *Die Zauberflote* was very popular, no doubt because of its magic elements, exoticism, colorful characters, and the comic relief provided by the Queen’s ladies and Papageno, the Birdcatcher, which role was written by Shikaneder for himself. Much simple and tuneful music co-exists with the serious and dramatic, including some taken from music Mozart had written previously for Masonic ceremonies. The first time I heard this opera, I was put off by the chauvinism of Sarastro, and the fantastic nature of both plot and characters. At the end, however, I was deeply moved – which could only have been Mozart’s musical message working its magic.

- Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester