

THE MAGIC FLUTE

BACKGROUND

The Magic Flute (Die Zauberflöte), the last of Mozart's operas to be performed, is a popular entertainment for a commercial theater, a curious creation for a composer who worked mainly under royal patronage. The playwright was **Emmanuel Schikaneder**, the proprietor, chief actor, and clown of the **Theater an der Wieden** in Vienna. So it is not surprising that the opera should contain a fat comic role for Schikaneder himself, the bird-catcher **Papageno**, together with a bunch of gags, fantasy, transformation scenes, and other theatrical magic that were the staple of popular fare at the time.

But Mozart and Schikaneder had another link: they were both **Freemasons**, dedicated (at least in theory) to a life led according to high-minded humanistic values. The Freemasons were anti-clerical, blowing away what they saw as the mysteries and mumbo-jumbo of the Church in favor of the principles of light and reason. But in fact they had plenty of mysteries of their own. These are paralleled by the action of the last half of *The Magic Flute*, when the original scenario of hero-rescues-damsel-in-distress gets changed into one of both hero and heroine seeking initiation into an order higher than themselves.

The result is an opera with a huge gear-change in the middle, and not a few inconsistencies. At the start, for example, there is nothing to indicate that the **Queen of the Night** is anything but a grieving mother trying to get her daughter back from a cruel abductor. It is she who gives Tamino and Papageno the tools they will need on their quest (the magic flute and bells), and her Ladies who consign them to the protection of the Three Spirits who will serve as their guides. But once Tamino comes to believe that **Sarastro** (the high priest of the Masonic temple) is good and not evil, the Queen of the Night appears as creature of darkness, but the magic instruments and the Spirits now work as effectively against her as for her. It is not clear whether Mozart and Schikaneder changed their minds half-way through the composition, or whether these ambiguities were always their intention from the beginning.

In the synopsis that follows, passages in normal type will be played in one or other of the four videos I will use for comparison. *Passages in italics* complete the story, but will not be played.

ACT ONE

Chased by a serpent, **Prince Tamino** finds himself in an unknown land. He faints and is saved by the Queen of Night's **Three Ladies**, who squabble over who will get this handsome prize. When he revives, he is approached by the bird-catcher **Papageno**.

[The Ladies return to give Tamino a portrait of the Queen of the Night's daughter Pamina, who has been kidnapped by the evil Sarastro. Tamino is instantly smitten and] the **Queen of the Night** arrives to secure his promise that he will do everything in his power to rescue Pamina from Sarastro's stronghold. The Ladies give the Prince a magic flute and Papageno a set of magic chimes as protection on their quest. Additionally, **Three Boys**, acting as guardians and advisors, will lead the way.

[Sarastro's slave **Monostatos**—a kind of Caliban figure—pursues **Pamina** but is frightened away by Papageno, who tells Pamina that he and Tamino have come to rescue her. Meanwhile the three Boys have led Prince Tamino to Sarastro's Temple.] There, he meets a priest who explains to him that it is the Queen of Night who is evil, not Sarastro. [Tamino begins playing his flute. Pamina and Papageno hear it and hasten to find him, but are intercepted by Monostatos. Papageno's chimes come to their aid, allowing the bird-catcher and Pamina to escape, until Pamina recognizes that she owes Sarastro honesty. He tells her that he has taken her from her mother for her own protection. She and Pamina and Tamino see one another for the first time, and fall into a passionate embrace. Tamino agrees to undergo the tests for initiation into the Brotherhood, and is led away.]

ACT TWO

[Sarastro declares his vision of Tamino as a future leader of his people. But in order to prove himself worthy of the role, he must first undergo several rigorous trials. Papageno is induced to accompany him by the promise of a wife as his reward. The Queen of Night's Ladies arrive and try to seduce the two men, but they hold their nerve and pass their first ordeal.]

[Monostatos tries to kiss the sleeping Pamina, but is frustrated by the entrance of the Queen of the Night.] Set on revenge, she charges Pamina with the task of murdering Sarastro. Torn by her devotion to her mother and her love for Tamino, Pamina is at a loss. Sarastro enters, reassuring Pamina that he is not out for vengeance, but strives for understanding and forgiveness.

[The second ordeal is a vow of silence. Tamino passes the test, but Pamina believes herself betrayed when Tamino refuses to speak to her, and leaves in despair. Papageno, meanwhile, is at his wits' end. He encounters an old woman who, once he has sworn lifelong fidelity to her, reveals herself as a young girl named **Papagena**. But as he has disobeyed the vow of silence, she is driven away from him. Papageno's life now seems futile.]

[Beside herself with grief, Pamina contemplates suicide, but the three Boys intervene,] bringing her and Tamino together for the final trials. Protected by the magic flute, Tamino and Pamina successfully undergo ordeals by fire and water.

[The three Boys also manage to prevent Papageno from killing himself, and the bird-catcher is reunited with his Papagena for good. The Queen of Night and her Ladies, led by Monostatos, once again try to storm the Temple, but the intruders are surprised by Sarastro and cast out by the light of the rising sun.]