

THE MAGIC FLUTE

(German title: Die Zauberflöte)

An Opera by W A Mozart

Opera in two acts by Mozart; words by Emanuel Schikaneder and Gieseke. Produced, September 30, 1791, in Vienna, in the Theatre auf der Wieden; Paris, 1801, as "Les Mystères d'Isis"; London, King's Theatre, June 6, 1811 (Italian); Covent Garden, May 27, 1833 (German); Drury Lane, March 10, 1838 (English); New York, Park Theatre, April 17, 1833 (English). The role of Astrofiammante, Queen of the Night, has been sung here by Carlotta Patti, Ilma di Murska, Gerster, Sembrich, and Hempel.

CHARACTERS

SARASTRO, High Priest of Isis.....Bass

TAMINO, an Egyptian Prince.....Tenor

PAPAGENO, a bird-catcher.....Baritone

ASTROFIAMMANTE, Queen of the Night.....Soprano

PAMINA, her daughter.....Soprano

MONOSTATOS, a Moor, chief slave of the temple....Baritone

PAPAGENA.....Soprano

Three Ladies-in-Waiting to the Queen; Three Youths of the Temple; Priests, Priestesses, Slaves, etc.

Time: Egypt, about the reign of Rameses I.

Place: Near and at the Temple of Isis, Memphis.

The libretto to "The Magic Flute" is considered such a jumble of nonsense that it is as well to endeavour to extract some sense from it.

Emanuel Johann Schikaneder, who wrote it with the aid of a chorister named Gieseke, was a friend of Mozart and a member of the same Masonic Lodge. He also was the manager of a theatrical company and had persuaded Mozart to compose the music to a puppet show for him. He had selected for this show the story of "Lulu" by Liebeskind, which had appeared in a volume of Oriental tales brought out by Wieland under the title of "Dschinnistan." In the original tale a wicked sorcerer has stolen the daughter of the Queen of Night, who is restored by a Prince by means of magic. While Schikaneder was busy on his libretto, a fairy story by Perinet, music by Wenzel Müller, and treating of the same subject, was given at another Viennese theatre. Its great success interfered with Schikaneder's original plan.

At that time, however, freemasonry was a much discussed subject. It had been interdicted by Maria Theresa and armed forces were employed to break up the lodges. As a practical man Schikaneder saw his chance to exploit the interdicted rites on the stage. Out of the wicked sorcerer he made Sarastro, the sage priest of Isis. The ordeals of Tamino and Pamina became copies of the ceremonials of freemasonry. He also laid the scene of the opera in Egypt, where freemasonry believes its rites to have originated. In addition to all this Mozart's beautiful music ennobled the libretto even in its dull and unpoetical passages, and lent to the whole a touch of the mysterious and sacred. "The muse of Mozart lightly bears her century of existence," writes a French authority, of this score.

Because of its supposed relation to freemasonry, commentators have identified the vengeful Queen of the Night with Maria Theresa, and Tamino with the Emperor. Pamina, Papageno, and Papagena are set down as types of the people, and Monostatatos as the fugleman of monasticism.

Mozart wrote on "The Magic Flute" from March until July and on September 30, 1791, two months before his death, the first performance was given.

In the overture to "The Magic Flute" the heavy reiterated chords represent, it has been suggested, the knocking at the door of the lodge room, especially as they are heard again in the temple scene, when the novitiate of Tamino is about to begin. The brilliancy of the fugued allegro often has been commented on as well as the resemblance of its theme to that of Clementi's sonata in B-flat.

The story of "The Magic Flute" opens Act I, with Tamino endeavouring to escape from a huge snake. He trips in running and falls unconscious. Hearing his cries for help, three black-garbed Ladies-in-Waiting of the Queen of the Night appear and kill the snake with their spears. Quite unwillingly they leave the handsome youth, who, on recovering consciousness, see dancing towards him an odd-looking man entirely covered with feathers. It is Papageno, a bird-catcher. He tells the astonished Tamino that this is the realm of the Queen of the Night. Nor, seeing that the snake is dead, does he hesitate to boast that it was he who killed the monster. For this lie he is immediately punished. The three Ladies-in-waiting reappear and place a padlock on his mouth. Then they show Tamino the miniature of a maiden, whose magical beauty at once fills his heart with ardent love. Enter the Queen of the Night. She tells Tamino the portrait is that of her daughter, Pamina, who has been taken from her by a wicked sorcerer, Sarastro. She has chosen Tamino to deliver the maiden and as a reward he will receive her hand in marriage. The queen then disappears and the three Ladies-in-waiting come back. They take the padlock from Papageno's mouth, give him a set of chimes and Tamino a golden flute. By the aid of these magical instruments they will be able to escape the perils of their journey, on which they will be accompanied by three youths or genii.

Change of scene. A richly furnished apartment in Sarastro's palace is disclosed. A brutal Moor, Monastatos, is pursuing Pamina with unwelcome attentions. The appearance of Papageno puts him to flight. The bird-catcher recognizes Pamina as the daughter of the Queen of the Night, and assures her that she will soon be rescued. In the meantime the Three Youths guide Tamino to a grove where three temples stand. He is driven away from the doors of two, but at the third there appears a priest who informs him that Sarastro is no tyrant, no wicked sorcerer as the Queen had warned him, but a man of wisdom and of noble character.

The sound of Papageno's voice arouses Tamino from the meditations inspired by the words of the priest. He hastens forth and seeks to call his companion by playing on his flute. Papageno is not alone. He is trying to escape with Pamina, but is prevented by the appearance of Monostatos and some slaves, who endeavour to seize them. But Papageno sets the Moor and his slaves dancing by playing on his magic chimes.

Trumpet blasts announce the coming of Sarastro. Pamina falls at the feet of the High Priest and explains that she was trying to escape the unwelcome attentions of the Moor. The latter now drags Tamino in, but instead of the reward he expects, receives a sound flogging. By the command of Sarastro, Tamino and Pamina are brought into the Temple of Ordeals, where they must prove that they are worthy of the higher happiness.

Act II. In the Palm Grove. Sarastro informs the priests of the plans which he has laid. The gods have decided that Pamina shall become the wife of the noble youth Tamino. Tamino, however, must prove, by his own power, that he is worthy of admission to the Temple. Therefore Sarastro has taken under his protection Pamina, daughter of the Queen of the Night, to whom is due all darkness and superstition. But the couple must go through severe ordeals in order to be worthy of entering the Temple of Light, and thus of thwarting the sinister machinations of the Queen.

In the succeeding scenes we see these fabulous ordeals, which Tamino, with the assistance of his magic flute and his own purity of purpose, finally overcomes in company with Pamina. Darkness is banished and the young couple enter into the light of the Temple of the Sun. Papageno also fares well, for he receives Papageno for wife.

There is much nonsense and even buffoonery in "The Magic Flute"; and, in spite of real nobility in the role and music of Sarastro, Mr. Krehbiel's comment that the piece should be regarded as somewhat in the same category as a Christmas pantomime is by no means far-fetched. It lends itself to elaborate production, and spectacular performances of it have been given at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Its representation requires for the role of Astrofiammante, Queen of the Night, a soprano of extraordinarily high range and agility of voice, as each of the two great airs of this vengeful lady extends to high F and are so brilliant in style that one associates with them almost anything but the dire outpouring of threats their text is intended to convey. They were composed because Mozart's sister-in-law, Josepha Weber (Mme. Hofer) was in the cast of the first performance and her voice was such as has been described above. The Queen has an air in Act I and another in Act II. A quotation from the second, the so-called "Vengeance aria," will show the range and brilliancy of voice required of a singer in the role of Astrofiammante.

One is surprised to learn that this tour de force of brilliant vocalization is set to words beginning: "Vengeance of hell is boiling in my bosom"; for by no means does it boil with a vengeance.

Papageno in his dress of feathers is an amusing character. His first song, "A fowler bold in me you see," with interludes on his pipes, is jovial; and after his mouth has been padlocked his inarticulate and oft-repeated "Hm!" can always be made provocative of laughter. With Pamina he has a charming duet "The manly heart that love desires." The chimes with which he causes Monostatos and his slaves to dance willy-nilly, are delightful and so is his duet with Papageno, near the end of the opera. Tamino, with the magic flute, charms the wild beasts. They come forth from their lairs and lie at his feet. "Thy magic tones shall speak for me," is his principal air. The concerted number for Pamina and trio of female voices (the Three Youths or genii) is of exceeding grace. The two Men in Armour, who in one of the scenes of the ordeals guard the portal to a subterranean cavern and announce to Tamino the awards that await him, do so to the vocal strains of an old German sacred melody with much admired counter-point in the orchestra.

Next, however, in significance to the music for Astrofiammante, indeed, of far nobler character than the airs for the Queen of the Night, are the invocation of Isis by Sarastro, "O, Isis and Osiris," with its interluding chant of the priests, and his air, "Within this hallowed dwelling." Not only the solemnity of the vocal score but the beauty of the orchestral accompaniment, so rich, yet so restrained, justly cause these two numbers to rank with Mozart's finest achievements.

"Die Zauberflöte" (The Magic Flute) was its composer's swan-song in opera and perhaps his greatest popular success. Yet he is said to have made little or nothing out of it, having reserved as his compensation the right to dispose of copies of the score to other theatres. Copies, however, were procured surreptitiously; his last illness set in; and, poor business man that he was, others reaped the rewards of his genius.