

Operaphoria™

Encore of the December 2006 Julie Taymor production of *The Magic Flute*



Die Zauberflöte, Mozart's Last Opera

When *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute) opened September 30, 1791, at Emanuel Schikaneder's Theater auf der Wieden, Viennese society took little notice; they considered folk opera beneath contempt. Only court composer Antonio Salieri went to see it, concluding "*The Magic Flute* is fit to be performed before the greatest monarch at the greatest festivities." Small consolation for Mozart, who died two months later.

Employing a rescue plot from the folk-opera tradition, librettist Schikaneder—who also owned the Theater and the troupe—fashioned a story calculated to please. To the standard rescue plot with the equally standard characters of 1) a foreign prince, 2) a fair maiden, and 3) a wicked sorceress, he added large doses of comedy, exotic animals, and Masonic pageantry. And, with his talent for comedy and song, he wrote the sidekick Papageno role for himself.

Schikaneder's inclusion of elements of Masonic pageantry highlighted the society's humanism and gained their support for the opera. Both Mozart and Schikaneder were Masons, members of the same lodge, for which Mozart had already written a considerable amount of ceremonial music. The Masonic touch is especially curious since it was always under attack by the church and aristocracy in Austria because of its emphasis on equality. Some critics have taken the opera as an allegory in defending Freemasonry.

In their interpretation, they equate the evil Queen of the Night with Maria Theresa, who banned Freemasonry and actually had her late husband's (Emperor Francis I) Masonic lodge raided!

The plot of *The Magic Flute* is not as complicated as it seems with so many scene changes. It runs along



two tracks: first there's the rescue plot, where Prince Tamino, against the forces of sorcery, rescues his new-found love, Pamina. Papageno, the comic bird-catcher, tags along, and in the end also finds himself a wife. Blocking our hero's

way is the Queen of the Night, who is both evil sorceress and Pamina's mother, which leads to the second plot line: The Queen, aided by her Three Ladies, is determined to destroy Sarastro, High Priest of Isis and Osiris, as well as the Brotherhood he leads. Why this is so is only vaguely filled in, but appears to symbolize the contest between the

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Operaphoria™: A state of ecstasy induced by opera

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light (knowledge and humanism) and darkness (ignorance and hatred).

In addition to the above characters, along the way we meet the Genii, three boys who pop up to aid our hero in some of his travails, despite his being armed with a magic flute to protect him, as is Papageno with magic glockenspiel. And, finally, there is Monostato, who actually works for Sarastro but acts more like a member of the Queen's gang. Twice his lust boils over as he tries to despoil the helpless Pamina. He is punished by Sarastro, turns coat and joins the Queen's ranks.

In the end, the above complications all work themselves out nicely. And by Act 2, with Tamino's discovery of the Brotherhood, we are in more serious territory as he is initiated into this band of high-minded men. This takes Tamino through a series of trials, all of which he passes handily. In a final test, he is joined by Pamina in a show of



Golda Schultz
sings Pamina

their love as well as what looks like a late nod to equality of the sexes. But what stands out in these Brotherhood scenes is Mozart's incredible music, symbolizing Freemasonry's high principles: freedom, justice, humanism.

A critical analysis of *The Magic Flute* might describe it as a dazzling response to an unequal libretto. His librettist, after all, was an actor, not a philosopher. But Mozart was more than a man of the theater and once the story turned to the Brotherhood his music began to soar, at risk of overwhelming the basic story before us. The music of the second act is often so glorious we want the entire libretto to mean more, to be as profound as the music itself. But let us resist this temptation to overburden *The Magic Flute*; rather, let us enjoy its magic, its humor, its pageantry, and its music. By doing so, we pay Mozart our highest tribute. – GD

Julie Taymor

The playfulness and spectacle of Mozart's magic opera has inspired the involvement of major design artists. Earlier this year the Kent State University Museum assembled an exhibition of 18 different designers of *Magic Flute*, including the classic 1975 Ingmar Bergman film, plus Marc Chagall, Maurice Sendak, and the Met's Julie Taymor.



The spectacular costumes, masks and puppets of the Julie Taymor production play a major role in its great success. Taymor was new to the Met with this production in 2004, but had already established herself with a long string of credits and awards.

In 1991 she received the coveted MacArthur Fellowship Award for her work in theater. She directed the award-winning film, "Frida," about the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. She has directed and designed operas for major opera companies around the world, directing her first *Magic Flute* more than a decade prior to her work with the Met. Her first major Broadway success was with the *Lion King* which opened on Broadway in 1997 and twenty years later still plays to full houses nightly.

The Taymor *Magic Flute* was modified and abbreviated in 2006, with the goal of appealing to families with children. That modified version, sung in English, was selected for the first season of the Met Live in HD simulcasts. Both productions are still in the Met repertoire, and it is difficult to imagine their ever being retired. This Encore is the abbreviated English language production, intended for families with children, plus all adults who appreciate Mozart at his whimsical best. – GP

What's Happening?

For more than two hundred years Mozart's *Magic Flute* has been captivating audiences with its spectacle, just as it has been challenging critics with its meaning. That was probably Mozart's intention. He was wise enough to know that his final operatic gift to the world was a great piece of work, and he had enough of an impish sense of humor to be rolling over in his pauper's grave, laughing at those who are trying to figure out the meaning of this gloriously silly *singspiel*.

One major source of material was *Sethos*, a popular novel of the time, by Abbé Terrasson. Whole scenes of the imaginary ancient Egyptian mysteries in *The Magic Flute* were lifted verbatim from this novel. The Freemasons of the day were fond of giving meaning to these vague mysteries and incorporating them into their rituals. Thus, the Masons embraced *Magic Flute* as a contribution to their attempts to be profound and mysterious. Their interest in and endorsement of the opera contributed greatly to its popularity.

Several operas, novels and plays of 1790 take their material from collections of popular pseudo-oriental tales. One of the inspirations for Schikaneder was the story of *Lulu*, which tells of a wicked magician who captures the daughter of the fairy queen. She sends a portrait of her daughter to the hero, who, with the help of a magic flute, rescues the maiden from captivity, and wins her as Tamino wins Pamina.

In 1791 Schikaneder produced *Kaspar the Bassoonist*, also known as *The Magic Zither*, plagiarizing *Lulu*. He then revised it, added the references to Freemasonry, added some incidental music Mozart had composed several years earlier for a different Schikaneder play, and *voilà*, they had a good start on *The Magic Flute*.

However, as the opening article in this issue points out, we will most enjoy this production if we simply concentrate on the fun. The opera opened on September 30, 1791, with Mozart conducting

from the piano. Shortly after, he was confined to his bed, where he died at 1:00 a.m. on December 5. With his last gift, Mozart might be telling us that even in the face of death, life is not all that profound. So, he stirs up a brew of semi-sacred, quasi-intellectual and borderline profound mysteries into one big pot, stages it with flying gondolas and a neurotic bird-catcher just for fun, glorifies the High Priest of Isis and Osiris, and sets the whole creation to music that fires up a crazy mother soprano as it thrills the audience. And then he laughs.

It is an amazing gift. — GP



Mozart

Production (*Encore*)

The Magic Flute, by Mozart
Aired Saturday, Dec. 30, 2006
No Intermission

Conductor: **James Levine**
Production: **Julie Taymor**
Pamina: **Ying Huang**
Queen of the Night: **Erika Miklósa**
Tamino: **Matthew Polenzani**
Papageno: **Nathan Gunn**
Sarastro: **René Pape**