

## Mozart's Magic Flute

by Ellen A. Brown

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, many artists, writers and musicians were sympathetic with the political upheavals in America and France and sought to express the revolutionary ideas in new ways. William Blake rejected the established styles and techniques of leading artists and searched determinedly for new methods of printing and new forms of poetry. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Magic Flute, clearly a demonstration of artistic imagination at its best, was also a statement about the social and political currents of his day. In 1791, while Blake was writing and engraving poems about the events and characters of the French Revolution, Mozart was composing his own fanciful but revolutionary works of art, using drama and melody to celebrate brotherhood and elevate the common man.

Most of Blake's poems (and political views) did not get widely disseminated during his lifetime. Although...

...many people... share the opinion that he was one of the greatest of Englishmen, his contribution to the art and literature of his country being of the very highest order...Blake suffered neglect and even ridicule during his life, and was almost forgotten for forty years after his death. (Keynes, viii)

Since Mozart's fairy tale opera was an immediate success, not only in Vienna, but throughout Europe, its political and social message reached the masses and influenced both political thought and musical form and content.

Historians may differ as to the reasons why Mozart agreed to write an opera to be performed at a popular theater, but they would agree that he must have relished the task. This assignment to write for the masses resulted in the creation of something entirely new – in structure, harmony and theme. By undertaking to satisfy the public's appetite (for humor, magic, stage machinery and action), Mozart created an opera, which is arguably among the most entertaining and enjoyable operas ever written. Throughout the opera, "there is strong evidence of a cosmopolitan, universal man breaking through." (Kendall, p.7)

Mozart had been experimenting with operatic form for many years. In 1772, when he was only fifteen, he wrote an opera for carnival season in Milan (Lucio Silla) which the Italians did not appreciate...

because there were new elements in Mozart's musical style which sounded strange to them. There were some fantastic and gloomy scenes of almost romantic intensity in the opera, and Mozart had composed music to suit their mood. This was not to the Italians' taste, and they never commissioned him to write another opera. (Woodford, pp 76-79)

By age twenty-five he had written thirteen operas. Most of them were in the Italian number opera style, with emphasis on lengthy, highly ornamented arias, which demonstrated the vocal skills of the singers but did little to support the dramatic action. Even in the last year of his short life, Mozart was perfectly willing (and capable) of writing in the old-fashioned style still popular among his court patrons. In fact, his last opera (*La Clemenza di Tito*, Prague, 1791), written (in just eighteen days!) for the coronation of Emperor Leopold, II, was "an *opera seria* with castrato part, entirely outside the line of development of Mozart's other operas from 1782." (Landon, p. 100)

Mozart's familiarity and fluency with all the known musical styles and forms allowed him to adapt easily to even the most rigid of stylistic constraints. What is especially remarkable about Mozart's operas is that he was so very innovative within the constraints. His *Marriage of Figaro* (1786) based on Beaumarchais' play by the same name, poked fun at the nobility, and just like the original, "it is filled with rebellion against the way the noble lord behaves with his servants." (Branowski, p. 394) Somehow Mozart was able to sneak this opera past the Austrian court censors, writing an Italian comic opera that satisfied all the requirements of his patrons (while having a laugh at their expense.) The musical innovations (with arias perfectly suited to each character's personality and with a tight dramatic structure) were introduced so appealingly that the noble patrons and audiences did not object.

Most critics would agree that Emmanuel Schikaneder's libretto and Mozart's genius were perfectly matched. Lorenzo da Ponte, the librettist for Mozart's three great Italian operas, had been dismissed from his post as court librettist (and had left the country) in the spring of 1791, so Mozart needed to find a new librettist. According to one of Mozart's biographers (Nissen), Schikaneder, an old friend (actor, impresario and writer of plays and operas), approached Mozart and asked him to write an opera

entirely in the taste of the present Viennese public; you can surely satisfy not only the connoisseurs but also your own reputation, but see to it that you cater primarily to the lowest common denominator of all classes. (Landon, p. 125)

Audiences at the Theater auf der Wieden would have been right at home with the use of dialect in the spoken dialogue (the Viennese dialect is much like Cockney) and they would have recognized

some of the stock characters. The libretto is not only a mix of standard ingredients from low comedy and from light operas, but it is also heavily dominated with the rituals and symbols of Freemasonry.

Both Mozart and Schikaneder were Masons. Masonry had existed in Austria since 1742 and was popular among the nobility and the intellectual elite. The husband of Maria Theresa (Duke Francis Stephen) was a member, and he may have influenced the suppression of a papal bull that had condemned Freemasonry in 1731. By the 1780's, however, Francis Stephen had died, and his son, the Emperor Franz Joseph, "regarded the Craft with considerable, if tolerant, skepticism." (Landon, P. 56) During the 1780's Freemasonry was extremely popular and drew into its membership, "princes, counts, baron, many senior civil servants, senior military officers, diplomats, writers, musicians, bankers, and merchants." (Landon, p. 56) It is easy to imagine that Mozart overheard and participated in many conversations among his Masonic brothers concerning the American and French Revolutions.

Much that is known about Mozart's life and career points to his frustration over the patronage system. Time and time again, Mozart had been forced to swallow his pride while his talents went unrecognized and underpaid by ignorant and arbitrary employers. During his childhood and adolescence, young Mozart had visited and performed for royalty in France, Italy, England and throughout the Austrian empire, receiving honors and acclaim everywhere.

He and his family had associated with the foremost personages of Europe, and had been treated by them as equals, not as members of the socially disdained class of musicians. Here lay the germ of Wolfgang's tragic conflict with the society of his time, once the miracle of his being a prodigy ended. (Woodford, p. 50)

As early as 1781, Mozart had raised the possibility, in a letter to his father, "of making a living from composing for subscription editions, teaching, opera commissions...and income from concerts." (Kuester, p. 75) The Magic Flute represented a chance for Mozart to write an opera for a public theater, and to attempt to make money based on future sales of the opera score rather than strictly by commission. By venturing in this direction, Mozart was thumbing his nose at the aristocracy and embracing the common man. The Masonic theme of brotherhood was close to his heart.

By 1785, Mozart was "a dedicated member of the craft: he supplied music for Masonic ceremonies." (Landon, p. 57) The Austrian Emperor Joseph II, however, was growing uncomfortable about the growing popularity of the lodges and "ordered the number of Viennese lodges to be reduced to three. He obviously considered that the masons had become too powerful, and that there was no

control over their activities.” (Landon, p. 58) According to H.C. Robbins Landon, there may have been a great deal of enthusiasm among the masons for the production.

By 1791 it was nearly midnight for the Freemasons in Austria. If they had been left in relative peace by Joseph II, no one knew for certain what the attitude of Leopold II would be. For the moment he did nothing, and it was into this vacuum that Mozart and Schikaneder risked a long shot – to save the craft by an allegorical opera. (Landon, p. 58)

Wolfgang Hildesheimer is a Mozart scholar who portrays the Masonic singspiel influences in a disparaging manner:

The importance of Die *Zauberfloete* with Mozart’s *oeuvre* has always been overestimated. The sacred, monumental quality – the weaving of palm branches, the long robes, the pious processions – is strange and un-Mozartian; it seems as if they were forced on him. The prosaic recitatives of the priests and near-priests, these strophic arias (song-like structures) – all this makes the opera into a work *sui generis* and inimitable, to be sure, but not something complete and successful within itself. To be sure, Mozart’s music is for long stretches at its highest level, but it was conceived as an unpretentious entertainment, and it is not equal to the pretentious claims made for it later. (Hildesheimer, p. 327)

The Magic Flute’s special magic is in its successful elevation of basic human themes (love, brotherhood, trust, honor, and courage). Landon sets forth a view very different from Hildesheimer, as he considers the task before its creators:

How was Masonry to be protected? How were its greatness and universality to be presented to the general public?... Wisely, they treated the whole subject in two ways: with dignity, love and respect – as two brothers – but also not without humor, with even a hint of malicious satire. (Landon, p. 135)

The plot of this opera is not easy to understand, for there are many contradictions and confusing or ambiguous twists and turns. It is set in a fairy tale world of magic, with a powerful queen doing battle with a mighty high priest, a young hero setting out to save a damsel in distress, three beautiful women who give (dubious) advice, three delightful boys who drop out of heaven (in a balloon) to give further advice and encouragement, and a comic, very unsophisticated bird-catcher who wins (and earns) the affection of the audience. Just as in so many good fairy tales, the hero satisfactorily faces all the challenges and wins the princess. The forces of good triumph over evil, and the silly bird-catcher is united with the (bird-catcher) woman of his dreams. Tamino, the hero, is required to overcome his naive allegiance to the Queen of Night and recognize her for the scheming and wicked person that she is. He then is accepted into the initiation rites of the temple and proceeds to prove

himself worthy for membership (and to win the hand of Pamina). Pamina, the Queen's daughter who has been abducted by Sorastro, endures as many hardships as her true love, Tamino. She, too, must weigh her loyalty – should she trust her mother, or Sorastro?

Mozart seems to have had a special fondness for Pamina, as demonstrated in her extraordinary expressive and sad aria, when she grieves over Tamino's apparent lack of love for her. Such an aria is to be expected, but she sings a wonderful duet with Papageno, too, about the love between a man and his wife. Unlike the *opera seria* tradition, the characters in The Magic Flute do not sing many long, protracted arias, and there is little chance for applause at the end of an aria since the music and the drama moves rapidly on. In fact, there is an abundance of ensemble numbers in which three or four different characters are singing together, each with different texts and different tunes. When Papageno finally meets Papagena, Mozart demonstrates their almost speechless happiness and surprise by having them stutter – musically, of course. To add to the humor and novelty, Mozart also has Papageno sing one of his numbers with his lips closed (humming.)

One of the characteristics of this opera, which has always been noted, is its appeal for children. A child can watch this opera and be delighted with the spectacle of dragons, magic flutes, and the antics of a silly man covered with feathers who keeps getting himself in trouble. Without venturing too far into psychoanalysis, it seems obvious that Mozart was trying to touch the child in each of us and give us something hopeful and positive to savor. The Masons in the crowd would have been gratified to recognize that their system of beliefs had been enacted in such a dignified and reasonable manner, but they must have also noticed some of the ways in which Mozart modified their system of beliefs. Pamina is not portrayed as powerless or weak, yet Masonry in Austria, and throughout most of Europe, did not allow women to become members. It may have seemed rather shocking to members, therefore, when they saw Pamina successfully going through the initiation rites side by side with Tamino.

Despite the high costs of production and the difficulties in finding singers who can pronounce the spoken dialogue as well as sing, this opera has become immensely popular in opera houses around the world. Shortly after Mozart's death, as performances spread to cities throughout Europe, even Goethe was impressed. He endeavored to write a sequel (to be named Die Zauberfloete Zweiter Teil), but his negotiations with the Vienna State Opera eventually broke down. Certainly this masterpiece pointed the way to the Romantic composers and playwrights of the nineteenth century. Present day visitors to Salzburg, Mozart's place of birth, can easily obtain tickets for a performance with puppets in

the Marionetten Theater. Even in out-of-the-way spots in the United States it is possible to enjoy this opera on video (Bergman's Swedish version, for example) or find excellent audio recordings.

Mozart did not leave to posterity a clear and unambiguous expression of his philosophy or his ideology in the many personal letters that have survived, but his music speaks eloquently, across the ages and across cultures and languages. Some may find his music too classical, or too predictable or controlled, but his music will undoubtedly continue to attract new fans. He had the genius to make his craft seem effortless and easy, a hallmark of artists who have perfected their technique. He must have known what a gift he possessed, and that his music would live on. Papageno's unpretentious dream, as expressed in his duet from Act I, is universal in its appeal and one with which audiences will always identify:

And then if all maidens were mine I would set the bait  
The one I loved best would get the prize  
And if she kissed me tenderly,  
She would be my wife and I her husband  
She would go to sleep by my side  
And I would rock her like a child (Ein Vogelfaenger bin ich, ja)

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