

DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE  
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An ancient, secret brotherhood. A pattern of mysterious symbols and codes. A desperate quest through forests and temples in which friends and foes – the forces of good and evil – are not always discernable. Twists and turns. Death-defying trials. An astonishing truth about to be unveiled, a truth that will transform humankind...

Is this promotional material for *The Da Vinci Code*? It could be. It could also have served two hundred years ago as promotional material for Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, or *The Magic Flute*. True, the description above would have fallen short, since *Die Zauberflöte* isn't just a quest story, but a comic opera, a *singspiel* -- a German form of opera in which arias and duets are interspersed with spoken dialogue. Moreover, *Die Zauberflöte* is a vaudevillian extravaganza whose enticements include a lion-drawn chariot, a flying machine, a waterfall, and a mountain that spews fire.

*Die Zauberflöte* was written for a popular audience -- not the aristocratic audience for whom Mozart was accustomed to writing -- and performed not in Vienna but in a suburb outside the city walls. Think northern New Jersey instead of Manhattan, the Meadowlands instead of the Met. The Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden, where *Die Zauberflöte* premiered in September 1791, had recently produced the *singspiel* *The Stupid Gardener from the Mountains, or the Two Antons*; the magic opera *Oberon, King of the Elves*; and another *singspiel*, *The Philosopher's Stone, or the Magic Island*. Theaters all over Vienna were making a killing off of these "magic" or "fairy-tale" operas, which featured princely heroes, oppressed heroines, supernatural beings, magic objects, and implausible plots. In the winter of 1791, the director of the Freihaus, the actor, impresario, and former itinerant violinist Emanuel Schikaneder, was writing a libretto based on a fairy tale called *Lulu, oder Die Zauberflöte*. Schikaneder asked Mozart to compose the music. Mozart accepted.

Mozart and Schikaneder were close friends and fellow Freemasons. They had met in Salzburg ten years earlier, and Mozart had written several songs and pieces for Schikaneder's theater troupe. In exchange, Schikaneder gave Mozart and his family free admission to his productions, comedies and farces and singspiels that featured elaborate costumes and scenery, and jaw-dropping transformation scenes. Mozart wasn't a snob. He loved low art as well as high; in nearly all his operas slapstick and hijinks coexist with moral seriousness and acute depictions of human emotion. Mozart and Schikaneder shared a dream of advancing a uniquely German form of opera – comic opera that would be German in language and spirit, as opposed to Italian.

There's evidence to suggest that Schikaneder and Mozart collaborated on the libretto, lifting ideas and material from a dizzying variety of sources, including *Thamos, King of Egypt*, a heroic play for which Mozart had written incidental music, but which had had limited success; the ancient myth of Orpheus; the above-mentioned fairy tale operas *Oberon, King of the Elves* and *The Philosopher's Stone*; *Dschinnistan*, a collection of fairy tales that had supplied ample material for *Oberon* and *The Philosopher's Stone*; a treatise titled "Concerning the Egyptian Mysteries" by Baron Ignaz von Born, philosopher, champion of the enlightenment, and high-ranking Austrian freemason; *Sethos*, a French novel by about a prince who gets inducted into ancient Egyptian mysteries; Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain*, a medieval romance; Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; and Mozart's own *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

Despite this abundance of literary source material, it's likely that the source of *Die Zauberflöte*'s intellectual and moral seriousness is Masonic philosophy, out of whose tenets and rituals Mozart and Schikaneder constructed the central story of the opera: Tamino's induction into the brotherhood of Sorastro. Though librettist and composer were careful not to divulge any Masonic secrets, they did want to glorify Freemasonry's ethical and spiritual ideals, and thus inlaid the story and the music with Masonic symbols and patterns, particularly numerological ones.

It's worth noting that Freemasonry in eighteenth century Europe fulfilled a more pressing intellectual and spiritual need, and occupied a more prominent position in society, than it does today. Though the roots of Freemasonry's initiate traditions lie in medieval fraternities, and its mythology derives from the legend of Hiram, architect of

the Temple of Solomon, and from the ancient mysteries, particularly the Egyptian mystery cult of Isis and Osiris, the order was born in England in 1717 and gained traction throughout Europe in the remaining years of that century – years that coincided with the period in western history known as the Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment, progressive minds developed a renewed faith in human reason, as opposed to divine inspiration; boldly questioned traditional authority and values, especially religious and political ones; and believed that reason and science were more likely to produce universal human progress than religious faith. The brashest voices proclaimed that religion was mere superstition, God and the soul illusions. More temperate thinkers were unwilling to abandon their religious beliefs but felt that the Catholic Church had lost its spiritual substance as well as empathy for the unfortunate and the afflicted.

Enter Freemasonry, which permitted its members to follow or dismiss Christian dogma as long as they believed in a universal creator, and which offered a sanctuary for reflective men to gather and promote tolerance and humanitarianism with the goal of creating a more virtuous society. By mid-century there were tens of thousands of Freemasons all over Europe, foremost among them intellectuals, artists, high-ranking bureaucrats, and even priests. The *philosophe* Voltaire, the most brilliant and strident voice of the Enlightenment, was a Freemason, as were Montesquieu, the Marquis de La Fayette, Goethe, Beethoven, Johann Christian Bach, Frederick the Great, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Pope, Edward Gibbon, William Hogarth, and Edmund Burke.

Mozart, and to a lesser extent Schikaneder, recognized in the plot and characters of *Die Zauberflöte*, and in the source material, the outline not only of the process of one individual's induction into Masonry but the long-term objectives of the Order. They decided to write an allegory of these "secret" processes, and in doing so wrote an allegory of the transformation occurring in the society around them. The central story of *Die Zauberflöte* is that of Pamina and Tamino shifting their allegiances from the Queen of the Night, who wishes to "win the people for herself with superstition and trickery," to Sarastro, high priest of reason and virtue, whose brotherhood promises to usher in an age in which "superstition will vanish and the wise man will be victorious," an age in which "the earth will be a heavenly kingdom and mortals will be like Gods." The Queen of the Night, once powerful, is now weak and feeble, but she resists Sarastro and tries to destroy

him, much as the Catholic church resisted and fought against the *philosophes* and other secular humanists of the Enlightenment. In the struggle between Sarastro and the Queen of the Night for the allegiance of Pamina and Tamino, we see the struggle between reason and faith for the soul of eighteenth century man. When Tamino and Pamina pass through their trials and are inducted into Sarastro's brotherhood, the Chorus sings, "Hail, you Enlightened souls! You have penetrated the dark!" while the Queen and her retinue lament, "Our power is shattered and destroyed."

However progressive and noble Mozart's and Schikaneder's intentions, it's easy to look back from our twenty-first century vantage and see patriarchy and misogyny, inconsistencies and hypocrisies. Sarastro's brotherhood is essentially a church. He has temples and priests and an adoring chorus. He claims a direct line to The Truth but will only reveal it to those who submit to his control and endure his esoteric rituals. He can be chilly and totalitarian. He abducts a young girl from her mother – hardly acceptable no matter what one's ends – and holds her captive. He considers forcing her to be his lover. He and his priests put down women every chance they get – strange, for worshippers of Isis -- and within the brotherhood is a subtle, unspoken conviction that relations between men are more pure and safe than relations between men and women. Yet all is not well in the brotherhood. Monostatos, a lustful Moor (that is to say Muslim, or Turk), lives among them, subverting Sarastro's will and repeatedly attempting to rape Pamina. Finally Sarastro punishes Monostatos, sentencing him to "seventy-seven strokes of the bastinado," or severe beatings on the bottoms of his feet. This punishment hardly seems appropriate given the kind, forgiving spirit of the brotherhood. "Within these sacred halls, vengeance is unknown," Sarastro sings. "If a man falls from grace, love leads him back to his duty...we forgive our enemies." Clearly Monostatos has fallen from grace -- doesn't he deserve to be forgiven?

Maybe we should be more forgiving of Mozart and Schikaneder. Their intent, in having Sarastro punish and expel Monostatos, was to suggest that he wouldn't tolerate the presence of evil in the brotherhood, and that he was noble for doing so. (Not incidentally, the Austrians had just won a war against the Turks, who had nearly conquered Vienna). And despite all the swipes taken at women in *Die Zauberflöte*, Pamina, the heroine, is invested with great importance and wisdom, and the larger

implication of the opera is that the Couple, not the Individual, is the most exalted entity. “Nothing is nobler than woman and man,” Papageno and Pamina sing. “Man and woman, woman and man attain divinity.” Sorastro has no intention of inducting Tamino into the brotherhood alone. His plan from the very beginning was to get Pamina and Tamino together and initiate them as a couple, ushering in a new era, a new kind of brotherhood in which women would have a place. “Triumph! Triumph, noble pair!” sing Sorastro’s priests after Tamino and Pamina have completed their trials. “The mysteries of Isis are now yours. Come, enter the Temple!”

Mozart died two months after the premiere of *Die Zauberflöte*, shortly before his thirty-sixth birthday, at the height of his fame. In his brief life he had written over six hundred works – symphonies, concerti, sonatas, quartets, trios, songs, arias, minuets. In the previous six years alone he had composed *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan Tutte* – in addition to his usual output of smaller pieces. Though he was still out of favor with the new emperor, and hardly free from his chronic financial difficulties, things were looking up: his operas were being performed all over Germany, he had commissions coming in from London and Amsterdam and Hungary, and he was in line to become the Kapellmeister of St. Stephen’s cathedral – a steady job with perks. The task of supporting his wife and six children, a paramount concern, looked possible. He was working furiously on a variety of compositions, including the *Requiem*, and his music was achieving a new moral gravity and spiritual grandeur. *Die Zauberflöte* premiered on September 30, 1791 and was a huge popular success. Mozart was pleased with the production – the spectacular singing, the lavish scenery – and during that final autumn of his life he attended nearly every evening, sitting in the audience with family and friends. All evidence suggests that during this period, though haunted by the melancholy and loneliness that had dogged him all his adult life, and preoccupied with creative and personal issues, he was cheerful and energized and determined to endure; he was full of love for his family, passion for life, and high expectations for the future.

We should be glad. After giving so much to the world, one can’t help feeling that Mozart deserved any happiness he might have found, and especially those nights at the Freihaus with his latest creation. By December he was deep in the throes of rheumatic fever and too sick to attend the nightly productions. His wife Constanze, who at one point

lay down on Mozart's deathbed intending to infect herself, reported that every evening he heard and followed the music of *Die Zauberflöte* in his head. "Through the power of music we step lightly through the dark night of death" – so sing Tamino, Pamina and the Men in Armor just before Tamino and Pamina walk into a mountain of fire. *Die Zauberflöte* has as much to say about dying an enlightened death as it does about living an enlightened life. In a famous letter to his father, written in 1787, Mozart claimed that "...death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence." Mozart believed that death was a transfiguring event, or what his biographer Maynard Solomon called an "ontological opportunity." Dying was every man and woman's most arduous trial, the ultimate challenge and triumph of a life, and on the other side was beauty and truth and light. Mozart meant to express this in *Die Zauberflöte*, especially in the glorious music that accompanies Tamino and Pamina's trials. One hopes that this same music, playing in Mozart's febrile mind, emboldened him through his final suffering. He died in the night between December 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>. Or, as Sorastro's followers might have said, he "penetrated the dark."