

The Magic Flute

David Kettle

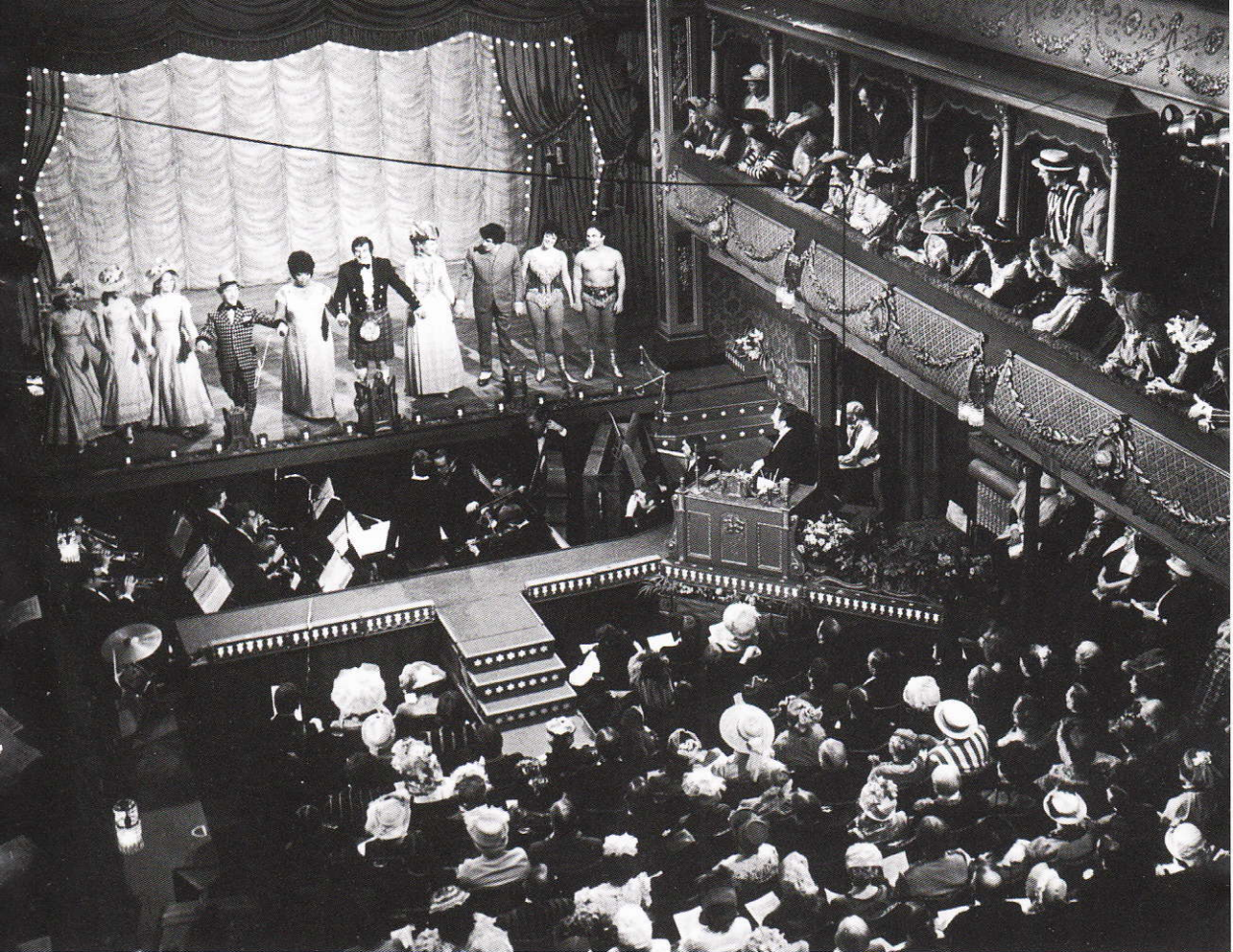
It was in the year of his death – 1791 – that Mozart composed *The Magic Flute* (although he clearly didn't know that the year would be his last). As so often in his life, the composer was going through hard times, both in a perilous financial situation and in a feeling that his talents were no longer being truly recognised. The music-loving Austrian emperor Joseph II had been a reliable patron, arranging for Mozart's operas *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan tutte* to be commissioned for the court theatre, and for *Don Giovanni* to be performed there, as well as appointing Mozart as court chamber composer following the death of Gluck in 1787.

Times had been good. But Joseph II died in February 1790, and his successor, Leopold II, was too concerned with political problems in his empire to care much about music. In any case, he wasn't keen on Mozart's creations: a contemporary court report mentions the emperor's 'strong aversion' to *La clemenza di Tito*. He allowed Mozart to remain in his role as court chamber composer, but reduced his responsibilities to simply writing dance music for royal balls.

Legend has it that German actor and impresario Emanuel Schikaneder spotted an opportunity, and stepped in to take advantage of Mozart's parlous position by persuading him to lower himself to writing a fairytale *Singspiel* that would appeal to a popular audience at his provincial Theater auf der Wieden on the outskirts of Vienna. In fact, that's far from the whole truth.

Schikaneder had known the Mozart family for more than a decade: his theatre troupe had been in residence in Salzburg in 1780–1 and the Mozarts had been regular visitors to their performances (the impresario even gave them free tickets). Which also indicates that far from looking down on popular Viennese musical theatre, Mozart enjoyed and felt entirely familiar with it. In fact, he had been working with Schikaneder for two years before *The Magic Flute* was even discussed, writing an aria for a production of Paisiello's *The Barber of Seville* in 1789, and contributing to the five-composer collaborative opera *The Philosopher's Stone* in 1790.

And at any rate, it wasn't much of a step down. For his theatre company, Schikaneder employed capable singers and a 35-piece orchestra, and judging by Mozart's tricky instrumental writing the players must have been accomplished musicians. Furthermore, it wasn't all pandering to the masses: the impresario put on works by respected playwrights



Above: Old Time
Music Hall at the City
Varieties, Leeds.

such as Goethe and Schiller, although he did admittedly satisfy the Viennese passion for outlandish fairytale operas with the most up-to-date theatrical effects – flying machines, lifts, waterfalls, volcanoes. Mozart went into the project with his eyes wide open, and with a determination to set himself the same high standards for his new *Singspiel* that he had applied elsewhere in his output. Judging by letters from Mozart to his wife Constanze, who was taking the waters in the German spa town of Baden, he and Schikaneder worked on the opera between May and July 1791. And it was an entirely collaborative effort, with the composer involved right from the start: Schikaneder himself later wrote that it was an opera that he ‘planned and worked out carefully with the late Mozart’.

Several texts have been suggested as sources for *The Magic Flute*'s exotic story, one of which brings up the topic most closely associated with the opera: freemasonry. *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians* was an essay drawing comparisons between Egyptian rites and masonic ceremonies by Ignaz von Born, a scientist, civil servant and man of letters who was knighted for his work in metallurgy. He was also elected master of the Zur wahren Eintracht masonic lodge in Vienna in 1782, and was well aware of Mozart's musical skills, having been a subscriber to one of the composer's concert series in 1784.

And Mozart also knew Born. The composer attended Born's lodge in 1785, and wrote his cantata *Die Maurerfreude* ('The Mason's Joy') for a celebration of Born's knighthood in April the same year. Although he was expelled following rumours about his personal life, Schikaneder had also been a mason, and was intimately aware of the craft's rituals and beliefs.

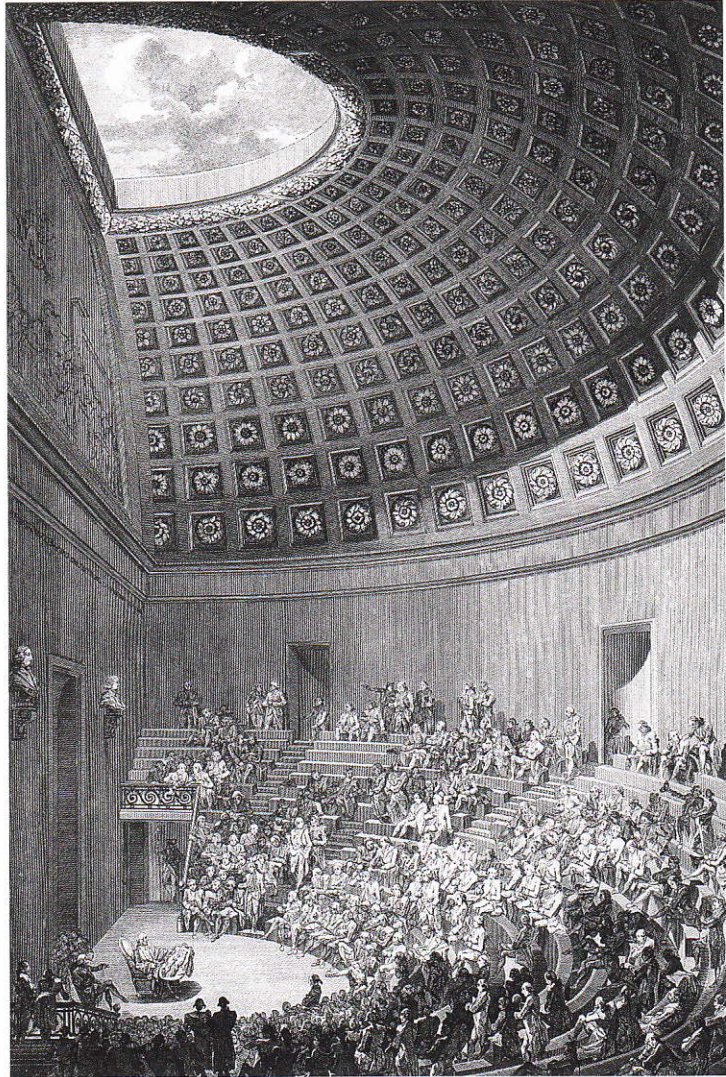
Various theories have been proposed as to why Schikaneder and Mozart might have chosen to create a masonic opera, from a crisis in the craft following the French Revolution and change in Austrian emperor, to a general desire to communicate masonic ideals to a wider audience. Certainly the enlightened humanism that freemasonry advocated chimed with Mozart's own progressive views. But the composer also seems to have shown a certain degree of rebellion against masonic misogyny in *The Magic Flute*: although there are several examples of women being held up for ridicule, it is significantly both Pamina and Tamino who achieve enlightenment and admittance to Sarastro's temple at its conclusion.

How important is freemasonry to an understanding of *The Magic Flute*? It's a question that's open to huge debate. Some commentators have found masonic symbolism at almost every level of the opera – from Tamino's initiation ordeals to the ubiquitous and masonically symbolic number three – but others are far more wary about assigning elements to masonic allegory. At its heart, *The Magic Flute* is a fairytale opera in the tradition of the magical works staged in Vienna at that time, and can equally be seen as a metaphor for our journey through life and for the knowledge we gain from experience.

Mozart conducted the premiere on 30 September 1791, with Schikaneder in the role of Papageno. It was a popular work from the very start. At the first performance, several numbers were encored immediately, and the opera was reportedly performed 35 times in its first nine weeks. Aria arrangements for piano, string quartet, guitar and other more exotic instrumental combinations followed, and Beethoven and Spohr were among the many composers to write works based around its themes.

Mozart himself was already ill at the premiere, however: he had fallen sick on 6 September while in Prague for the premiere of *La clemenza di Tito*. His health deteriorated until 20 November, when he became bedridden, and he died on 5 December from what is now generally accepted to be acute rheumatic fever.

Rather than a dumbing-down of his craft, would *The Magic Flute* have proved to be a new direction for the composer had he lived beyond 1791? It's impossible to say, of course, but its success ensured an important legacy: the work played a vital role in the definition of a



Above: Anatomy theatre at the Ecole de chirurgie (School of Surgery), Paris, 1780.

German opera style that would later be taken up by Beethoven, Weber and ultimately Wagner.

And *The Magic Flute* clearly mattered enormously to Mozart. In a rather melancholy letter to Constanze on 7 July 1791, written while working on the opera, he revealed the impact its music was having on him: 'Even my work gives me no pleasure, because I am accustomed to stop working now and then and exchange a few words with you. Alas! This pleasure is no longer possible. If I go to the piano and sing something out of my opera, I have to stop at once, for this stirs my emotions too deeply.'

WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR

Keep it short and simple

The Magic Flute is one of Mozart's simplest and most direct scores, with pure diatonicism and transparent textures occurring throughout. It has been suggested that he was writing for a popular audience unused to the musical ironies and subtleties of his earlier operas. But *The Magic Flute*'s subject matter seems to call out for simplicity in its setting, and the classical nobility of much of Mozart's music is very much in keeping with the opera's lofty themes. For the same reason, Mozart keeps things brief and to the point: there's little repetition in the text, the pace is rapid, and even key moments are kept short. The music in which Tamino and Pamina joyously celebrate the end of their trials, for example, lasts a mere two bars.

Defining character through music

Mozart assigns a different style of singing to each of his characters: Tamino and Pamina generally have long, noble, legato melodies; the Queen of the Night's music is often stormy and unpredictable; Papageno's vocal lines usually have a simple, folk-like quality; and Sarastro's music is slow, stately and serious. Furthermore, Mozart contrasts two couples, each comprising a male and a female voice – the *opera seria*-style Tamino and Pamina, and the *opera buffa*-style Papageno and Papagena. Depending on the dramatic situation, the two couples swap musical styles, creating a stylistic variety that presents us with real human beings rather than static figures on the stage.

The Queen of the Night and Sarastro form an interesting couple from a perspective of musical characterisation. They are clearly opposed in their vocal ranges – the Queen of the Night's Act II aria 'Der Hölle Rache' famously reaches a stratospheric top F, while Sarastro plumbs the depths of the bass clef in several of his utterances. And it is clear even from the Queen's first aria, 'O zitt're nicht, mein lieber Sohn', with its portentous orchestral introduction and insistent off-beat violin chords, that she is not what she seems.

Mozart surpasses all his contemporaries with the use of chromatic lines to illustrate a character's emotional turmoil, for instance in Pamina's aria and her suicide scene.

Mozart's unusual orchestra

Mozart uses some (for his time) unusual instruments in his orchestra for *The Magic Flute*, and varies his ensemble so that almost every number has its own sound world. Two basset horns – alto clarinets with masonic associations that bring a solemn colour to the woodwind section – accompany Sarastro and his priests. Mozart achieves a striking effect by using the piccolo only once in the opera – in Monostatos's Act II aria.

Although the clarinet was one of Mozart's most beloved instruments, he reserved it for significant moments in which characters express pure emotions from the heart. Papageno's pipes and magical bells, and the magic flute itself, all make appearances in the score, although they too are used sparingly. Trombones, primarily considered an ecclesiastical instrument in Mozart's time, play a prominent role, perhaps confirming the opera's function as a comedy with sacred or spiritual overtones.

A novel approach to form

Arias, duets and ensembles had previously represented a pause in the action, a static moment in which characters would describe their emotions or predicament. But at several points in *The Magic Flute*, Mozart uses through-written music to accompany a fast-moving narrative – a technique that would prove highly influential to later composers. The finales to both Acts, for example, are chains of individual numbers representing dramatic threads being drawn together.

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS

Arnold Östman; Streit, Jo, Bonney, Cachemaille, Sigmundsson, Drottningholm Court Theatre Orchestra and Chorus (Decca)

This might be as close as we can get to how *The Magic Flute* was heard in Schikaneder's Vienna theatre, with a light and airy yet superbly incisive period-instrument account from Arnold Östman and a radiant cast. Kurt Streit makes a stylish Tamino, Barbara Bonney is radiant and delicate as Pamina, and Sumi Jo sparkles with natural clarity in the Queen of the Night's vocal fireworks.

Charles Mackerras; Hendricks, Anderson, Allen, Lloyd, Miles, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Chorus (Telarc)

Charles Mackerras's lithe, nimble account on modern instruments with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra is lively and full of infectious fun. Thomas Allen makes a witty, genial Papageno and really lives the role – he seems to be singing with a smile on his face. Jerry Hadley is a boyish Tamino, Barbara Hendricks has a touching vulnerability as Pamina, and June Anderson's memorable Queen of the Night is fierce and sultry.

David Kettle is a journalist and writer on music who has written for *BBC Music Magazine*, *The Strad*, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *Folk Roots*.