

What's a Christian To Do With *The Magic Flute*?

Masons, Mysticism, and Misogyny in Mozart's Last Opera

The libretto of Die Zauberflöte has generally been considered to be one of the most absurd specimens of that form of literature in which absurdity is regarded as a matter of course.

- Edward J. Dent, 1913

It is in its infinite richness and variety, its inexhaustible capacity for the provision of new experience that the unique greatness of The Magic Flute lies as a work of art.

- Patrick Cairns ("Spike") Hughes, 1958

Introduction

Perhaps no other opera has launched as much controversy, argument, or bewilderment as *The Magic Flute*. For the more than 200 years since its creation, scholars, musicologists, poets, psychologists, and critics, to name only a few, have pondered over and pontificated upon the intentions of its creators, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his collaborator, Emanuel Schikaneder. This paper is presented as a very limited response to some of the questions that have historically been raised concerning the content of the opera's libretto. The title of this presentation has been unceremoniously lifted from Connie Neal's excellent book, *What's a Christian To Do With Harry Potter?* (2001), which was written in response to the concerns of conservative Christian parents when confronted with the phenomenal success of the Harry Potter novels. In defense of Harry (and author J. K. Rowling), Neal chose passages from the books and discussed their positive, life-affirming content, outlining spiritual lessons that could be extracted from these segments. Although Mozart's work needs no apology, some explanation of certain passages may provide enlightenment, or even edification.

One aspect of the opera that has garnered much scrutiny is that of identification: is it a child's fairy tale? a political allegory? a Masonic ritual treatise? a heroic quest legend? In addition to the lack of a clear genre identity, the opera's libretto contains other problematic elements: a plot shift that seems to demand a corresponding shift in audience and character allegiance; misogynistic and racist remarks made by otherwise sympathetic characters; the unresolved ambiguity of certain secondary characters; and sudden, disorienting changes from serious drama to giddy comedy and back.

In spite of or, more likely, because of these difficulties, the opera has proven to be one of Mozart's most beloved. It achieved great success early on, and its popularity has not waned in the two centuries that have passed since its premier. In the introduction to her translation of the libretto, Judith Eckelmeyer embraces the contradictions that populate the text:

What is it about *The Magic Flute* that perpetuates its attraction even in today's world, so vastly different as it is from that of Vienna in 1791? What do 20th-century eyes see in this work? What spurs such a flurry of endeavor on behalf of a relic of old-fashioned (if splendid) music and a plot and text of somewhat clouded quality? The answer must in part be that the contemporary mind seeks to resolve the questions raised by the confusion and obscurity it experiences in this work. In part, there is also something about the opera which makes it a kind of puzzle or toy: the rich fantasy elements, magical effects, and challenges of scene and machinery design are as fascinating for the contemporary person to see or to attempt to actualize as they were in the 18th century or will be in years to come. (x-xi)

As noted above, the opera provides a wealth of opportunities for interpretation and re-visitation, making it one of those works of art that can be experienced again and again, with new insights or moments of revelation occurring at each re-acquaintance. A large part of the appeal of the opera lies in Mozart's deceptively simple music. Its sometimes folk-like simplicity makes it instantly accessible to the untrained ear, while

repeated hearings reveal increasing depths of beauty to the music lover who is fortunate enough to listen carefully and frequently.

However, the text does not often receive the same level of respect as the music. Many critics have complained that the libretto is somehow not worthy of Mozart's efforts. For much of its history, tradition held that the inconsistencies of the plot, including the "redirected quest of the hero" (Baker 95), were due to a change of direction on the part of the collaborators, after learning of another opera already in production based on the same folktale. However, this theory presupposed that Mozart and Schikaneder didn't really care about the quality of their work. An investigation into the life of the composer would soon expose two important facts to contradict this theory: (1) Mozart was always the consummate musical craftsman and cared deeply about the quality of his creations, and (2) he was extremely proud of this particular work and of the reception it enjoyed during the first weeks of its theatrical engagement. As H. C. Robbins Landon has pointed out, "Mozart obviously found the amazing diversity of the subject immensely attractive," citing the composer's inclusion of a multitude of musical forms – from folk-tunes to ritualistic hymns, from the "mad coloratura of the Queen of the Night" to an "antique-sounding north German Lutheran chorale tune" – as evidence of his engagement with the text (127). Also challenging the traditional change-of-plan-in-midstream idea, P. G. Baker writes:

What we are really confronted with in *The Magic Flute* is a deliberate reshaping on the part of Schikaneder and Mozart of traditional folk lore and *fantastische Geschichte* into an entirely new form. Between them they stood a fairy-tale on its end and left to posterity one of the most enigmatic, though fascinating, operas ever written. (95)

Finally, Daniel Hearst reminds us that no less a personage than Goethe himself professed to admire *The Magic Flute* and claimed that “it took more education to praise the libretto than to condemn it” (277).

Interpretations

Quite a few of the interpretive problems in *The Magic Flute* stem from the realizations of the characters, especially the female roles, and their relationships to each other. Over the years, various writers have proposed a wide variety of character interpretations, many of them allegorical. Later segments of this paper will deal with one of the female characters in more detail, but an overview of interpretive viewpoints seems appropriate at this point. The earliest allegorical interpretations were political in nature. Because of the immediacy of the event, the first proposed explanation of the opera, in 1794, painted the text as a “perfect cipher of the French Revolution” (Hearst 277), in which Tamino represented the people of France, Pamina embodied liberty, and the Queen of the Night portrayed Louis XVI. A more widespread interpretation was developed in the mid-1800s concerning Austrian Enlightenment political views and held that Tamino was the depiction of Emperor Joseph II, Pamina represented Austria, Sarastro personified Enlightenment ideals, the Queen of the Night was Joseph’s mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, and, in some versions, Monostatos portrayed the restrictive and devious activities of the Catholic clergy (Osborne 325).¹ More recently, Hearst sees parallels between *The Magic Flute* and Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. As Schikaneder was

¹ A century later, in 1951, Egon Komorzynski revived the allegorical approach, this time suggesting that the opera could be read in light of Mozart’s views on the “conflict between Italian and German opera in Vienna” and assigning the following identities to the cast: Tamino = Mozart, the ultimate German musician; Papageno = Schikaneder; Pamina = German opera; Sarastro = Joseph II; the Queen = Italian opera; and Monostatos = Salieri (who else?) (Hearst 277).

known to have acted in and produced several of the Bard's plays, this is not as far-fetched as it may at first appear. Also, there is evidence that Mozart intended someday to base an opera on the plot of *The Tempest*. In Hearst's view, Tamino is Ferdinand, in that they both must prove themselves worthy, Papageno is to some extent Caliban, Pamina is the lovely Miranda, and Sarastro is Prospero (272). Baker remarks that the parallels "with Shakespeare's *Tempest* are quite striking... We might argue that *The Magic Flute* is really Mozart's *Tempest*. Like that earlier masterpiece of drama and spectacle his last opera presents to us the culmination of a profound vision of human nature and the possibility of an ennobled and enlightened universe" (Baker 115). These efforts exemplify the range of possible readings this complex text can inspire.

Other interpretations, although not strictly allegorical, have also been proposed, especially in the twentieth century, when the psychoanalysis of texts became commonplace. In 1957, Auden and Kallman suggested that the opera could be viewed in Nietzschean terms: "The story of a change in relation between the Dionysian principle and the Apollonian, Night and Day, the instinctive and the rational, the unconscious and the conscious, [is] here symbolized as female and male, respectively" (Auden and Kallman 10). An interesting interpretation was submitted by Dorothy Koenigsberger in 1975. Basing her study on alchemical lore (which was immensely popular in Mozart's day), Koenigsberger declared that all of the various characters of the opera were, in fact, "joint participants in one being," facets of a single soul, seeking unity and undergoing stages of refinement (the trials) in order to achieve purity and integrity, i.e., becoming "golden" (Hearst 278, and Eckelmeyer xiv). Shortly thereafter, in 1979, Joscelyn Godwin approached the libretto from a broad philosophical view, relating Jung's

concepts of *animus* and *anima* to Tamino and Pamina², who are meant to complete each other, like two sides of the same coin³ (Hearst 279). Continuing the search for an overriding theme for *The Magic Flute*, in 1990 Hearst looked to the influences of Freemasonry and the Enlightenment upon the authors and concluded that clemency, or forgiveness, provides the glue that holds this opera, as well as many of Mozart's other works, together (272). A year later, in *Autonomy and Mercy: Reflections on Mozart's Operas*, essayist Ivan Nagel focused on the character of Papageno and proposed a different, but complementary, theme:

As [Mozart] turned mercy to pardon, heroic deed to probation, so he recouped Baroque nobility as humane, palpable dignity. Henceforward dignity sides not with gods and princes but with man, for it sides with the most simple of men. Respect for the human being thus was freed of any tie to office, power, or privilege – liberated not by cannons or the guillotine, but through a comedian's drollery on September 30, 1791, in the Freihaus Theater of Vienna. (78)

The assertion is often made that a valid interpretation of a work of art should be reproducible, stable over time, and true to the intention of the author. The illustrations above demonstrate the complexity and profundity of this particular work of art, simply because there have been so many writers and scholars who have been willing to plunge into the texts and subtexts of the opera in order to glean its meanings.⁴ Although such a wide variety of interpretations exists, many of the more recent proposals are based upon philosophies that were nonexistent in Mozart's day. Should they then be discarded? The simple fact is that neither Mozart nor Schikaneder ever wrote down

² The anima/animus concept was further explored by Robin Wallace in 1999.

³ Similarly, Laura Jacobs points to the complementary relationship between Papageno and Papagena, who represent, in her words, "right and left sides of the same feather-brain." (16)

⁴ The previous discussion represents only a fraction of the overwhelming amount of work that has been published regarding allegorical and thematic interpretations of the opera.

what they intended for the opera to mean, and it might not have ever occurred to them to do so. Still, while scholars continue to plumb the depths of this opera, newer interpretations do not invalidate the older views. In fact, they build upon them. Whereas some writers of the past were searching for a single, unified, determinate meaning to the entire work, more contemporary scholars don't necessarily choose to follow that path. Instead, current scholarship has allowed for many layers of meaning to coexist, recognizing that many newer interpretations have actually built upon and enhanced the older, established readings (Eckelmeyer xvi, and Baker 95).

In any case, it must be remembered that, since the original performances of 1791, no one has come to *The Magic Flute* in an unmediated way, except, perhaps, for children. Today's opera goers read plot summaries in the program while listening to the overture, and then read translations of the text on overhead screens during the performance (even, sometimes, when the opera is performed in their native language). It should also be recognized that the opera itself has been mediated through tradition – lines are frequently changed or cut from the libretto altogether, translations may be undertaken based on felicity of singing rather than fidelity to the original text, the order of scenes may be altered or some may be deleted, and innovations in costuming, sets, technology, props, or casting can drastically alter the experience of the audience. This situation is true, of course, for all operatic works, not just *The Magic Flute*, and actually contributes to the fascination and appeal of the work. However, when exploring and interpreting the text in a more intentional fashion than as a mere audience member, it is important to keep the fact of mediation in mind.

Masons, Mysticism, and Misogyny

Masons

In December of 1784, Mozart was officially initiated as a Freemason into the Viennese lodge "*Zur Woltätigkeit*" (Till 124). The phenomenon of freemasonry that swept Europe in the 1700s was based upon a rejection of the established Church as shallow and corrupt and a parallel embrace of the Enlightenment's secular religion of morality. Members of Masonic lodges in Vienna constituted the intellectual, scientific, and artistic élite of the Austrian capital. It is interesting to note, however, that the lodge Mozart chose to join was not the largest or most influential of the city (although he visited that lodge, "*Zur wahren Eintracht*," on several occasions and had many friends there⁵), but instead, the smaller lodge that was "specifically the meeting place for those who believed in a *Catholic* Enlightenment in Vienna" (Till 125). Although these two allegiances seem contradictory, Mozart remained both a devoted Catholic and a passionate believer in the Enlightenment throughout his life. Consequently, Masonic references and Enlightenment values permeate his works, especially his operas. Emanuel Schikaneder, the librettist of *The Magic Flute*, was also a Freemason, although by the time of his collaboration with Mozart, he had been dismissed from his lodge because of his philandering ways. When Mozart and Schikaneder partnered in 1791 to write *The Magic Flute*, freemasonry was under attack from Austria's new emperor, Leopold II, and many believe that the opera's story was intended in part to defend Masonic principles and shed a positive light on the activities of the few remaining lodges.

⁵ Including fellow composer, Franz Joseph Haydn.

Much scholarship has been devoted to the Masonic references and esoteric symbolism contained within the libretto of *The Magic Flute*. In fact, author Jacques Chailley devotes 297 pages to the topic in his book, *The Magic Flute Unveiled: Esoteric Symbolism in Mozart's Masonic Opera*. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore this topic in depth, but I believe a brief historical explanation and a few examples of Masonic symbolism are in order here. Originally, Masonic rites were established in three levels – Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason (Landon 129). However, in the last half of the eighteenth century, Viennese freemasonry had been influenced by two strains of Masonic practice from Germany: the “Strict Observance” sect, whose members claimed to be the inheritors of the medieval knights Templar; and Rosicrucianism, which introduced mystical and occult practices first developed in Scotland as part of the Scottish Rite. The term “Rosicrucian” refers to the eighteenth degree, or level of attainment, in the thirty-three-step Scottish Rite configuration of freemasonry. This level was signified by a cross of roses, hence the term “Rosicrucian,” or rose cross.

Several aspects of Mozart’s opera seem to be obvious referents to Masonic symbolism and ritual. The number three was particularly significant to Freemasons, as it referred both to the Trinity of Christian belief as well as to the original three levels of Masonic achievement. In the opera, threes abound: three Ladies, three Spirits, three Slaves, three doors to the temple, three virtues – “be firm, patient, and silent” command the three Spirits to Tamino. The opera’s central key is E-flat major, the key of three flats. In the overture, and later in the introduction to Act II, Mozart used trombones to play a three-fold chord (three groups of three notes played in thirds) to represent the “secret knock” used by Masons to gain entrance to their lodges. Finally, Tamino and Papageno undergo three sets of trials that parallel the three stages of initiation: the

Entered Apprentice maintains a vow of silence; the Fellow Craft endures a vow of fasting; and the Master Mason bravely overcomes the trial of fire and water (Landon 129). The Rosicrucian eighteenth degree is represented by the entry of eighteen priests in the beginning scene of Act II, who sing a chorus eighteen measures long. Sarastro's first appearance occurs in Scene XVIII of Act I, and later, Papagena reveals herself to be eighteen years old.⁶ The libretto also specifies that roses be used to decorate the "flying machine" that is intended to carry the Spirits onto the stage from the wings. Additionally, the strict injunction to silence, repeated at regular intervals during Act II, is reflective of the vow of secrecy rigorously imposed upon all lodge members.

According to Chailley's book, the numeric and symbolic allusions mentioned above only scratch the surface of the complex and arcane symbolism embedded within *The Magic Flute*. However, as Hughes points out, it really makes no difference to the average listener whether the intended symbolism is grasped or not. He writes:

Mozart was far too great and instinctive an operatic craftsman to introduce esoteric little luxuries in the form of musical numbers that could be understood, or at best, fully appreciated, only by one section of the community. (191)

The most important aspect of the music is that it was written, first and foremost, to be appropriate for the situation or emotion portrayed in the story. As an example, let's consider briefly one of my favorite episodes in the opera – Scene XXVIII, in which the two Armored Men welcome Tamino, and then Pamina, to the final trial by fire and water. Chailley points out that the introduction to the Armored Men's duet contains the Rosicrucian eighteen groups of notes (275). However, Corse proposes another explanation of the unusual music in this scene – that Mozart selected the antique style

⁶ "Eighteen years and two minutes," to be precise.

of Baroque counterpoint to signify in a general way that the opera represented the old-fashioned virtues of a previous time, in the way that Masons themselves believed they represented a return to older and superior ways of living.⁷ (52) The ponderous solemnity of this crucial moment in the opera is further emphasized by the vocal line of the Armored Men, which was adapted by Mozart from an ancient Lutheran melody, circa 1524, titled *Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh' darein* (Landon 130). Perhaps Mozart reverted to music of the church to indicate the profundity of this episode and the Freemasons' original reliance upon the Bible for inspiration:

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. (Isaiah 43:2)

Mysticism

The plot of *The Magic Flute* is rife with mystical allusions and magical occurrences. Sarastro and the priests of the temple worship the ancient Egyptian gods, Isis and Osiris. The Queen of the Night is obviously capable of bewitching others, at least to some extent, and her Ladies miraculously slay the serpent pursuing the prince. We learn in Act II that Pamina's father possessed a magical sun-circle amulet, the source of his powers, which was bequeathed to Sarastro upon his death. (It is this medallion that the Queen is so eager to recover in order that her powers may be restored.) And, of course, the eponymous flute, which also belonged to Pamina's father, holds wondrous powers over man and beast. Most of these plot devices can be explained by considering the opera's roots in fairy tale. The main story line was adapted by Schikaneder from a folk-tale, *Lulu, oder die Zauberflöte*, written by A. J. Liebeskind in

⁷ This explanation also holds true for the fugal treatment of the Overture.

1789. The Egyptian temple setting was inspired by the authors' fascination with their Masonic rituals, which were thought to be derived from an ancient Egyptian text.⁸ However, the most important mystical elements in the story, the magic instruments, present a challenge to the viewer because they are first presented to Tamino and Papageno by the Three Ladies. As the Ladies represent a morally compromised realm, and the intention of the Queen is that the musical devices will be used to assist in the overthrow of the High Priest's kingdom, it would appear that the flute and bells are essentially instruments of evil. However, when our heroes quit their service to the Queen and embark on their new journey, the instruments are taken away, to be returned to them later by the Three Spirits. From this point forward, the magical items aid the protagonists in achieving their desires – Papageno finds his Papagena by playing the bells, and Tamino faces his fears with the aid of his flute and his true love. We learn, therefore, that although the instruments are indeed magical, their magic can be used for good or evil purposes. The ways in which the items are used determine their value, rather than their intrinsic properties. The gifts we are given can be viewed in much the same way: we are empowered to use them for selfish or altruistic purposes, and it is our choices that make the difference.

Misogyny

The opera's libretto is also littered with what would have been called, in the 1970s, "male chauvinist" remarks. The Viennese and German Freemasons of the late

⁸ The book in question was actually a novel, *Sethos*, by Abbé Terrason. The main character, Sethos, is an Egyptian prince who undergoes rigorous training to eventually become pharaoh. It appears that many Viennese Masons of Mozart's day believed this work to be an actual ancient text detailing Egyptian rituals and religious practices. In fact, lodge leader Ignaz von Born, thought by many to be the model for Sarastro, used *Sethos* as his authority for establishing Masonic rites throughout Vienna.

eighteenth century were notoriously misogynistic, and some of the text of *The Magic Flute* reflects that attitude. Herewith are some representative lines from the libretto:

(Priest to Tamino) So a woman has taken you in? A woman does little, talks a lot.

(Sarastro to Pamina) A man must guide your hearts, for without him every woman is likely to step outside her sphere of influence.

(Priests to Tamino and Papageno) Guard against feminine wiles: this is the first obligation of our organization.

(Tamino to Papageno) It sounds just like the mindless babbling of women, but invented by deceivers... She is a woman, has the mind of a woman.

While some critics have maintained that the inclusion of lines such as these indicates the sexist attitudes of both Mozart and Schikaneder, others have pointed to the character of Pamina as contradictory evidence of the authors' sympathy towards women. Although it is difficult to imagine any male of the eighteenth century as a feminist, nonetheless there are evidences within the plot suggestive of the composer's and librettist's more liberal and positive attitudes towards the opposite sex.

In the character of Pamina, we find a surprisingly modern, liberated woman who embodies not only the traditional virtues associated with the fairytales and theatricals of the eighteenth century, but also possesses many admirable attributes admired and sought after by women of today. On many levels, it is her growth and development, not Tamino's, that provide the impetus for the opera's story. If, as some have claimed, the libretto of *The Magic Flute* represents an early example of the *Bildungsroman*,⁹ a sort of *Bildungsoper*, if you please, then Pamina represents the character whose formation provides its focus. Before she ever steps on stage, we in the audience already know

⁹ A novel whose principal subject is the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a usually youthful main character.

several important facts about her. We discover that she must be beautiful, for when the prince gazes upon her portrait he is transported immediately by love for her; it's his music, as much as his words, that allows us a glimpse of her beauty. "The music signifies the beauty of the portrait, for by referring to Pamina beautifully, the aria implies her beauty" (Corse 55). Her constancy, one of Mozart's favorite virtues, is revealed soon after, when the First Lady insists to Tamino: "Do not slander the virtue of the gentle beauty! Neither coercion nor coaxing is capable of enticing her to the ways of vice." We learn from the three slaves that the "charming girl" has succeeded (at least, temporarily) in escaping from her guard, Monostatos, by using her wits. Upon her first appearance on the stage, she manages to repel unwanted amorous advances, perform another escape, and comfort her new friend, Papageno. "It is a simple duet for we are concerned with two simple people – Papageno the child of nature, and Pamina as yet little more than a child; it is she, however, who takes the lead in this little scene and use[s] her womanly instinct to console Papageno that 'Men who feel love do not lack good hearts'" (207). In this homage to folksong, Jacobs finds evidence of Mozart's contentment in his nine-year marriage: "*Die Zauberflöte* glorifies that interlocking, wedlocked completion, that sunstruck sexual symmetry in which masculine and feminine melt into one, adding up to more than the sum of their parts, crowned in a divine corona of eternal empathy" (18).

Pamina will not be allowed to remain in her simple, uncomplicated state for long, however. Although she does not yet realize it, she will face the trials to come with such courage and fortitude that she will surprise even Sarastro. Her first step towards entering the priestly world occurs when she determines to admit her mistake in trying to escape and vows to tell the truth "even if it were a crime." In this way, she begins to

turn her back on the morally suspect world of her mother and face toward enlightenment (Corse 58). Yet she has much more difficult challenges to face before her journey is completed. In Act II, she faces the most harrowing trial at the hands of her own mother, whose attempt to persuade Pamina to join in her revenge conspiracy results in the Queen's ultimatum: kill Sarastro or be forever abandoned. The girl's response is heart-breaking yet encouraging: "Pamina's horrified 'Mutter!' conveys both the fear of the heroine at the prospect of her mother's avenging fury and her renunciation of the Queen, the choosing of a different path... for it is here for the first time that Pamina chooses her own future, that of bride and lover rather than witch and tyrant" (Baker 109). In quick succession, she then encounters another attempt at blackmail and rape from the repulsive Monostatos and the apparent rejection of her own true love. Not only does Tamino turn away from her and refuse to speak, her friend Papageno, who was previously so chummy and chatty, also seems to refuse conversation (because his mouth is full, as it turns out). Desperate for someone to talk to about her terrible experiences, aching for comfort and direction, Pamina leaves the scene in agony – "Oh, this is more than wound, more than death!" – and begins to seriously contemplate the prospect of suicide. Confronted with the awful reality of her mother's true nature, abandoned and disowned if she doesn't comply with the Queen's demands, rejected by her friend and her lover, and in danger from her wicked pursuer, Pamina is completely and utterly alone. Unlike Ophelia, however, she does not succumb to madness. Instead, she holds out, embraces hope when it finds her, and lives to pass from "unspeakable misery...[to] unutterable happiness" (Kaiser 140).

A thoughtful examination of the libretto can result in a long list of Pamina's virtues. She is:

Clever: she manages to escape from Monostatos by invoking Sarastro's name, the person she knew he was most afraid of;

Loyal: she never speaks ill of her mother, even when confronted with the uncomfortable knowledge that her captor Sarastro is the better person;

Honest: captured again while trying to escape, she decides not to make excuses and confesses to breaking the rules;

Compassionate: she is quick to comfort Papageno, and always speaks to him on his terms, without patronizing him;

Demonstrative: she is first to express her feelings to her beloved Tamino;

Brave: she volunteers to lead Tamino through the trials of Fire and Water, with only Love as her guide;

Steadfast: faced with the apparent loss of affection from Tamino, she refuses to give up on him in spite of her own pain.

In addition to this catalog of admirable traits, Pamina exhibits a spunky, unconventional proclivity for facing her problems head-on. Unlike other fairy tale heroines, such as Cinderella, Rapunzel, or Aurora, Pamina chooses to be "an active agent in her own destiny" (Jacobs 16). Instead of sitting and waiting to be rescued, as good little fairy tale princesses are supposed to do, Pamina is always on the move – the only way the authors could keep her still was to cause her to faint now and then – and as a result, she is "always walking in unexpected" (Jacobs 16). This tendency to self-sufficiency has garnered Pamina extraordinary kudos. Kaiser labels her the "most human being in the opera" (137), and Hearst even suggests that the most appropriate title for this opera, "given Mozart's infinite care to create strong and deeply moving female characters in the course of writing all his operas, would be the simplest of all: 'Pamina'" (270).

The most extraordinary proof of Pamina's worth is to be found in her acceptance as an Initiate. To today's opera goer, this may not seem to be such an outstanding accomplishment. However, "the notion that women, once enlightened, should participate in all things, and perhaps even enter the priesthood, was far in advance of

Mozart's day" (Hearst 270). Because both Pamina and Tamino are willing to suffer pain and distress in order to attain wisdom, both are initiated, accepted, and crowned in the end, equally and without reservation (Corse 54). Pamina's experience is one of self-discovery and self-sacrifice: the woman in need of rescue becomes the rescuer (Nagel 82). Her strength of character surprises everyone, including Sarastro, and so impresses the temple inhabitants that they allow her to accompany Tamino through the final trials and achieve initiation herself. She exemplifies the ideal of "death to self" as the path to ultimate worth. As Tamino and the Armored Men put it, "A woman that fears neither night nor death is worthy, and will be initiated." Although *The Magic Flute* has been accused of harboring a hotbed of misogyny, this unprecedented step towards feminine equality strikes a decisive blow for women's liberation and elevates the opera from the level of base entertainment to the pinnacle of art as social influence and example.

Re-evaluation and Conclusion

After careful consideration of the text, I would propose that a subtitle to the opera could be written thus: *Appearances can be deceiving*. Throughout the course of the work, the characters rely upon appearances rather than reality, only to discover later that the truth was not as it seemed. Tamino mistakenly trusts his eyes when he awakens from his faint, finds Papageno on the prowl, and assumes that the bird-catcher is his defender. Later he believes in the beautiful Ladies and their seemingly benevolent Queen, and he sets out to destroy what he supposes is an evil empire. To Tamino and to the audience, Sarastro appears to have kidnapped Pamina, when in fact he has reclaimed her from potential disaster. Papageno believes that his counterpart is an ugly old crone, despite her assertion of youth and the priest's promise of beauty. When confronted with Tamino's silence, Pamina believes her ears and concludes that the

prince no longer cares for her. And, perhaps most importantly, Sarastro sees a simple girl who must be protected from Monostatos and her mother, but discovers that, belying her fragile appearance, the princess possesses the strength of character, courage, and steadfastness that qualifies her to be not only Tamino's wife, but his partner and co-ruler as well.

To most listeners, it really doesn't matter whether or not esoteric Masonic symbols are presented correctly on the stage, nor do they consider whether or not Pamina represents Tamino's *anima* or his Dionysian persona. The fact that musicologists and music historians sometimes spend inordinate amounts of time and energy trying to decode the music to find hidden meanings and enigmatic allusions does not in any way prohibit the uninformed listener from enjoying the work on its own, purely musical terms, nor will they fail to delight in the trials and eventual triumphs of the opera's characters. Misogynistic or racist passages in the dialogue may temporarily take one aback (although many contemporary performances omit or reword those segments), but the sexism inherent in the traditional romantic plot of quest and rescue is superseded by one in which man and woman prove themselves worthy and equal, finding acceptance and mutual self-fulfillment. "Man and woman prove, in fact, to be equally courageous, strong, and moral" (Corse 54). Appearances *can* be deceiving, and the story of *The Magic Flute* may be seen as the tale of a protagonist who experiences a change in his worldview that leads him to experience unexpected rewards. Tamino begins by believing that the Queen of the Night is weak and that her daughter needs to be rescued from evil, but through the course of events, he comes to accept that people are sometimes not what they seem to be, that a woman can be as strong and as wise as a man, and that sometimes silence and patience can be more effective in overcoming

obstacles than storming the gates. Tamino's lesson in discernment should be our own – we can learn to guard ourselves against lies and manipulation, to investigate assertions before acting upon them, and to accept truth when it confronts us. Anyone who witnesses Tamino's journey to enlightenment in *The Magic Flute* may be inspired to experience a personal revision of worldview by remembering some of the opera's valuable lessons: not all mothers are kind and good, not all princesses are weak and helpless, not all men are strong and reliable, peasants do not necessarily wish to be like princes, having lands and money isn't everything, just because someone is beautiful doesn't mean she is lovely, self-control is more important than adventure, it's better to knock than to smash the door down, music can soothe the "savage beast," and you can't believe everything you're told.

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NOTE: Certain quotes have been taken directly from the opera's libretto.

Because of the variances in performance practice mentioned earlier, I have chosen to read from Eckelmeyer's excellent translation of the original Schikaneder text, as printed for the opening night production by Viennese publisher Ignaz Alberti. In some cases, this will mean that the text to which I refer does not match even Mozart's autograph score, as the composer occasionally modified the text as it was set to music.¹⁰

¹⁰ For the translator's justification in using the Alberti text, see Eckelmeyer, viii.