**PROGRAM NOTES**

DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE (The Magic Flute)

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The Magic Flute was the greatest operatic success of Mozart’s career. As he lay dying on the night of December 4-5, 1791, he had the consolation of knowing that an enthusiastic audience composed of all strata of Viennese society, from elegantly dressed nobles to tradesmen and their families, was at that very moment filling Emanuel Schikaneder’s popular Theater auf der Wieden to laugh at the bird catcher Papageno’s slapstick antics and marvel at the Queen of the Night’s sky-scraping coloratura (sung by Mozart’s sister-in-law, the soprano Josefa Hofer). It is reported that in his final delirium the composer believed he was actually at the performance, as he hummed Papageno’s opening song to himself. Almost his last words to his wife were: “Listen! Hofer is taking her top F. Now, how strongly she takes and holds the B-flat. ‘Hört! hört! hört! der Mutter Schwur!’ (Hear, hear, hear! The mother’s curse!).”

Die Zauberflöte represented a totally new direction for a composer who usually wrote formal opera seria like Idomeneo or stylish comedies such as Così fan tutte and Le nozze di Figaro for the court theaters. However, by 1791 Mozart’s entrée to Vienna’s Imperial Court Theater was essentially barred. His supporter Emperor Joseph II had died the previous year, and the new Emperor, Leopold II, had no use for him. And to make matters worse, Mozart’s brilliant librettist Lorenzo da Ponte — his collaborator for Così, Figaro, and Don Giovanni — had been kicked out of the court for alleged unscrupulous doings and would soon be on his way to America.

Mozart’s fellow Freemason Emanuel Schikaneder came to the rescue. Since 1789, this versatile actor/singer/playwright/impressario had been running the Theater auf der Wieden as a home for popular Singspiel operas — or operas with extensive spoken dialogue. The title of Schikaneder’s first hit production — Der dumme Gartner aus dem Gebirge or “The Stupid Gardener from the Mountain” — suggests the level of entertainment he was aiming at. One of Schikaneder’s specialties was the then-popular genre of Zauberoper or operas with magical fairytale plots using lots of eye-popping stage effects. And Die Zauberflöte was commissioned to be just this kind of lightweight, mass-audience work.

Mozart was no snob. He had a robust and often ribald sense of humor, and this offer was very attractive to him: an opportunity to write for a new, broader audience. He began composing the score in the spring, working away in a little wooden garden house in the Theater’s courtyard. But in July, the opportunity to write a conventional opera seria, La clemenza di Tito, for the new emperor’s coronation festivities in Prague (this was not commissioned by Leopold II and was a speculative effort to get himself back in royal favor) forced him to break off. Returning from Prague to Vienna in September, he rushed to complete the opera in time for its September 30th premiere. The marvelous Overture and the March of the Priests that opens Act II were finished just two days before.
Schikaneder concocted his libretto from a variety of disparate sources. Most of the fairytale elements including the magic flute itself came from “Lulu, oder die Zauberflöte” in Christoph Martin Wieland’s recent fairytale collection. The ancient Egyptian setting and the trials for admission into Sarastro’s fraternity came from two books popular in Masonic circles: Tobias Phillip von Gebler’s *Thamos, King of Egypt* and Abbé Jean Terrasson’s *Sethos*. The role of the Everyman Papageno — who isn’t destined for success in any trials of courage and self-denial — was written for Schikaneder’s own comic gifts; Mozart gave him simpler music suitable to his modest vocal means. The mixture of low comic elements and ethical seriousness was bizarre indeed, and only Mozart’s genius could unify it into a masterpiece.

Led by Mozart at the fortepiano, the premiere on September 30 was warmly received, and the opera began a steady run of several performances a week drawing full houses. Mozart attended them regularly and delighted at the growing audience response: “I have just returned from the opera, which was as full as ever,” he wrote his wife in October. “As usual, the duet ‘Mann und Weib’ and Papageno’s glockenspiel in Act I had to be repeated, and the trio of the boys in Act II. But what always gives me most pleasure is the silent approval. You can tell that this opera is becoming more and more esteemed.” He often brought family members and colleagues with him and was delighted that his nemesis Antonio Salieri attended and praised the opera enthusiastically.

Both Mozart and Schikaneder were Freemasons, and Masonic lore and ceremony play a central if covert role in this opera. In the latter half of the 18th century, the Masons reached the apogee of their prominence in Europe. Many of the leading men in European intellectual and artistic life became members, including Voltaire, Goethe, Haydn, and even King Frederick the Great of Prussia. Mozart had joined the Viennese Lodge Zur gekrönten Hoffnung (To The Crowned Hope) in 1785. In America, Washington, Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin were all Masons. Despite the mysticism of some of its beliefs and ceremonies, 18th-century Freemasonry was essentially a society for promoting the progressive ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment.

Schikaneder and Mozart filled their opera with Masonic references. The number three holds mystical significance in Masonry, and it plays a prominent part in *The Magic Flute* too. The opera’s central key is E-flat Major, that is the key of three flats; this is the key of the famous Overture. As the Overture begins, we hear three dramatic fanfare chords, which return later in the piece and at significant moments in the opera itself. There are trios of guides who help Tamino and Papageno along their path: the Three Ladies associated with the Queen of the Night and the Three Boys associated with Sarastro, head of a Masonic-style brotherhood. When Tamino seeks to gain entry into Sarastro’s palace, he is turned back at three doors. The ceremonies and trials Tamino undergoes are based on Masonic ritual. And Sarastro’s realm embodies the Masonic ideals of universal brotherhood, mercy, and self-knowledge.
Listening to the Music
Low comedy, fairytale fantasy, and Masonic idealism — all these disparate elements coexist in a work that in other hands could easily have become a forgettable mess. Mozart’s challenge was to find suitable musical styles to express them all and trace a journey from the darkness represented by the Queen of the Night to the brilliant day of Sarastro’s realm. It is a journey of surprises and sudden reversals, for the people we trust at the beginning — the Queen of the Night and her seemingly helpful Three Ladies, who present Tamino with his magic flute and Papageno his enchanted bells — are later revealed to be villains, while the ostensible villain — Sarastro — turns out to be the good guy.

In his biography *Mozart, His Character, His Work*, Alfred Einstein writes of Mozart’s music here: “The work is at once childlike and godlike, filled at the same time with the utmost simplicity and the greatest mastery.” Indeed, sublime simplicity is Mozart’s approach for most of his music in this opera, the Queen of the Night’s two show-stopping arias aside. Static arias are generally not very long, and they are outnumbered by the various ensemble pieces that serve to move the plot along. The noble grandeur of the choruses and ceremonial orchestral music is achieved through modest means. Many of the most appealing numbers resemble folksongs: Papageno’s two “arias” and the charming duet for Pamina and Papageno “Bei Männern.” And yet with this stripped-down musical style, Mozart achieved a warm humanity and a spiritual depth unmatched in his other operatic masterpieces.

A few words about some of Flute’s most remarkable numbers, beginning with the Overture, arguably Mozart’s greatest. In the Masonic key of E-flat Major, it begins with three imposing fanfare chords that immediately command our attention; these chords probably represent the three opening knocks of a Masonic rite. They are followed by a merry fugue in which a sparkling little tune makes many entrances in the various instruments. With this music, Mozart immediately captures both the comedy and the high ethical themes of his hybrid work.

This opera contains two of Mozart’s most beautiful aria creations, which are remarkable for how concisely they express heartfelt emotion. The first of them is “Dies Bildnis” (“This Picture”), which Tamino sings early in Act I after the Three Ladies have presented him with Pamina’s portrait. Gazing at it, he falls instantly in love, a love strong enough to set him on his quest to free her from Sarastro. This is a song of idealized love, rather than raw passion, suited to Tamino’s very serious and sincere personality.

The second aria is Pamina’s “Ach, ich fühl’s” (“Ah! I Feel It”) from Act II. Convinced that Tamino has rejected her, Pamina in downward-drooping phrases expresses a mood of utter despair. Colored by plaintive woodwinds, this magnificent lament ends with a superbly touching orchestral postlude.

If these two arias are very restrained, the Queen of the Night’s two arias are spectacularly over-the-top. The Queen is not what she first appears to be. Her first aria, “O zittre nicht” (“Oh, tremble not”), is a skillful act of seduction to win Tamino to her service. She presents herself as a wronged mother and begs him in the most
heartrending and flattering terms to rescue her daughter Pamina from the “evil” Sarastro. This is a grand operatic scena with an opening recitative, a slow aria, and a fast aria. In her famous second-act aria, “Der Hölle Rache” (“Hell’s Revenge”), she takes the gloves off to reveal the claws beneath as she demands Pamina murder Sarastro or be cast off forever. Here, her famous coloratura passages, soaring to vertiginous high Fs, glitter like icy fire. Mozart wrote this role for his wife’s sister Josefa Hofer, who was renowned for her huge range and her remarkable vocal agility. But the extremes of the vocal writing also match the extreme nature of this character.

The two lovers, Tamino and Pamina, never have a love duet. But Pamina sings an unusual “brother-sister” duet with Papageno in Act I, “Bei Männern” (“Among Humans”), and it is one of Zauberflöte’s most heartwarming moments. As Papageno despairs of ever finding a mate, the two sing that the greatest happiness for humankind is the love between a man and a woman. This duet’s extreme simplicity adds to, rather than subtracts from its sublime humanity.

Early in the Finale of Act II comes one of the opera’s most magnificent inspirations: the duet of the Two Armored Men who guard the entrance to Tamino’s trial by fire and water. An ardent lover and student of Bach, Mozart here pays tribute to him with a chorale prelude in which the two men sing an old Lutheran chorale over elaborate imitative counterpoint in the orchestra. One could say that here Mozart set himself a musical trial to match Tamino’s moral one.

Although this opera is full of misogynistic pronouncements about the weakness of women, it is ultimately Pamina who insists on joining Tamino in his trials and advises him to use his magic flute to surmount them. An exquisite slow march for solo flute over a hushed military drum accompanies Tamino and Pamina’s successful passage through fire and water.

After Papageno has flunked his trials but won his Papagena anyway in one of the most endearingly comical duets of all time, the opera closes with a choral dance of triumph back in the Masonic key of E-flat Major. Among the chorus’s words, we hear “Stärke,” “Schönheit,” “Weisheit” — “Strength,” “Beauty,” “Wisdom,” the motto of Mozart and Schikaneder’s Masonic lodge.