



Brother Mozart and the Magic Flute

During the eighteenth century, Freemasonry in Vienna had a political as well as a benevolent side. It counted as its members many highly placed politicians and ecclesiastics who's ideal was the regeneration of humanity by moral means. It was hated by the Catholic Church and certain despotic political authorities who deemed it dangerous, both to religion and the wellbeing of the state.

Brother Mozart and the Magic Flute

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was twenty-eight years of age when, in the autumn of 1784, he joined a Masonic Lodge. As a pianist, little Wolfgang had been an infant prodigy, exhibited by his father throughout Europe, but he was now a recognized and admired composer living in Vienna. The very year of his initiation his first great opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, had been produced in Paris. This was, however, before the days of copyright law and the earnings of genius were meagre.

During the eighteenth century, Freemasonry in Vienna had a political as well as a benevolent side. It counted as its members many highly placed politicians and ecclesiastics who's ideal was the regeneration of humanity by moral means. It was hated by the Catholic Church and certain despotic political authorities who deemed it dangerous, both to religion and the well being of the state. The Church, however, even as today in certain Latin countries, did not consider it expedient to challenge high-placed persons nominally its members but also of the Fraternity.

The Empress Maria Theresa had been one who was opposed to Masonry and, in 1743, had ordered a Viennese Lodge raided, forcing its Master and her husband, Francis I, to make his escape by a secret staircase. The Emperor Joseph II (1780-90) was favourably inclined to the Fraternity, although the clergy did their best to get the Lodges suppressed.

Such was the Masonic milieu when Wolfgang Mozart became a Master Mason. He must have been greatly moved and inspired by his experience. Almost immediately he composed his *Freemason's Funeral Music* and his music for the opening and closing of a Lodge. He now composed his opera, *Don Giovanni*, and his three great symphonies - the E flat, the G minor and the C major, as well as a great number of concertos and chamber-music works.

His last great opera, *The Magic Flute*, opened in Vienna on the evening of September 30, 1791. Mozart conducted the first two performances, when he was overtaken by his last illness. He lingered on while the opera had an unprecedented run of more than one hundred consecutive performances. It is said that in his sick bed, watch in hand, he would follow in imagination the performance of *The Magic Flute* in the theatre. Then he died after its 67th performance.

The Magic Flute makes no mention of Freemasonry as such, but it has always been accepted as a Masonic opera. Musicians assert that even

the music has much Craft significance, beginning in the overture with its three solemn chords in the brass.

In keeping with the fashion of the time, the plot is half-serious, half-comic, a fantasy of magic and mystery laid in a never-never land called Egypt. It depicts the ancient mysteries and presents much Craft symbolism. To the Viennese of that day, The Queen of the Night was clearly the unfriendly Empress Maria Theresa; the good Sarastro was Ignas von Born, an eminent scientist and Masonic leader; the hero Tamino was the good Emperor Joseph and the heroine Pamina, the Austrian people themselves.

The first program credited the libretto to the actor-producer, Schikaneder, but it is now thought that it was written by Giesceke, the friend and intimate of Goethe and Schiller, who probably desired to remain anonymous for political reasons. The opera has remained popular through the years and is included in the present repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera Company.

The sources and influences of The Magic Flute are many, the most obvious being Lulu, or the Magic Flute by Christoph Martin Wieland, one of a collection of fairy stories published in 1786 under the title Dschinnistan.

This had already inspired several Singspiel productions by various companies with such titles as Kaspar the Bassoon Player, or The Magic Zither. But the oriental decor and magical effects taken from this source provide only one level of Mozart's work, for underlying them are pervasive references to the mysteries of Freemasonry.

Mozart, a Freemason since 1784, and Schikaneder, a fellow Mason of a different Lodge, had embodied much of Masonic teaching and symbolism in their opera. In using the symbols and, by many accounts, references to the actual rituals of Freemasonry, they may have intended to make subtle demonstration of the society's high-minded purposes. It seems at least possible, in other words, that the opera was intended in part as a defence of the Masons. (For two centuries there have been rumours and speculation that Mozart was murdered by the Masons for revealing their secrets, but this seems unlikely for several reasons. His collaborator and fellow Freemason, Schikaneder, lived for another two decades. Mozart's close personal identification with Masonic tenets and his frequent contact with high-ranking leaders of the society are well-documented in his letters, and it is improbable that he would have defied the society's strictures, or

that he would have been unaware of what he could use in a public work and what could not be revealed.)

The number three had a deep significance for the Masons, and it keeps occurring throughout *The Magic Flute*: Three Ladies, Three Boys, three temples, and so forth. A drawing of Schikaneder's revival production of 1794 shows that in the opening scene the Three Ladies kill the serpent by cutting it into three pieces. The opera's home key of E-flat (redolent of virtue, nobility, and repose) was often used by Mozart for his Masonic compositions because of its signature of three flats. Prominent in the Overture is the three-fold repetition of the Masonic rhythmic motto (short-long-long), also heard in Act II of the opera itself.

Also Masonic in origin is the inscriptions on the three temples: "Wisdom," "Reason," and "Nature." Freemasons in the audience would have recognized the symbolic armour of the guardians during the initiation trials, the earth-air-water-fire symbolism of the trials themselves, the Ladies' silver spears, Papageno's golden padlock, Sarastro's lion-drawn chariot, Tamino's death-like swoon, and the Queen of the Night's defeat by the powers of light.

In his admirable book *The Magic Flute, Masonic Opera*, Jacques Chailley makes a convincing argument that the trials of the opera's second act (as well as much that leads up to them in the first act) are modeled on actual Masonic initiation rituals. Even an apparently unrelated incident like Tamino's fainting spell in the opening scene, for instance, is interpreted as a reference to the beginning of such rituals, when the initiate is made to lie face down as a symbol of death to old habits of thought and action.

Brigid Brophy, in her fine study, *Mozart the Dramatist*, points out the origins of Masonic practices in the Eleusinian mysteries and Orphic myths of the ancient world. She documents the libretto's heavy debt to *The Life of Sethos*, a novel published in Paris in 1731 by the abbé Jean Terrasson. Purporting to be a translation from an ancient Greek source, this book recounts the initiation of its Egyptian hero into the mysteries of Isis. As Ms. Brophy points out, "Terrasson does not (but then one would not expect him to) explicitly connect his Isiac mysteries with Masonry; indeed, it is possible that the real influence was the other way about and the Masons borrowed hints for their own ritual from Terrasson's fictionalized Egypt."

Mozart and Schikaneder were also well-acquainted with the works of Shakespeare. Many fascinating parallels between *The Magic Flute* and

The Tempest are noted in Mozart on the Stage, by János Liebner. Sarastro, the opera's controlling force, is similar to Shakespeare's Prospero. Each plans the union of two chosen lovers but makes the way arduous in order to strengthen the bond. Monostatos and Caliban are very similar creations, symbols of our baser nature to be overcome and cast off. The unworlly innocence of the Three Boys finds its counterpart in Ariel, Prospero's sprightly servant and messenger.

Each succeeding era has seen The Magic Flute in its own way, and each of these interpretations has validity. Whether the opera is viewed as a light-hearted fantasy, Enlightenment allegory, veiled Masonic ritual, or a lost battle in the struggle for feminine equality, it speaks anew of magic and maturation to each successive generation.

Since the Masonic lodges operated openly in Mozart's Vienna and numbered among their members many of the highest officials of the realm, we may ask ourselves why two Masons, Mozart and Schikaneder, felt it necessary to compromise Masonic silence and portray so many of the society's secret symbols and beliefs in a public entertainment like The Magic Flute. If they, as the eminent scholar H. C. Robbins Landon has written, "risked a long shot - to save the Craft by an allegorical opera," what was the peril by which the once-powerful society was threatened? What forces ultimately caused their attempt to be futile, ending in the complete suppression of Masonry only four years later?

The answers are to be found in the revolutionary cross-currents of that turbulent era, and in the involvement of many of the Masons, even many of the highly placed aristocrats, in activities that threatened the thrones of Europe.

Freemasonry evolved from some of the craftsmen's guilds of the Middle Ages (which helps explain its name and why its adherents refer to it as the Craft), but its rise to prominence began in the mid-eighteenth century. Its espousal of Wisdom, Beauty, Knowledge, and Truth made it attractive to adherents of Enlightenment philosophies (with their de-emphasis of traditional religion in favour of individual moral advancement), which included most of the best minds in Europe and America. Viennese Masons included Mozart, who joined in 1784, his friend and admirer Franz Joseph Haydn, initiated in 1785, and Mozart's father Leopold, who joined at his son's instigation in 1785 and advanced to the third degree of membership in just sixteen days. The head of Mozart's lodge was Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, Haydn's patron and a high-ranking diplomat in the imperial government. Freemasonry thrived in the empire despite the

enmity of the Roman Catholic Church (a Papal Bull condemning the Craft in 1738 was simply ignored in Austria and its territories) and that of the powerful Empress Maria Theresa (whose younger son, the future Leopold II, had reputedly been elevated to the Eighteenth Degree of the Scottish Rite of Masonry).

But although a succession of Austrian emperors took a benign view of Masonry's espousal of the Enlightened notion that all men are perfectible through Reason, they naturally smelled treason when certain of the Masons went a step further and argued that in a fully enlightened society there was no need for monarchs. Masonry's insistence on shrouding its inner workings in secrecy worked against it, for the code of silence allowed treasonous sects to flourish within the Craft and at the same time caused government officials to imagine Masonic excesses much greater than those that actually occurred. In the end, the emperor felt he had no choice except to ban Masonry outright.

Probably the most virulently anti-monarchic sect of Masonry was the Illuminati, founded in Bavaria by Adam Weishaupt, a university professor, in 1776. Weishaupt joined the Masons the following year and soon allied the Illuminati with them. The sect's original aim was to fight evil and defend good causes, but this was soon expanded with anti-clerical and anti-royalist sentiments. The Illuminati operated for only a decade and probably never had more than 2000 members, but they panicked the royalty, who became suspicious of all Masonry.

The crowned heads had good reason to connect Masonic Lodges with revolutionary activities. Many of the leaders of the American colonies' revolt against their British king in 1776 were Masons, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. In France Masons were behind the push for republican government that led to the French Revolution (which, incidently, went much further than those high-minded aristocrats had foreseen and claimed most of them among its victims). The Austrian emperor heard first-hand reports of the uproar in Paris from his sister, the French Queen Marie-Antoinette.

Austrian attempts to control the Masons included Joseph II's decree of 1781, forbidding any order to submit to foreign authority. This led to severing Masonic ties with the Grand Lodge of Britain and setting up Austria's own governing body, the Grosse Landesloge von Österreich. In 1785 another imperial edict centralized the country's lodges and limited their autonomy. The proliferation of local lodges was reduced (only three remained in Vienna), and the members of each were limited to 180.

Regular reports of lodge meetings and attendance had to be submitted to the Emperor's police.

In 1790 Joseph II died and was succeeded by his brother, Leopold II. With the French Revolution in full cry, the Austrian government was becoming exceedingly alarmed about treasonous sentiments in the land and especially in the Masonic orders. That same year a lodge of Illuminati was uncovered in Prague, and names of high officials were increasingly mentioned in secret police reports to the emperor. As Landon points out, Austria was fast becoming a police state.

This was the demoralizing situation for Austrian Freemasons when Mozart and Schikaneder decided that their Singspiel would be more than merely light and entertaining, that it would demonstrate the probity and superiority of Masonic teachings. They may have had hopes of saving the Craft from total suppression, but those hopes were in vain. Leopold II died just six months after *The Magic Flute's* premiere and he was succeeded by his son, Francis II. The imperial government under the young and inexperienced Francis became dominated by conservative advisors and consequently swung even further to the right. In June of 1795 an order came down to close all Masonic lodges and other secret societies and Freemasonry ceased to exist in Austria for more than a century.