

Mozart's Other Masonic Opera

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No, the title of this article is not a mistake. More than one of Mozart's operas contains material of significance to Freemasons, although this is apparently not widely recognized to be so. The cause is probably a lack of study and consideration, rather than the extreme subtlety of the subject matter. Most Masonic commentators on Mozart's music have been content to address only the obvious relationships of his music to the Craft, for example, those pieces (Masonic Funeral Music, Little Masonic Music) that explicitly mention Masonry in their title, along with his final opera, The Magic Flute. But we shall see that another of Mozart's operas, The Abduction From the Seraglio, is also susceptible of Masonic interpretation.

The Magic Flute

Before addressing The Abduction, it is worthwhile looking at The Magic Flute again, for its customary analysis shows how the obvious and facile can obscure the more interesting and challenging aspects of a work. The Magic Flute is, of course, well-known for its content relating to Masonic ceremonies and symbols. Indeed, these are drawn upon so heavily that portions of the opera seem nonsensical, pointless, or melodramatically overdrawn to those unfamiliar with the Craft. Even with this substantial Masonic content, however, The Magic Flute concerns itself with only one portion of Masonry, that of the first degree or Entered Apprentice. It is also important to note that Mozart's music is only half of the tale of this opera: As much is due to the other Freemason responsible for its creation, Emanuel Schikaneder, who wrote the libretto and also originated the part of Papageno in the first performances.

As for most operas, the plot of The Magic Flute is not easily summarized. Act I begins with the noble prince Tamino pursued by a giant snake.

Falling insensible, he is rescued at the last minute by three warrior ladies in the service of the Queen of the Night. Struck by his physical attractiveness, they depart to inform their mistress of the presence of this stranger. When Tamino recovers, he encounters Papageno, the opera's comic relief, who falsely claims to have slain the monster. Suitable punishment is administered by the three ladies for this dishonesty who then inform Tamino that the Queen of the Night requires his service to free her daughter, Pamina, from being held captive by her father, Sarastro. Armed with magic implements (the flute of the title, as well as bells given to Papageno), Tamino and Papageno set off to free Pamina. As the end of the act nears, they become aware of the deception worked upon them by the Queen when they find that Sarastro, far from reveling in villainy, is found instead to rule in the Temple of Wisdom. Act II follows the pair as they are considered for initiation into the Temple, endure trials and temptations, and finally achieve appropriate rewards as the deceitful Queen and her minions are brought to ultimate defeat.

The obvious Masonic elements of The Magic Flute are the rituals of acceptance for initiation that begin Act II, and the ceremonies and trials that ensue. However, there are many other symbols present in this opera that remind us of the lessons of the first degree. Some of these are no longer considered entirely acceptable by modern standards: In particular, there are many references to the weakness of women and their unsuitability for leadership, as symbolized not only by the Queen of the Night's treachery but also by Pamina's readiness to desert Tamino when he is under a vow of silence. The character of Monostatos, the Moor, is also representative of evil, especially lustfulness; audiences of the time must have been shocked at his musical declaration of desire for a white woman. (At least one current translator of this

opera has substituted obesity for black skin as Monostatos' undesirable physical characteristic, to avoid the obloquy that might come upon a modern production of The Magic Flute in a faithful English translation of the original German.) It is quite possible that only Mozart's music has kept this opera from falling into disfavor due to these representations, common in 18th century works but unfashionable in the 20th.

Taken as a whole The Magic Flute symbolizes much more of the journey of the newly-made Mason, however, or perhaps even that of all of Mankind. From the very first moments, when Tamino is menaced by the snake, we are invited to consider how man begins his existence. The snake may be taken as a symbol of ignorance, ready to devour even the aristocrat, such as Tamino, as well as the common people. (The similarity of the snake to that of the dragon in the opening cantos of Spenser's The Faerie Queen, where the monster represents Error is not necessarily coincidental.) The rescue from the symbol of ignorance is effected, however, by the forces of superstition. Some commentators identify the Queen of the Night with Lilith, the mythical first wife of Adam, who rejected God and became a demon of the night, attempting to entrap the souls of men by seduction. Tamino and Papageno indeed fall victim to the Queen's blandishments and succeed in "rescuing" Pamina by stealth.

Wisdom is not to be gained by dishonest means, however, and Tamino fortunately addresses the guardians of Wisdom's Temple candidly in his desire for a direct confrontation with Sarastro. It is then that the trickery worked on the searchers becomes clear. This scene teaches that while superstition may appeal of itself to one who is ignorant, those in the grip of false beliefs must choose to free themselves by their own actions. The relationship to the requirement to seek Masonic membership voluntarily is apparent. Sarastro makes clear to Tamino and Papageno how they have been victimized. Desiring further enlightenment, they are at once plunged into darkness, a phenomenon that will surprise no Mason.

It is not necessary to elaborate on the committee that considers Tamino's application for admission to the Temple of Wisdom nor on the trials of darkness, silence, circumspection, privation, and even fire and water that he must undergo; their meaning is quite transparent. But it is worth looking further into the character of Papageno, who accompanies Tamino into the chamber of reflection and there experiences some of the same tests. Papageno fails these tests miserably, but surprisingly is rewarded nonetheless. What conclusions are we to draw from this paradox? It is that Papageno differs significantly from Monostatos or the Queen of the Night in a most important way: He has at least endeavored to seek wisdom and climb above his simple and ignorant origins among the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. The Queen of the Night wishes to enslave all; Papageno desires at least freedom for himself. Monostatos would seize Pamina by force; Papageno hopes for a wife of his own to be given him. Despite his inability to pass the severe tests required for a disciple of wisdom, Papageno makes one vital decision: He chooses to be led by those who have acquired wisdom. From this comes his entitlement to earthly reward, if not celestial illumination. As the higher degrees of Masonry speak to the duties of the sagacious to provide wise leadership, there is also a duty incumbent upon the masses, who themselves may be unable to accept the stern demands of wisdom, at least to choose enlightened leaders. When the masses seek immediate gratification by setting above them those who rule in the name of ignorance and superstition, the misery of all is the inevitable result.

The Abduction From the Seraglio

The libretto of The Abduction From the Seraglio was written by Gottlieb Stephanie the Younger. My sources are silent on the Masonic membership of this author, who also wrote the libretto for Mozart's chamber opera, The Impresario. Nevertheless, the internal symbolism we shall examine is convincing evidence of the linkage of The Abduction to the lessons of the Master Mason's degree.

At the time the scenario of The Abduction was developed, Europe was in the grip of a morbid fascination with the Turks, whose Ottoman Empire had expanded into the Balkans, threatening the central European powers. Despite the threat to their polities and customs, the allure of the "mysterious East" held the attention of much of the populace for a lengthy period, casting a significant influence on the arts. Many composers besides Mozart were drawn by this Oriental magnetism: We have only to look to Beethoven's incidental music for the Ruins of Athens, Rossini's opera, The Siege of Corinth, and Ludwig Spohr's Harmonie-und Janzarimusik (known in English as the Nocturne for Winds and Turkish Band) for ready examples of the effect the Turks had on Western music.

The action of The Abduction takes place in Turkey itself, entirely in the domain of the Pasha Selim. Constanze, a Spanish noblewoman, Blonda, her English maid, and Pedrillo, a valet, are held prisoner there, having been either shipwrecked on the coast or captured by pirates and sold into slavery; different versions of the libretto do not agree on these details, which have occurred before the curtain rises. Selim wishes to make Constanze his wife, while his major-domo, Osmin, has similar designs on Blonda. As the opera begins, Belmonte, Constanze's betrothed, has arrived to effect a rescue. Osmin, already distrustful of Pedrillo, has his suspicions raised further by Belmonte's appearance. Pedrillo nevertheless manages to insinuate Belmonte into the Pasha's household by introducing him as an architect.

Several Masonic elements have already made their appearance in definite terms: Belmonte has traveled from Spain, in the West, to Turkey, in the East, in search of something that has been lost. Traveling in a foreign country, he presents himself as an architect, a profession that we Masonically identify with that of Master Mason.

However, the Masonic reader or listener should, at this point, recognize also that Belmonte and Pedrillo have chosen the path of stealth and dishonesty. Without having met the Pasha nor

presented his case to him, Belmonte sets out to deceive and rob him. There is further evidence of Belmonte's flawed character to come: When at last he has a moment alone with his beloved Constanze, he can barely wait to ask her if she has indeed been true to him, despite the Pasha's blandishments. Despite the long journey he has made and the risks yet to be undergone, he is already questioning the value of the prize. How many Masons have exhibited such behavior, when, after receiving three or even thirty-two degrees, then want to know, "Is that all there is?" Belmonte is all too typical of the vast numbers among all mankind who do not clearly choose, understand, and value the goals they set in life and reach the grave not knowing if their lives have been worthwhile.

Constanze is rightly furious with him for doubting her steadfastness. Her dramatic aria, "Martern Aller Arten," recounts how she is prepared to endure "tortures of all kinds" rather than submit to the Pasha. Blonda, too, has plenty of opportunity to defy the lustful Osmin and his threats. In The Magic Flute, women are presented as weak and unfit for enlightenment and leadership; quite a different view may be seen in The Abduction, where they have the courage to stand up to their tormentors.

Meanwhile, Belmonte and Pedrillo proceed with their plan. The women are told to be ready to escape by ladder from their windows that night. Pedrillo then engages Osmin in a drinking bout — and, should the wine not prove enough to render him insensible, Pedrillo adds a sleeping draught to the bottle. Here we have more unMasonic behavior by our "heroes": Intemperance, further deception, and the inducement of a Moslem to break his religion's solemn strictures against the use of alcohol. Osmin may not be a particularly sympathetic character, but the two Spaniards do not have all that much to recommend them, either. And, as we might by now think that they deserve, the planned "abduction" does not work, and the four Westerners are caught.

Belmonte has one last ignoble resort: bribery. "I come from a noble Spanish family," he says,

"and can pay any ransom you might demand. My name is Lostados."

"Lostados?" demands the Pasha. "Do you know the Commandant of Kau?"

"He is my father," Belmonte replies.

"Know, wretch, that your father and his forces drove me from my native land, robbed me of my beloved, and cost me my fortune. O happy day, that has placed the son of my greatest enemy in my hands!" Selim and Osmin depart to make plans for the torture and execution of the four Westerners, who are left to sing a mournful quartet.

But the opera does not end here. When the Pasha Selim returns, he has a surprise for the four. In one of the most inspiring and dramatic moments in opera, he declares: "I detest your father too much ever to follow in his footsteps. Take your passports. Take your womenfolk. Take your freedom. Your ship is the harbor. Go to your father. Tell him that you were in my power, but I set you free." Osmin, enraged, demands satisfaction for the many wrongs he has suffered, but the Pasha has a word for him too. "What one cannot obtain by benevolence, it is unwise to seek by force."

In this stirring final scene, Pasha Selim teaches Belmonte the true lessons of Masonry — benevolence, generosity, forgiveness. Struck by this unexpected turn of events, Constanze wonders if she has made the wrong choice, but it is too late for her to remain with the Pasha. The opera concludes with a vaudeville in which the four express their gratitude and vow to tell the story of the Pasha's wisdom and magnanimity far and wide, and a chorus of janissaries sings the Pasha's praises.

Rather than dealing in Masonic symbolism, as does much of The Magic Flute, this opera deals in the most vital part of Masonry: How a Master Mason should behave. If Belmonte exhibits the characteristics of a candidate for the Master Mason's degree, we may see in the Pasha the character of the Worshipful Master, charged

with completing the candidate's education at a time when the candidate may think himself already fully capable and qualified. The W.M. of a Lodge is, after all, in many ways identified with a monarch, such as the Pasha, and the members of his Lodge must hope that he will govern the Lodge with the same virtuous characteristics as were shown by Pasha Selim in the final scene.

The final scenes of the opera also remind us of that time when our earthly schemes shall prove ultimately futile, and, despite every form of trickery, we must face a grim finality. Then it is only our humble dependence on the Supreme Grand Master above that will preserve us from oblivion, and it is that benevolence that must be our conclusive hope. Then, as did the four at the end of the opera, we shall express our thanks and, hoisting anchor, set forth in our ark upon the uncharted sea in confidence that there is a distant shore to receive us.

With these interpretations as a guide, can there be any doubt that The Abduction From The Seraglio is indeed "Mozart's other Masonic opera?"