

## The dark side of Enlightenment

«And this year, what are you doing at the Festival?» «*The Magic Flute.*» «Oh, wonderful!»

Every time someone comes to know that you have to stage the *Flute*, the answer is invariably the same: *wonderful*. And who am I to contradict my interlocutors?

The fact is that *Flute* is surely wonderful for the audience, but it gives a hard time to the poor director who is put into the troubles to face it from the other side of the curtain.

Indeed, there is no opera that lends itself to more different interpretations than this work of Mozart's maturity (if one can speak of maturity for a genius who died at 35). Apparently it is a children's story, but the degree of nonsense is so high to make any creations of the Grimm Brothers (or any films by Tim Burton) turn pale. You can always study all the masonic implications of this libretto, choice that gifts you with an intellectual glow: the fight between Enlightenment and Obscurantism is pretty evident, but most of the symbols and of the allusions remain inexplicable, and can be interpreted in the most imaginative and contradictory ways. What can the audience understand of all this?

There are even those who will read in the plot an allegory of the late Emperor Joseph II (Tamino) who fights against Maria Teresa (Queen of the Night), the Wife of Leopold II who was openly hostile to the Masonry. Is that what we really want to find in the *Magic Flute*? Even assuming that these are the real hidden meanings, a sort of an inner joke that at Mozart's time made someone laugh up his sleeve, how can we make it work today? Who knows anything about Austrian Emperors or Freemasonry?

Let's begin to bring some order to such a preposterous story (even if we're using the straightforward English version by Jeremy Sams, you will appreciate some general instructions): once upon a time there were two higher entities, Sarastro and the Queen of the Night, fighting each other. Sarastro has kidnapped Pamina, daughter of the Queen of the Night, and holds her captive. Now, that's a good starting point: Sarastro=good / Queen =bad. The Queen then chooses a young boy, Tamino, and convinces him to smuggle himself into Sarastro's palace and rescue Pamina. As a reward, he will be allowed to marry the girl. Pamina is really beautiful and Tamino accepts immediately. He will be accompanied, despite himself, by Papageno, a coward and liar bird catcher, which is not exactly the kind of body guard that you would choose to face an adventure that promises to be very dangerous. Ah, of

course, they will not go unarmed against the mighty Sarastro: Tamino is given a magic flute and Papageno receives a music box. Here the worldly-wise spectator should begin to doubt about the real intentions of the Queen, who offers them these "non-conventional weapons" – not to mention the sanity of Tamino who accepts them. Thus, Sarastro=bad, Queen=eccentric. Arriving at the palace, Tamino understands that the Queen did not tell him the whole truth. Sarastro does not seem entirely unreasonable, and defends Pamina's honor when Monostatos, the jailer, dares to set his eyes on her. Sarastro actually realizes that Tamino and Pamina are meant for each other, but he will allow them to leave the building only once they have passed through some difficult trials of initiation. The Queen of the Night will do anything to prevent this, the killing of Sarastro included. To achieve the crime, she gives a knife to Pamina and commands her to stab Sarastro to death. The girl accepts: she is in despair as Tamino has refused to speak to her along the whole second act (but the trial of silence is just one of the steps requested to Tamino for their salvation – and a tenor who doesn't sing should be accounted as gold in any opera...). Now: Sarastro=good, Queen=bad, Pamina=stupid. But the Queen's plots fail because, of course, only love and not vengeance leads to happiness. And Papageno? Involved in tasks requiring the courage that he has not, he will still be rewarded with his Papagena...

What can be said about such a story? And I kept silent on all the dragons, ladies, spirits, dancing animals and guards that punctuate the story. Only in a dream things can happen so inconsequentially. Wait a moment... *Flute* could be a dream. Indeed, the dream of a boy (Tamino) in love with a girl (Pamina) whose mother does not want to agree them to marry. And in his agitated sleeps Tamino dreams, and in his dreams come - transfigured - all the people of his real life: Sarastro, his father; Papageno, the grocer; Papagena, the florist girl; Monostatos, the bully who is courting Pamina; the three ladies, his nosy and gossipy spinster aunts... And if it's the daylight that dissolves the anguish of sleep - as well as it's the wisdom of Sarastro that dissolves the obscurantism of the Queen of the Night - to give coherence to any extravagances of such a whacky booklet occurs, needless to say, the genius never asleep of our Wolfgang.

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