



Opera Packs

***The Magic Flute* Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

Mozart's Childhood

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, in 1756, the youngest of a very musical family. His sister Anna (five years older than him) was already learning the piano and his father, Leopold Mozart, was a court musician to the Archbishop of Salzburg. Right from the start Wolfgang loved the sound of music and he used to sit by his sister whenever she practised the piano. By the time he was four he could pick out tunes on the keyboard by himself, at five he was composing his own music, at six he had started to teach himself the violin and at seven he was playing the organ (though he was so small he couldn't reach the foot pedals and he had to play the instrument standing up). By this time, of course, his father had realised he had a genius on his hands and had begun to teach the boy properly. Leopold was extremely well educated and, under his guidance, his children learnt music theory, arithmetic (Wolfgang was very good at this) Italian, French, Latin, and a little English. They also became fine pianists – so fine that their parents took them round Europe to show them off as child prodigies.

Mozart Grows Up

For seven years Mozart lived the life of a child star. His keyboard playing was marvellous (and remained so for the rest of his life) but what clinched his success was his personality. He was a very affectionate boy and, surrounded by love and admiration, never doubted for a moment that everybody loved him. Certainly all the kings and queens of Europe doted on him – the Empress Maria Theresa had him sitting on her lap, the French princesses kissed him, even George III waved to him in St James's Park. It was a dazzling life while it lasted – but it meant that Mozart found it extremely difficult to grow up. His father dominated his teenage years and was still managing him when he turned 25. Mozart eventually decided he had had enough and broke free. He severed his Salzburg connections, married a girl his father disliked, and set up as an independent musician in Vienna.

From then until the year of his death (1791) Mozart lived the life of a free-lance composer. He taught, he performed and he wrote music to commission. He was never poverty stricken, but cash flow was always a problem (especially as he had picked up a taste for luxury in his childhood). He lived with his wife in large Viennese apartments, dressed well, ate well, played billiards, had six children and, apparently, worked himself to death. By the time he wrote *The Magic Flute* (in the summer of 1791) he had composed over 40 symphonies, 45 concertos, 17 Masses and a dozen operas.

The Magic Flute

The summer of 1791 was a particularly harrasing time for Mozart, he had *another* opera to finish, he'd run out of money and he was worried about his wife's health. But, even so, his letters are full of the things that cheered him up, writing music in a cool summer house, eating a delicious dish of sturgeon, sending rude jokes his music students and chatting to the mice who were keeping him awake. And it is Mozart's love of ordinary things (and ordinary people) that comes across in *The Magic Flute*. It was written as a *singspiel* (that is a comic opera with spoken dialogue) and it was put on in a seedy wooden theatre in the Viennese suburbs. In spite of the venue, the whole of Vienna turned up to watch and the theatre was packed every night. It was a show that had something for everyone.

The Story

The opera is about a prince who goes through a series of trials and grows up. This is ultimately a serious story, but Mozart wanted everybody to enjoy it and he filled the piece with popular tunes, magic effects, dancing animals, glittering arias – and wonderful ordinary people.

The Overture

The opera begins with a solemn fanfare on the brass. After that the music gets down to a cheerful bustling tune but it gives way, in the middle, to a solemn three-fold series of chords on the trombones. Trombones were always used for supernatural effects in the 18th century, and these chords re-appear in *The Magic Flute* whenever the hero gets a step further on his journey to wisdom and maturity.

The Kingdom of Night

The curtain goes up on a young man, struggling with a serpent and calling out for help; he faints just as three ladies appear from nowhere. They kill the monster (just by pointing their spears at it) and sing a trio, congratulating themselves on their bravery. They are servants of the Queen of Night, and wear glittering blue/black dresses and wigs; they pause to admire the young man but decide (reluctantly) to leave him where he is, and go and tell their Queen about him.

Papageno

The young man wakes up, but he is completely unnerved – the dead serpent frightens him, and the sound of some panpipes has him running off to the wings. The panpipes belong to Papageno, the bird catcher, who now enters playing his pipes and singing a catchy tune (very like a folk song). He tells us what a brilliant bird catcher he is – and how useless he is at catching the one thing he really wants, a girlfriend. You will see that in the ENO production Papageno really *does* catch birds (this part of the show is always rather tense for the bird handler backstage).

The young man re-appears and, having established that Papageno *is* a man (he is so covered with feathers that it's difficult to be sure), he settles down for a chat. He says *his* name is Prince Tamino, and he congratulates Papageno on killing the serpent.

Papageno cheerfully takes the credit for this mighty deed, until he is interrupted by the Three Ladies, who make one of their sudden appearances. They scold Papageno for telling lies and lock his mouth with a magic padlock. Papageno mimes to the Prince to release him, but the Prince isn't listening. The Ladies have given him a portrait of the Queen's daughter – Pamina. One look, and Tamino has fallen in love.

The Queen of Night

He has barely recovered himself when some insistent violins, over a thrashing bass, tell us that the Queen of Night has arrived. The sky changes to jet black and, in the ENO production, we see her framed against a night sky, sacrificing Papageno's birds. She tells Tamino that her daughter has been kidnapped by an evil sorcerer and that she expects *him* to rescue her. She punches this home with a coloratura aria – agile, high and glittering – Tamino is completely dazzled by her, as are we – and she disappears as abruptly as she appeared.

Magic Gifts

At last Papageno can make himself heard, and his indignant 'Hmm Hmm Hmm's!' start off the next musical number, the quintet. He still can't speak of course, but the Ladies sail in, unlock his padlock and give Tamino a gift, to help him in his quest. It is a magic flute. Papageno discovers that he is supposed to go with the Prince and, before he can sneak off, he is given a gift as well, a set of magic bells. Both men are delighted but, when they ask the way to Sarastro's Kingdom, the Ladies become unusually solemn. The music changes gear and some plucked strings, clarinets and high bassoons set a new mood. It is as though we have already wandered into Sarastro's land and the Ladies are more affected than they realise. They tell the men that they will be guided by three Boys ('young, fair, but old in wisdom') and they wish them well in their journey.

Pamina

The next scene is set in Sarastro's country. Pamina is dragged in by the evil Monostatos and tied to her bed. The cords are in fact extremely easy to untie, but Pamina is so distressed that she just faints, whereupon (to our immense surprise) Papageno stumbles on the scene. He and Tamino have got separated, and it is the bird catcher who has found the Princess first. Papageno and Pamina get on immediately; he tells her all about the girlfriend he hasn't got, and they sing a duet in praise of love, and the destiny of the human race.

The Three Doors

The scene shifts to another part of Sarastro's land where Prince Tamino enters to a solemn march, and accompanied by three boys. They advise him to be "constant, patient and silent," but these virtues are too mature for Tamino, who can only ask anxiously after Pamina. The boys are unable to be more explicit, and they leave as Tamino turns to examine the buildings in front of him. They are three temples, covered with Egyptian hieroglyphs and containing three large doors. Each door has an inscription, which Tamino reads in turn as he attempts to enter. At the first two doors, dedicated to Reason and Nature, unseen voices cry out "go back!" but the last door, dedicated to Wisdom, opens quietly and an old priest comes out.

Tamino (and the audience) are prepared for a sinister figure, but the priest turns out to be grave and friendly. He gently tells the Prince that Sarastro rules in the Temple of Wisdom, that he is wise and just but, even so, he *has* kidnapped Pamina. Tamino is dismayed, furious and, eventually, bewildered. He demands explanations, but the priest says he is under an oath of silence and quietly withdraws. And, to Tamino's surprise, he finds he has made a friend.

Magic Music

Left alone the Prince plays his flute (comforted by offstage voices that assure him that Pamina is still alive) and as he does so, wild animals appear – enchanted by the music. Papageno's panpipe is heard off stage and Tamino rushes off in its direction. At which point Papageno and Pamina appear from the *opposite* side of the stage. Unlike Tamino they have not worked out the nature of Sarastro's land and are still trying to escape. They run straight

into the arms of Monostatos and his men and are about to be tied up, when Papageno remembers his magic bells. He plays a little dance tune on them and, to everybody's amazement, the guards drop their ropes and dance off singing.

However, they haven't escaped. A march heralds the arrival of Sarastro and the difference between Papageno and Pamina becomes immediately apparent. The bird catcher wants to hide, or at least think up a good story, but Pamina cries out that, whatever happens, they must tell the truth; it is one of the great turning points of the opera.

Sarastro

Sarastro enters with a crowd of his followers, the Brotherhood of priests and their families. He is a benevolent figure, dressed in an ordinary brown jacket, and he tells Pamina that he has kidnapped her for her own good. Her father is dead, and she had to be rescued from the domination of her mother. So far so good, but then he adds that all women should be guided by men (and he loses the sympathy of at least half the audience).

Monostatos bustles on with Tamino under arrest, Sarastro greets the Prince and Pamina and Tamino see each other for the first time. They fall in love at once (it takes them a mere 15 bars of music). Sarastro proceeds to wrap up the act. Tamino and Papageno are told that they must get ready for initiation into the Brotherhood, and Pamina is politely put to one side. Papageno looks as if he'd like to protest, but the two young men are led away.

The Brotherhood

Act 2 is dominated by the initiation trials, though you will notice that, whereas the men understand what is going on, Pamina is left in ignorance. First however we see Sarastro and the Brotherhood. They enter to a flowing march, scored for trombones and basset horns, and they settle down to discuss Prince Tamino. Sarastro sees in him his successor, but the priests are not confident he'll get through the trials. "He is after all only a prince," says one of them, "More than that," replies Sarastro, "he is a man!" As the priests agree to let the trials proceed, they blow horns to the three-fold rhythm we heard in the overture, and Sarastro sings a solemn prayer to the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris.

The First Trial

The scene switches to an underground vault. Some skeletons are mouldering in the alcoves and Tamino and Papageno are led in by two priests. Their blindfolds are removed and they are told that the first test will be the Trial of Silence. Papageno has to be bribed to take part, and the priests leave with some very elderly batchelor advice about the wickedness of women. Their warnings are immediately fulfilled by the sudden appearance of the Ladies (nobody ever understands how they got in). They are appalled that the two men are in the hands of the enemy and try to shake them out of the vow of silence. However the men (just) manage to stay firm and the scene ends with a three-fold chord of triumph; the trial has been passed. (The priests are clearly very lenient examiners, Papageno has actually been chattering throughout.)

Pamina now undergoes her trials. She is discovered asleep in the moonlight by Monostatos. The colours of his clothes, sparkly black and shot green, have already alerted us to the fact that he should be in the opposite camp (the Kingdom of Night) and now we find him lusting over Pamina. His aria is rapid and furtive – sung in an excited *pianissimo* and topped by a piccolo. But, before he can touch the girl, there is a clap of thunder and the Queen appears.

She is furious with her daughter for collaborating with the enemy and we now hear that Pamina's father was a member of the Brotherhood himself. Indeed he gave the symbol of power, the Circle of the Sun, to Sarastro. The Queen gives Pamina a dagger and demands she kill Sarastro and get the Circle back. The girl recoils and the Queen sings another aria,

even more glittering than the first. Drums and trumpets drive her on as she plots her revenge, and the aria reaches its climax with a startling top F.

Pamina is left alone, to be comforted by her intended victim. Sarastro enters, he knows exactly what has happened and, in a serene aria (the absolute counterpart of the Queen's last effort) puts vengeance and murder in their place: "Here," he says, "we have *other* rules..."

The Second Trial

Meanwhile the men are still in the dark. Tamino plays his flute, while an old hag offers Papageno some refreshment. He sits down to chat to her and is horrified when she tells him she is eighteen, and that her boyfriend's name is 'Papageno'. "What is your name?" he asks, but there is a clap of thunder and she disappears. The Boys bring in some food, which cheers Papageno up, but Tamino continues to play his flute and the melody attracts Pamina. Tamino cannot talk to her and turns away. Papageno doesn't say anything either (he's got his mouth stuffed with food) and Pamina is overcome with dismay. She sings a pain filled aria and leaves – just as we hear the three-fold motif again; the men have come through their second trial.

An Interruption

A chorus of priests praise Isis and Osiris (and Tamino) when Pamina rushes in. The whole Brotherhood are appalled at a woman interrupting their ceremonies but Sarastro (who has clearly been re-thinking his ideas on women) lets her stay. He tells the lovers to say farewell to each other, but assures them they will meet again.

Papagena

Everybody leaves and Papageno stumbles in, lost and frightened. He and Tamino are now on different tacks and a priest tells him that he will never become of truly enlightened. Papageno assures him that he doesn't mind that much, at which the priest shakes his head and leaves him with a bottle of wine. Papageno settles down to enjoy himself, Viennese fashion. He drinks his wine and sings a popular Viennese song (with magic bell accompaniment) and he has just begun to brood on his missing girlfriend, when the old hag limps in. She tells him very firmly that he has no chance of getting out of the underground vault unless he promises to marry her. Papageno reluctantly agrees and, to his astonishment, she straightens up, throws off her rags and is revealed as the young and beautiful Papagena! Papageno dashes towards her, but she is hustled off by the priests, who tell him he is not worthy of her.

The Third Trial

We move to the surface to find Pamina completely bewildered by the turn of events and intent on suicide. She is providentially stopped by the Three Boys and dashes off to join Tamino for his final trial. The last trial is introduced by two armed men with flaming helmets. They sing a solemn chorale as Tamino realises he will be tested by fire and water. Before he can begin, Pamina rushes in. She has been allowed to join him and Tamino gravely hands over his magic flute. Following its sound, Pamina leads her lover through the flames and water and they emerge safe and sound to a triumphant chorus.

Papageno finds a wife

Papageno is also facing death; he is so fed up with losing Papagena that he has decided to hang himself. He puts a noose round his neck and finds himself curiously reluctant to jump. Fortunately the Three Boys rush in and remind him to play the magic bells. This does the trick and Papagena descends to the stage in a bird's nest. Papageno can hardly contain himself, and he courts her in a wonderful bird-like duet. They immediately settle down to discuss the size of their family...

The Circle of the Sun

The sky darkens as the Queen, her ladies and Monostatos make a last attempt to destroy Sarastro's kingdom. They come in stealthily, wheeling an absurd cannon, and are swept away by the rising Sun. Sarastro hands the Circle of the Sun round the newly enlightened Tamino and *he* passes it on to Pamina. The opera ends with a chorus of praise for the gods, and a surprise appearance of Papageno and his wife, already blessed with some new chicks.

Sarah Lenton for ENO Baylis, 2002

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