

OPERA MATTERS: *THE MAGIC FLUTE*

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A look at the background to the operas produced by Manitoba Opera and what was happening in the world and in Winnipeg at the time of those operas were first produced.

“Mozart’s Finest Opera”

Milton Cross, who for decades was the voice of the Metropolitan Opera’s Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts, described the *The Magic Flute* as Mozart’s finest opera: “In it, he combined simple German folk tunes and classic operatic writing with brilliant effect. The plot is a curious hodgepodge of political satire, the symbolism of Freemasonry, and naïve humor, set against an Egyptian background.” Cross suggests that the focal point of the opera’s action, the Temple of Isis, represents Freemasonry; that Pamina represents all that is best in the Austrian people; that the shrill Queen of the Night was a parody of dowager Empress Maria Theresa, who virulently opposed Freemasonry, despite the fact that her son, Emperor Joseph II, was a Freemason himself and was considered a liberal and enlightened monarch (notwithstanding Peter Shaffer’s parody of him in the play and movie *Amadeus*). Prince Tamino was likely symbolic of the Emperor. Finally, the trials by fire and water that Pamina and Tamino had to endure, the conflict between light and darkness, goodness and evil and the final triumph of good over evil are all to be found in Freemasonry and were ideas typical of the period known as “The Enlightenment.”

(Source: Cross, Milton, The New Milton Cross Complete Stories of the Great Operas, Doubleday, New York, 1955, pp 631, 632)

Opera Can be Fun

Mozart, as portrayed in Shaffer’s play was a fun-loving, bawdy genius who believed that music could be fun and that opera could be fun. All of his operas have humour, but especially his operas in German which were meant to be very funny and understood by his German-speaking audience. Mozart and Emmanuel Schikaneder, his librettist and the director of the Theater auf der Wieden in the then suburban district of Wieden, just outside Vienna, created *The Magic Flute* to be just that: funny and understandable by everyone. To that mix, Mozart added the sublime music that endures to this day.

Singspiel vs. Opera

The Magic Flute is a “singspiel,” but a classical variant of it. Singspiel, literally “sing-play,” is usually translated as musical comedy or operetta. Paul Lang, in his *The Experience of Opera*, notes that singspiel in Mozart’s time was generally a “type of entertainment whose stock characters, incidents, and other theatrical ingredients were familiar and popular.” However, Lang continued:

The singspiel was a very special kind of opera; consistency of musical style was not expected, as the individual numbers were separated by spoken dialogue rather than by recitative and did not need logical or musical continuity. As professional entertainers, Mozart and Schikaneder were,

of course, bound to respect this tradition, and indeed externally they held fast to the standard recipe. In none of his mature operas did Mozart use such a wide variety of styles and genres, from German folksong to the dizzying coloratura of the old seria, from the solemn choral anthem to the lightning-fast buffa ensemble. But while the mixture is heterogeneous, it corresponds to the spirit of the fantastic fairytale, and the whole is held together by an admirable musical logic based on tonal concordances.

We called the genre singspiel but should qualify it as Viennese singspiel, for it is different from its German counterpart. The Viennese mixture of German, Italian and French elements is more operatic in nature and tone and demands fully qualified opera singers rather than actors who can also sing simple songs.

(Source, Lang, Paul, The Experience of Opera, W.W.Norton & Company, New York, 1973, pp. 95 and 96.)

Mozart was clearly trying to create a new, uniquely German style of opera and in doing so created this marvellous opera that is equally entertaining and enlightening to both the opera lover and the newcomer to opera.

What was happening in the World in 1791

The event dominating all political thought in Europe was the French revolution. The Bastille had been stormed on July 14, 1789 and this act of defiance of royal power, followed by a mob attacking the Palace of Versailles in October 1789 led to the royal family closeting themselves in the Tuileries Palace in Paris. In an ill-advised move, recommended by Queen Marie Antoinette (sister of Emperor Joseph II of Austria), the royal family, disguised as servants, tried to flee to safety in June 1791 but were recognized and returned to Paris in disgrace, leading to their house arrest in the Tuileries. The king was so discredited by this attempt that the revolution moved inexorably towards abolition of the monarchy, the trial for treason of the King and Marie Antoinette and their eventual guillotining.

In Vienna, all the talk was of intervention to restore King Louis XVI to his throne, as an attack on one monarchy was considered an attack on all monarchies, not to mention Emperor Joseph's concern for his sister. In fact, war broke out with Austria the following year, but France won and the war simply served to hasten the declaration of the French republic and the charges of treason levied against Louis and Marie Antoinette.

Mozart would certainly have been aware that an opera exalting the merits of a royal personage (Prince Tamino) would be welcomed in the Vienna of 1791.

What was happening in Canada when *The Magic Flute* premiered in 1791?

In the wake of the American Revolution, waves of United Empire Loyalists (Americans remaining loyal to the British Crown) fled the United States to settle in the British Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec. In order to defend the remaining British colonies in North America, soldiers of the many British regiments that fought in the war were also encouraged to settle in British North America by the grant of free land.

In recognition of the influx of loyalists, the British Government decided to divide the Province of Quebec into two new colonies: The *Constitutional Act, 1791*, created Upper Canada and Lower Canada and granted legislatures to both new provinces. Upper Canada was given English law and institutions, while Lower Canada was allowed to retain the French language, its Civil Code, based on French law and Roman Catholic religious institutions.

The steps in the “Canadas” followed the 1784 decision to create the new Province of New Brunswick out of the western portion of Nova Scotia in recognition of the loyalist population settling in the Saint John River valley. Nova Scotia had been granted a legislative assembly in 1754 and New Brunswick was granted an assembly when it was created in 1784.

Hence, at the time of Mozart, Canada experienced not only war with the United States but also the beginnings of Constitutional Government.