

Synopsis: The Magic Flute (*Die Zauberflöte*)

Composer: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Libretto: Emanuel Schikaneder

First Performance: Theater auf der Wieden, Vienna, September 30, 1791

Original Language: German

Act I.

Tamino, a soldier and explorer of royal lineage, hovers between life and death in a surreal landscape. He is threatened by a serpent and becomes overwhelmed, but three ladies in the service of the Queen of the Night save him. They admire him for awhile before departing to report their discovery. Tamino recovers and hides when the royal birdcatcher, Papageno, bounces in. The ladies return and, after introductions, give Tamino a portrait of the queen's daughter, Pamina, whom they say is enslaved by the evil Sarastro. They padlock Papageno's mouth for lying about slaying the serpent. Tamino immediately falls in love with Pamina's image ("Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön"). The Queen, appearing in a burst of thunder, grieves over the loss of her daughter and urges Tamino to rescue her ("Zum Leiden bin ich auserkoren"). The ladies hand Tamino a magic flute to ensure his safety on the journey. Papageno, freed from his silent bondage, is ordered to accompany him and is given magic bells. Three spirits are appointed to guide the travelers.

Elsewhere, the lecherous Monostatos pursues Pamina. He is frightened away by the feather-covered Papageno, who tells Pamina that Tamino loves her and is on his way to save her. He bemoans his own lack of a sweetheart, but Pamina comforts him (Duet: "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen").

Finding himself at the entrance to a temple devoted to reason, Tamino learns from a high priest that it is the Queen who is evil, not Sarastro, and that Pamina still lives. He plays on his flute, hoping it will lead her to him or vice versa. When he hears Papageno's pipes in return, he rushes off to follow the sound. Monostatos and his men chase Papageno and Pamina, but are rendered helpless by Papageno's magic bells. Sarastro, entering in ceremony, bewilders everyone by chastising Pamina, punishing Monostatos and welcoming Tamino into the sacred temple. Pamina and Tamino are enchanted by their brief glimpses of each other, while Papageno is terrified of everyone and everything. They are all led away to await their trials.

Act II.

Sarastro tells the priests that the young heroes will undergo initiation rites ("O Isis und Osiris") and that all their futures hang in the outcome. Tamino and Pamina bid each other farewell and Papageno joins Tamino as they are led off and sworn to silence. The three ladies appear to threaten and seduce them. They have no trouble derailing Papageno from his course of virtue, but Tamino remains firm.

Monostatos, meanwhile, makes his move on the sleeping Pamina ("Alles fühlt der Liebe Freuden"), but is chased away by the arrival of the Queen of the Night. She gives her daughter a dagger and orders her to murder Sarastro ("Der Hölle Rache"). Afterwards,

the distraught Pamina is confronted by Monostatos, then rescued from him and consoled by Sarastro (“In diesen heil’gen Hallen”).

Papageno is quick to break a new oath of fasting and jokes with a mysterious – and flirtatious – old lady, who vanishes as suddenly as she appears. Tamino remains steadfast, even breaking Pamina’s heart when she misunderstands his refusal to speak to her. (“Ach, ich fühl’s, es ist verschwunden”).

The priests inform Tamino that he has nearly completed his ordeal. Papageno, meanwhile, is eliminated from the trials for repeated violations. He impulsively asks for a drink and his wish is instantly fulfilled. Pushing his luck, he begs for a cuddly wife (“Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen”), but that request is granted in the form of the old lady. When he promises to take her as his wife (if not to be faithful), she transforms into the beautiful young Papagena and promptly disappears.

The spirits save the despairing Pamina from taking her own life. They lead her to Tamino where she and Tamino enjoy a tender reunion. She explains the magic flute’s origins to him before walking with him through the purifying trials of fire and water, with Tamino playing the flute as protection.

Papageno also is saved from attempted suicide by the spirits, who remind him that if he uses his magic bells he will find true happiness. When he plays the bells, Papagena appears again (Duet: “Pa-pa-pa-pagena! Pa-pa-pa-pagena!”) and their mating dance ensues.

The Queen of the Night, her three ladies, and Monostatos launch a final attack on the temple, but are defeated and swallowed up by the earth.

Sarastro presides over the initiation and unification of Pamina and Tamino and hands over to them the seven-pointed star, symbol of absolute power. It becomes clear that Sarastro has been testing the two all along so they could reign as his successors. Tamino’s explorations and Pamina’s ordeals are now at an end. Everyone unites in praising the couple and celebrating the triumph of courage, virtue, and wisdom as they begin a new golden age.