Masonic Ideas in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*

Of all of Mozart’s operas, *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflote* in German) is perhaps the one that most consistently confounds viewers, critics, and fans. While some see it as a simple fairy tale with numerous inconsistencies, others see it as an elaborate metaphor for the Enlightenment. While there may be elements of truth in both of these theories, one unifying theme crops up again and again in the opera: Freemasonry. *The Magic Flute*, in both its libretto and its score, is riddled with promotion of and symbolism for Masonic ideology.

*The Magic Flute* was composed in 1791, right before Mozart’s death, and set to a libretto written by Emanuel Schikaneder, a close family friend of the Mozarts. Both Mozart and Schikaneder were Freemasons, and probably very serious Freemasons: soon after he joined the lodge, Mozart convinced his father to join too, and there is evidence to support the fact that Mozart convinced Haydn to join as well. All in all, it seems as if Masonry was an important factor in the later part of Mozart’s life, and something that would have been on his mind at the time he wrote *The Magic Flute*. The Masons, a secret society started in the late 16th century, saw symbolic rituals, rites, and traditions as the means of approaching enlightenment, and promoted such revolutionary ideas as the one that goodness was not necessarily coincident with rank or birth. In general, the increased importance of rationalism, man (as opposed to state or church) and knowledge of the Enlightenment was paralleled by Masonic ideology. Though one can interpret practically every word of *The Magic Flute*’s libretto, every note of its music, as being of some Masonic import, I address here only the most important and fundamental similarities between the opera and Masonic teachings. It should also be noted that neither Mozart nor Schikaneder ever explicitly
confirmed that *Die Zauberflöte* was a Masonic opera, and therefore much of any Masonic interpretation of the opera is conjecture (even if it is very well-founded conjecture).

The opera’s libretto is filled with Masonic messages, from the very setting of the plot to the characters themselves. *The Magic Flute* takes place in Egypt, and references to Ancient Egypt and Persia abound; the Egyptian Gods Isis and Osiris figure prominently into the story, and Sarastro’s name is derived from Zoroaster, a semi-mythological Persian figure, for example. These two civilizations are of special importance to the Freemasons: their philosophies and discoveries were seen as a direct precursor to Masonic philosophy. In addition, Zoroaster himself was seen by the Masons as the incarnation of complete good. Another form of symbolism in the libretto is numerical. The number three, which in Masonry represents the central tenets of the society – will, wisdom, and intelligence – appears various times in the opera. There are three Ladies in the service of the Queen of the Night, three Boys who lead Tamino and Papageno on their quest, in the original cast three slaves and three priests, three temples, and three knocks on the doors of the temple. Three also figures prominently in the score, which will be addressed in more detail later. Throughout the opera, there are also constant references to sleep, night, and darkness, particularly in the beginning; towards the end, on the other hand, references to light, illumination, and awakening dominate. Before departing on his journey to Sarastro’s realm, Tamino asks himself “do I sleep or do I wake? Is this a dream or reality?” After he completes Sarastro’s trials, however, he is cast into blinding light, which represents him being “woken up”. In Masonic symbolism, a person is seen as “asleep” and “in the dark” until being awoken by enlightenment and Masonic initiation, and, in fact, during their initiation they are blindfolded, and once the blindfold is removed are they said to be “enlightened”. This is exactly paralleled by Tamino’s spiritual journey.

*Die Zauberflöte’s* strong characters, from The Queen of the Night to Pamina, all represent various elements of Masonic scripture. Papageno is at first reluctant to accompany Tamino on his journey; he

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prefers to lead a simple, unenlightened life. In this way, he represents the common person who the Masons see as not brave enough to embark on the journey of enlightenment (by joining the Masons), who values his life as it is more than the wisdom and knowledge he could attain through the Masons. The padlock used to punish Papageno for telling a lie also figures into Masonic ideology. The Masons place utmost importance on the truth, and, in fact, truthfulness is one of the prerequisites for becoming a Mason, and therefore for becoming “enlightened” as the Masons see it. In this vein, it is only once Papageno has the padlock removed from his lips and swears that “I will never tell a lie again” that he is able to begin his journey of enlightenment. Sarastro says about Tamino that “he is a prince, but more importantly, he is a man.” This is how he is viewed while in the court of Sarastro, which represents how everyone, from a prince to a pauper, becomes simply a man upon entering a Masonic lodge. Along with Papageno, Tamino represents a Masonic initiate. Unlike Papageno, who is cowardly and unwilling to achieve enlightenment at the cost of his own comfort, Tamino embodies the values that are required upon becoming a Mason – although he does not have them at the beginning. In the first scene of the opera, he displays his cowardice by running from a serpent, and his ignorance by blindly believing Papageno’s harmless lies and the Queen of the Night’s more sinister ones. Later in the opera, however, he has the traits of the ideal Mason: wise, brave, virtuous, and humble\textsuperscript{3}. Sarastro, then, represents the enlightened dictator who, through his tolerance, allows his people to achieve enlightenment themselves. His followers say that “He wisely decides and we gladly obey,” which fits perfectly with the prevalent Masonic idea that the truly enlightened form of government is not a republic or a democracy, but an enlightened dictator. He is the character who allows Tamino and Papageno to ascend into his ranks and achieve clarity of thought through a series of symbolic trials, much like a Masonic master.

The fact that the main antagonist of the opera is the Queen of the Night plays into the concept of light and dark, of enlightenment and ignorance, in Masonic teachings: whereas Sarastro is a king of illumination, the Queen of the Night tries to keep her subjects in the dark, unenlightened, just as she tries

to pull the wool over Tamino and Pamina’s eyes by turning them against Sarastro. She may not literally represent Maria Theresa or any other specific ruler, as many have interpreted her to, but she does represent absolutism, and is a foil to Sarastro’s enlightened dictatorship. Other symbols for different aspects of Freemasonry are plentiful as well. The padlock, besides the significance explained earlier, has another relation to Masonry: in the initiation ceremonies to many Masonic lodges, a padlock is placed over the lips of the initiate as a symbolic guard against “idle chatter,” as a secret society cannot very well function if its secrets are not kept. According to Masonic teachings, music’s purpose is to “inculcate feelings of humanity, wisdom and patience, virtue and honesty, loyalty to friends, and finally an understanding of freedom.” This role is fulfilled succinctly by the instruments in the opera (the titular flute and the magic bells). When Papageno plays his bells, they make Monostatos and his followers peaceful and companionable, where previously they were trying to capture and torture him and Pamina, essentially having engendered in them feelings of “humanity” and “virtue.” Elsewhere, Tamino similarly uses his flute to travel unharmed through the most hostile environments, also fulfilling music’s role according to the Masons.

The rituals that Tamino and Papageno undergo in The Magic Flute are similar enough to Masonic trials to be recognized, but different enough that they do not accidentally divulge any of the society’s secrets. Allegorical rituals are the key to any Masonic moral teachings. An initiate will undergo various trials to gain knowledge, understanding, and illumination. The way that Tamino is selected as fit to undergo Sarastro’s trial is that his case is brought before the priests, and after he is examined and found to be virtuous, fearless, and reticent, a vote is taken to decide whether he should be allowed. This entire process is almost exactly like the screening process for Masonic initiates: a candidate’s application is presented to a board, and he is examined to decide whether he embodies the characteristics of a Mason.

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5 Thomson, Katherine. The Masonic Thread in Mozart. (London: Lawrence and Wishart) 41.
among which are virtuousness, bravery, and humility. Then, the board votes, and it is only at this point, if the initiate has been approved, that he may begin the trials. The first two trials in the opera are largely designed to teach the virtue of silence: in the first one Tamino and Papageno are tempted to speak by the Three Ladies from the beginning of the play, and in the second by Pamina and Papagena. This directly corresponds to some of the initial trials given to potential initiates of a Masonic lodge: they are tested to ensure that they can keep silent when it is needed, so that the knowledge of the Masons is not spread to those who are not ready. The third and final trial involves overcoming fear of death. Bravery, especially in the face of death, is another prerequisite trait that is tested for in an initiate Mason.

Though perhaps the opera’s music on its own does not provide conclusive arguments in favor of Masonic ideals, it does back up the ideas found in the libretto through symbolism and other elements, and contains countless coded references to Masonry. At the beginning of the opera, three chords are sounded that are heard again several times throughout the opera. The overriding key of the opera is also E-flat, having three flats in the key signature. Firstly, these represent the pattern of knocking used to enter a Masonic lodge: an initiate would knock with roughly this rhythm in order to be identified as a member; and secondly, the aforementioned three basic tenets of Masonic teachings, as mentioned above: will, wisdom, and intelligence. It is usually agreed that the first part of the overture is representative of initiate’s journey: after the original sounding of the first 3 chords, the piece begins slowly, uncertainly, and not altogether happily. After a while, form is found and the piece turns into fugal imitative polyphony. This represents the transformation from uncertain, unenlightened individual to a Mason, an enlightened person with a sense of purpose and order in their life. As mentioned previously, the Masons believed music should serve didactic purposes as well, inspiring friendship, humanity, and understanding. Much like the major Enlightenment philosophers of the time, the Masons thought music should be simple

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and natural. This is reflected in several of *The Magic Flute*’s arias, especially Papageno’s. The character’s parts are so simple, it seems as if anyone could sing them, reflecting the Masonic ideal of equality and unity between nobility and the common man. However, some parts of *The Magic Flute* stand out as not sounding natural and simple, instead being complex, intimidating, and really not having anything to do with humanity, brotherhood, or loyalty: the Queen of the Night’s arias. Instead of making the viewer think of humanity, it seems as if you have to be almost inhuman to sing her parts. Mozart deliberately created this dichotomy to represent the difference between the tenets of absolutism at the time, and the more enlightened tenets of Masonry: while absolutism is about creating a distance between the common person and their ruler, Masonry is about bringing people, from rulers to ruled, together in brotherhood.

There is some question as to whether someone not initiated as a Mason would recognize the specific Masonic references of *The Magic Flute*. Whether they would or would not, the overall moral and ideological message conveyed is very obvious, and very Masonic in nature. Mozart’s final work advocates enlightenment through allegorical ritual, brotherhood, and equality with its every element, from the characters to the overture to the instruments used.

Works Cited


