# 21 Ingmar Bergman's Film Version of *The Magic Flute*

DEAN DUNCAN

Any discussion about *The Magic Flute* and film will quite naturally concern itself with Ingmar Bergman's celebrated 1975 production. *The Magic Flute* is a very distinct entry in Bergman's *oeuvre*. Further, it is a distinct, distinguished example of a very rare and particular kind of movie. It stands with so much of Georges Méliès, with the first Marx Brothers features, with René Clair's *Le Million*, Sacha Guitry's *Story of a Cheat*, Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*, Carné/Prévert's *Children of Paradise*, Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* and *Tales of Hoffman*, Chaplin's *The Circus* and *Limelight*, and Jean Renoir's *The Golden Coach* as one of the preeminent and most beautiful examples of what we might call the theatrical film. The theatrical film is no simple adaptation, no mere derivation, nor is it a case of cinema subordinating itself to a parent art. In his *Images*, Bergman himself describes and celebrates this merging of the theatrical and the cinematic as he recollects his own youthful visit to Stockholm's eighteenth-century Drottningholm Court Theater, and a dear ambition that was seeded there.

> In my imagination I have always seen *The Magic Flute* living inside that old theater, in that keenly acoustical wooden box, with its slanted stage floor, its backdrops and wings. Here lies the noble, magical illusion of theater. Nothing *is*; everything *represents*. The moment the curtain is raised, an agreement between stage and audience manifests itself. And now, together, we'll create![1]

The theatrical film, like its ancestor the *Singspiel*, can be simultaneously heightened and plain, artificial and conversational. It emphasizes equally the tale and its telling. In doing so it contemplates and integrates notions of artifice and reality, creation and reception, even nature and culture.

Bergman's *Magic Flute* does all that, and more. Mozart's *Figaro* and *Così* stand as supreme examples of a comic tradition that boasts countless other supreme examples. His last opera is much more singular. For many, it is the preeminent specimen of its genre, and as such it has been performed and celebrated through the centuries. But Theodor Adorno, famously, makes a case for a more complex view: "*The Magic Flute,* in which the Utopia of the Enlightenment and the pleasure of a light opera comic song precisely



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coincide, is a moment by itself. After *The Magic Flute* it was never again possible to force serious and light music together."[2]

In this oft-cited quotation lies much of the melancholy burden of modernity, and of Adorno's and the Frankfurt School's intractable integrity. And yet, as is well known, Adorno never really accounted for so much of the post-WWII popular culture that might have challenged this brave, dire assertion. It may indeed be that the Utopias of Enlightenment, of reconciled binaries, and of the Brotherhood of Man, are forever beyond our reach. (Were they ever really within it?) Still, *The Magic Flute*, and Bergman's theatrical film version of it especially, most certainly did manage to combine noble seriousness and joyful lightness, even going so far as to bind up some of our most painful historical and cultural wounds.

On the face of it, Ingmar Bergman is an unlikely contributor to this conciliatory project. His early films were angst-ridden melodramas, drawing upon the inspiration of his spiritual forebear, August Strindberg, to portray the painful incompatiblities that so often exist between men and women. As Bergman gained confidence, as he found his voice and style, these conflicts went on to reflect and represent a deeper alienation, speaking to what he saw as the fundamental solitude of life, the irreducible suffering of the human condition.

Bergman would extend these explorations into the arenas of faith and religion, going on to hold forth on the subject of God's silence, or outright nonexistence. As he did so, he established and refined a more rigorous set of cinematic strategies. This particular brand of modernism would become emblematic of the period's sense of discontinuity, anxiety, and absurdity. Bergman was an articulate witness to anguished times, and to the existential agony that transcends time.

But if Bergman's sensibility was compelling and resonant, it also invited – even demanded – interrogation and critique. He lacked ideological concern, and even awareness.[3] And at times his morbidity and defeatism seemed to border on the pathological. A young Bergman planned for his staging of a Strindberg play to be "a vision of toiling, weeping, evil-smitten humanity . . . in all its grotesqueness, its terror and its beauty."[4] In middle age, upon receiving a major award at the height of his power and influence, he had this to say about the world and the artist's place in it:

> To be an artist for one's own sake is not always pleasant. But it has one enormous advantage: the artist shares his condition with every other living being who also exists solely for his own sake. When all is said and done, we doubtless constitute

a fairly large brotherhood, which thus exists within a selfish community on our warm and dirty earth, beneath a cold and empty sky.[5]

Bergman's very sympathetic critical biographer, Peter Cowie, quite justly observed that his "rigid, some would say inflexible, view of the world leads to a certain repetition of themes, doubts, and aspirations. The unremitting obsession with death and betrayal, belief and disillusionment, produced in the fifties and sixties a style ripe for parody . . . ."[6] The American film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, who had very much admired many of Bergman's films, could still, finally, look back at and characterize his work as "solipsistically self-pitying, spiritually constipated, and utterly without interest in overcoming these flaws."[7]

All that said and given its due, it is important to note that Bergman's films are not without their infusions of high spirits, humor, and, especially, tenderness. These latter episodes (i.e., the clown Jof's luminous vision of the Virgin and Child in *The Seventh Seal*, the sisters' placid walk through the park at the conclusion of *Cries and Whispers*, etc.) are the more uncommonly affecting because of their comparative infrequency and because of the way they leaven the darker films, which in turn brighten the dark times that produced them.

With remarkably few exceptions, Bergman's *Magic Flute* is a celebrated, beloved film. It is also quite strikingly distinct from the rest of his *oeuvre*. On a number of occasions Bergman gave exquisite expression to impulses and impressions that provide a context for understanding what drew him to this opera and what connects this film to moments in his other films. For example, he wrote the following during the production of *The Seventh Seal* (1957): "I believe a human being carries his or her own holiness, which lies within the realm of the earth; there are no other-worldly explanations. So in the film lives a remnant of my honest, childish piety lying peacefully alongside a harsh and rational perception of reality."[8]

A decade later he wrote the following in a notebook while preparing for the production of *Persona* (1966):

> My parents spoke of *piety*, of *love*, and of *humility*. I have really tried hard. But as long as there was a God in my world, I couldn't even get close to my goals. My humility was not humble enough. My love remained nonetheless far less than the love of Christ or of the saints or even of my own mother's love. And my piety was forever poisoned by grave doubts. Now that God is gone, I felt that *all this* is mine; *piety* toward life, *humility* before my meaningless fate, and *love* for the other children who are afraid, who are ill, who are cruel.[9]

In another passage he expresses his hopes for what would in many ways be his testament film, *Fanny and Alexander*, but this statement might also be applied to his entire work:

> Through my playing, I want to master my anxiety, relieve tension, and triumph over my deterioration. I want to depict, finally, the joy that I carry within me in spite of everything, and which I so seldom and so feebly have given attention to in my work. To be able to express the power of action, decisiveness, the vitality, and the kindness.[10]

These seemingly atypical, wonderfully refreshing comments indicate qualities that are also important parts of Bergman's sensibility, and of his work. And as it turns out, music – and Mozart – are crucial to the implementation of these ideas.

Alexis Luko provides a thorough study of Bergman's extensive, detailed, and purposeful use of previously composed classical music in the films.[11] Luko had observed, of course, that the intense close-ups for which Bergman has been so noted are very often rife with confrontation, alienation, and agony. She contrasts these familiar qualities with what she calls the "aural closeup," which is generally marked by the featured, foregrounded presence of classical music on the soundtrack.[12] These aural close-ups often run counter to the harrowing nature of so much of Bergman's work, featuring as they do these same characters now courteously listening, experiencing brief, incandescent moments of comprehension and connection.[13]

In Bergman's films these moments are powerful, but glancing. Significantly, they constitute the near entirety of *The Magic Flute*, which is the only completely concentrated, utterly unmitigated example of harmonious concord in his entire *oeuvre*.[14] Since Bergman was such a lightning rod, such an uncommonly versatile, prolific, acclaimed, and excoriated artist, his *Magic Flute* ended up being more than just a striking contrast to the main body of one individual's film output. It would emerge as a galvanizing contrast to, and even a bright beacon for, international film in general, as well as for the tumultuous decade that it bisected.

Writing toward the end of Bergman's active career as a film director, Peter Cowie said that "*The Magic Flute* may well take its place among the five or six greatest films that [he] has directed,"[15] in part because "Bergman's own predilection for chilly metaphysics had been tempered by Mozart's sense of wonder."[16] Jeremy Tambling (in a generally critical analysis) saw the film as an attempted "corrective to the tortured mind of the twentieth century."[17]

All of this was by design, and a consequence of a very particular attitude and process. As mentioned earlier, the theatrical film is not simply a matter of cinematic subordination to a parent art. Bergman's *Magic Flute*, for instance, is precisely aware of, and becomes a sophisticated essay about, the relationship between theater/opera and film, and of film's early grammatical evolution.

That said, Bergman's *Magic Flute* is also, decidedly, a modest adaptation, in which its brilliant, morose, and often seething adaptor submits to the sensibilities of the original authors (Schikaneder and Mozart), their inspirations, and the institutions that allowed them to communicate.

*The Magic Flute*'s opening montage sets the tone for this important, encouraging act of obeisance, and it does so in a couple of important ways.[18] Eight serene, sunsetting establishing shots of the Drottningholm Court Theater[19] and its environs give way to an image of the spectators whom we presume to be sitting inside, and to a shot of one spectator in particular. The camera frames and then zooms in on a red/golden-haired girl of some eight or nine years. It comes to, and holds on, a close-up of her face, which lasts for a full forty-five seconds.

This is Bergman and Liv Ullmann's daughter, Linn,[20] to whom we will return with some frequency throughout the course of the film. She is listening to the opening Adagio of Mozart's overture. She is also looking, off-frame. Presently, the camera cuts to what she is looking at – namely, an eighteenth-century winged putto painted on the closed curtain at the front of the stage. We cut back to Linn, who now glances over to a draped and helmeted Muse figure seated in billowing clouds. To Linn, again, and now a last cut to the expanse of the curtain in its entirety.

This back-and-forth is known as cinematic suture, and *The Magic Flute* establishes Linn Ullmann as the site thereof. Suture is a standard technique through which classical (commercial) film spectators are brought into the film space and under the conventions and assumptions that inform and structure it.[21] It is accomplished by shot-reverse shot sequences in which we see a person looking, cut to what or who she is looking at, then return for her response to the thing she has just seen. In this construction we are introduced to the character with whom we will identify, come to share her space and perspective, see through her eyes, and feel as she feels.

To a degree, Linn is looking at, and about to bear witness to, "the noble, magical illusion of theater."[22] But there is something more, something much more, to her presence here. The deeper significance of this first suturing in *The Magic Flute* is that we are not completely, or even primarily, being invited to identify with a character in the opera proper. Instead,

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we identify with a spectator, and with a child at that. This is the sensibility that our suddenly, surprisingly humble director expects or perhaps invites us to assume, at least for the duration of this film.

At a basic level, Bergman's *The Magic Flute* is a story for children, and a reflection of the guileless, hopeful spirit of childhood. As in:

> Then were there brought unto [Jesus] little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.[23]

And again:

> The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.[24]

These moving statements, combined, evoke childhood's exemplary qualities and redemptive, paradisiacal power. These are manifest as Mozart's serene expository Adagio gives way to the electrifying Allegro, and as the last close-up of this beloved child resolves into what could well be her own bright vision. Now comes *The Magic Flute*'s celebrated assembly of attentive faces, juxtaposed and multiplying, comprising an impressive, practically comprehensive litany of bone structures and expressions, ages, and ethnicities. This striking, raptly listening legion of facial types is all bound together by the score on the soundtrack.

Motion picture soundtracks are traditionally tasked with binding together a film's disparate and often disharmonious images. In the nature of its production and assembly, film is a very fragmented medium. Conventional film music, so smooth and flowing, distracts the spectator from this fact. And it has further labors to perform. Most film music is subordinated to the narrative, as well as to the other ideological and commercial functions that motion pictures perform.[25] The overture sequence in *The Magic Flute* reverses this standard hierarchy: its images actually accompany the music and serve to secure and exemplify the story that the music tells.

In some ways, Mozart himself is the story in question. He has not only written this score, but he also represents the musical and cultural ideal that embraces and unites all of these spectators. Since viewers of the film have seen in this opening sequence almost every kind of person that they might imagine – since they have almost certainly seen someone who looks like them – then they too are invited to become part of this communion.

A waggish commentator once suggested that "Ingmar Bergman presented the overture to *The Magic Flute* (1975) as if it was a Coca-Cola commercial . . . ."[26] This is quite funny, but it is not quite fair. In the context of Bergman's customary alienation, not to mention 1968, absurdism, Allende, Baader-Meinhof, the cataclysmic end of the Vietnam War, constant clouds of nuclear threat, the FLQ, intractable instability in the Middle East, the implosion of an American presidential administration, if not of American democracy itself, the Khmer Rouge (and East Timor, and on and on), Munich, the OPEC oil embargo, rampant industrial pollution, and the threat of environmental cataclysm, rapacious capitalism with its resultant recessions and oppressions, revolutions, and totalitarianisms all around – surely, in this calamitous context (to say nothing of Bergman's constant, perpetual sickness unto death), a modest measure of sentiment and even calculated simplicity is not just to be dismissed.[27]

It is in part because of the tortured twentieth century that Bergman stages his *Magic Flute* as a story for children. But his staging is not merely escapist, nor at all childish. As its Masonic traces suggest, the opera also contains lessons that both youthful spectators and guileless protagonists can share as together they trace its archetypal passage from guileless innocence, through fiery trial and abiding love, to outright exaltation.

Once again, Ingmar Bergman has with some justice been taken to task for the consistent lack of political engagement in his films. Better, say some, the artist hit nails right on the head, fashioning narratives and even making outright declarations that directly address some aspect of social reality, that raise awareness and lead to needful change. But it could just as much be argued that Bergman left ideological interrogation in other capable hands as he ably explored his own alternative courses for illuminating the human condition.

In his autobiography he describes what he felt to be the opera's central scene, the one that moved him most profoundly, the one that most motivated him to undertake this adaptation. Tamino, the protagonist, the aspirant, the young hero who is passing through necessary trials on the way to his eventual, glorious apotheosis, is downcast (in the Act 1 finale). He has encountered deceit and dishonor, is discouraged by all the gaps that exist between appearance and reality, between his ardent aspiring and the obstacles that stand in his way:

> Tamino is left alone . . . He cries: "Oh, dark night! When will you vanish? When shall I find light in the darkness?" The chorus answers pianissimo from within the temple: "Soon, soon or never more!" Tamino: "Soon? Soon? Or never more.

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Hidden creatures, give me your answer. Does Pamina still live?" The chorus answers in the distance: "Pamina, Pamina still lives."

These twelve bars involve two questions at life's outer limits – but also two answers. When Mozart wrote his opera, he was already ill, the spectre of death touching him. In a moment of impatient despair, he cries: "Oh, dark night! When will you vanish? When shall I find light in the darkness?" The chorus responds ambiguously. "Soon, soon or never more." The mortally sick Mozart cries out a question into the darkness. Out of this darkness, he answers his own question – or does he receive an answer?

Then the other question: "Does Pamina still live?" The music translates the text's simple question into the greatest of all questions. "Does Love live? Is Love real?" The answer comes, quivering but hopeful in a strange division of Pamina's name: "Pa-mi-na still lives!" It is no longer a matter of the name of an attractive young woman, but a code word for love: "Pa-mi-na still lives." Love exists. Love is real in the world of human beings.[28]

Bergman had previously used this very sequence in his 1968 horror film, *Hour of the Wolf*. There, it is performed on the stage of a marionette theater, witnessed by a disintegrating artist and the group of demons who will ultimately consume him. This 1968 quotation was sincere and unsarcastic. It provided a real respite, real refreshment, and it ended, and gave way once again to, despair.

Following this *Magic Flute*'s bright ascendence, Bergman would in some ways do the very same thing, returning in part, or at least alternatingly, to his dire and even demonic melancholy. The Mozart film was preceded by the exquisite dissolutions of *Scenes from a Marriage* (1974; also, subsequently, adapted for the stage), succeeded by the marital entropy of *Face to Face* (1976). On the stage, it was back to Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Strindberg's *Miss Julie*.[29]

But no matter. *The Magic Flute* provided a refreshing contrast to its director's deeply resonant but sometimes burdensome output. It provided a refreshing contrast to the troubled films that abounded during that troubling decade. Since that time, *The Magic Flute* has been continuously available and has become only increasingly visible.[30] This is so much the case that it really has begun to pose a serious challenge to Adorno's previously quoted statement about the Mozart/Schikaneder original. If the opera, as originally produced, was "a moment by itself," then Bergman's modest and self-effacing theatrical film has become an ever-renewing, ever-present moment of reconciliation and pleasure.

## Notes

1. Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film*, trans. Marianne Ruuth (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007), 353.
2. In *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 290.
3. On the cause and consequence of this disengagement, see Peter Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography* (New York: Scribners, 1982), 16, 133–34. For a particularly blistering critique, see Robert Phillip Kolker, *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 11, 163–65, 220, 327–28.
4. Quoted in Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman*, 21.
5. From "The Snakeskin," presented in 1965; in Bergman, *Images*, 51.
6. Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman*, 341.
7. Rosenbaum, reviewing Bergman's 2003 release, *Sarabande*, www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/saraband/Content?oid=919560.
8. Bergman, *Images*, 238.
9. Ibid., 56–58 (emphasis in original).
10. Ibid., 366.
11. Alexis Luko, *Sonatas, Screams, and Silence: Music and Sound in the Films of Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 71–105.
12. Ibid., 74.
13. See Ingmar Bergman, *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography*, trans. Joan Tate (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 43, 281–82, for a few of the very moving reasons for his frequent, fervent use of Bach.
14. But what, one might say, of Monostatos and the Queen of the Night? Quite right: these complicated characters, along with their many contradictory resonances and implications, give serious challenge to the point made above. That challenge is fully and fairly considered elsewhere in this volume, allowing for and in light of which I continue to urge this point.
15. Cowie, *Ingmar Bergman*, 295.
16. Ibid., 299.
17. Jeremy Tambling *Opera, Ideology, and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 136.
18. Parts of this analysis of the film proper are adapted from Dean W. Duncan, "Interpretation and Enactment in Ingmar Bergman's 'The Magic Flute,'" *BYU Studies* 43/3 (2004): 229–50.
19. As indicated earlier, Bergman had long imagined, then actually planned, his enactment of *The Magic Flute* with reference to the dimensions and accoutrements of the eighteenth-century court theater in Stockholm's Drottningholm Palace. It turned out that though still extant, the theater was too delicate to withstand the presence of a film crew. So designer Henny

Noremark, in close consultation with his director, replicated the original space, together with all of its apparatus and devices, in the studios of the Swedish Film Institute. This was partly, certainly, for the sake of homage. It also gave the collaborators full control of the filming space and allowed them to demonstrate their fascinating ideas about the early evolution of the language of cinema. In this, it is evident that Olivier's *Henry V* informed Bergman's film, which would subsequently inspire productions like Louis Malle/André Gregory's *Vanya on 42nd Street* (1994) and others.

20. As identified in Rose Laub Coser, "The Principle of Patriarchy: The Case of The Magic Flute," *Signs* 4/2 (1978): 337–48, esp. 340; William Moritz, Review of *The Magic Flute, Film Quarterly* (Fall 1976): 45–49, esp. 47. Linn Ullmann has become a major critic and novelist in her own right.
21. See Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 28/1 (1974): 22–31.
22. See note 1.
23. Matthew 19:13. Also Mark, 10:14, Luke 18:15.
24. Isaiah 11:6.
25. Note the title, and then the overarching thesis, of film music scholar Claudia Gorbman's *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
26. Ronald Bergan, "How to Use Classical Music Properly in a Film," *The Guardian* (November 19, 2008), www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2008/nov/19/classical-music-in-film. Bergan is referring to the famous 1971 Coca-Cola commercial that would have liked to teach the world to sing. See also Moritz's salutary review in *Film Comment*, which takes the things we are praising here to be silly, more childish than childlike.
27. There are many touching examples of alienated, even hell-hounded artists seeking refuge, or at least a brief respite, in the tender visions of children. The fact that their reaching is not always quite convincing may make the gesture all that much more touching. Think of Bergman, again (his novel, *Sunday's Children*), Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*), Roman Polanski (*Oliver Twist*, still infernal), Nicolas Roeg (*The Witches* [but not *Walkabout*]), Martin Scorcese (*Hugo*), Wim Wenders (*Alice in the Cities*).
28. Bergman, *Magic Lantern*, 216–17.
29. Egil Törnqvist, *Between Stage and Screen: Ingmar Bergman Directs* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 69.
30. For example, as a much remarked-upon part of the 2018 centenary celebrations of Bergman's birth and its recent rerelease on DVD in the prestigious Criterion Collection.