

Introduction

JESSICA WALDOFF

A week after the premiere of *The Magic Flute*, Mozart wrote to his wife Constanze, “I have this moment returned from the opera, which was as full as ever. . . . But what always gives me most pleasure is the *silent approval!* You can see how this opera is becoming more and more esteemed.”¹ He could not possibly have imagined then, in October of 1791, how his opera’s fortunes would rise in the years to come. *The Magic Flute* remained in the repertoire at the Theater auf der Wieden and by 1801 had received over 200 performances. It was staged in Prague in 1792, as well as in Leipzig, Munich, Dresden, and a host of other German cities in 1793 and the years immediately following. In his 1798 biography, Franz Xaver Niemetschek claimed, “Who in Germany does not know it? Is there a single theatre where it has not been performed? It is our national opera.”² The opera soon reached stages in many European centers, including St. Petersburg (1797), Amsterdam (1799), Paris (1801), London (1811), and Milan (1816). Today, *The Magic Flute* is Mozart’s most frequently performed opera around the globe. According to Operabase, which documents opera productions and performances worldwide for every season, *The Magic Flute* is consistently listed among the “10 Most Played Titles” (along with *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*). In some seasons, including 2020/2021, 2021/2022, and 2022/2023, it has been the most performed opera by any composer.³ The data available so far for 2023/2024 suggests that *The Magic Flute* will, once again, receive the most performances.

In the years since its premiere, *The Magic Flute* has been written about in a variety of contexts, by a multitude of authors, and from a dizzying range of perspectives. While it would be impossible for any single volume to adequately capture the range and complexity of more than two centuries’ worth of research, commentary, and performance, this *Cambridge Companion to “The Magic Flute”* provides twenty-one essays on diverse topics, all newly written expressly for this collection. One important predecessor to this volume is Peter Branscombe’s 1991 *Cambridge Opera Handbook, W. A. Mozart: “Die Zauberflöte.”* Since that time, however, there have been significant documentary discoveries and developments.

A wealth of recent scholarship – ranging from books on Mozart and his contemporaries to studies of opera as a genre to explorations of Mozart’s contemporary Viennese and German contexts – has broadened the ways in which we understand this opera. This Companion provides up-to-date commentary and interpretation in a single volume, with special emphasis on four key areas.

Part I, “Conception and Context,” situates the opera in its immediate historical, cultural, and geographic context. As a German opera written expressly for Schikaneder’s suburban Theater auf der Wieden with its tradition of magic operas and machine comedies, *The Magic Flute* was created for a particular place and time. The playbill announced “Eine grosse Oper” (A grand opera); newspapers reported extraordinary expense associated with costumes and scenery; Mozart and Schikaneder pulled out all the stops, including Italianate singing for the serious characters and Volkstheater humor for the comic ones. Four authors bring contemporary German opera in Vienna to life, situate the libretto in the context of German Enlightenment theater reform, offer a portrait of the Theater auf der Wieden and its players, and provide vibrant details and iconography associated with the premiere and early performances.

Part II, “Music, Text, and Action,” is devoted to the opera’s musical drama. Although no one would deny the centrality of music in opera, music has not always been the focus of studies of *The Magic Flute*, and even when it has been, discussion has tended to concentrate on select moments such as favorite arias and Tamino’s colloquy with the Priest in the Act 1 finale. Essays in this section, individually and collectively, explore how Schikaneder and Mozart indicate dramatic action in text and music and with attention to the whole opera, providing a sense of character, plot, emotional life, mood, setting, stage direction, and special effects. Important topics, individual moments, and analytical questions are given new and illuminating treatment here.

Part III, “Approaches and Perspectives,” addresses issues that might easily fill an entire volume. The five essays in this section explore essential thematic questions in *The Magic Flute*, all of which have taken on new significance in recent decades. Each is immersed in an interpretive tradition and its attendant assumptions, and each engages with that tradition to pose an important question. How should we understand the opera’s search for Enlightenment? How should we understand its complex inclusion of exoticism and orientalism? How should we make sense of conflicting claims made about the work’s sources and meanings? How should we understand and stage the opera’s problematic representations of gender

and race? Each of these essays opens a hermeneutic window through which we may view the work anew.

Part IV, “Reception, Interpretation, and Influence,” offers five eclectic essays that trace *The Magic Flute* as it gained prominence, not merely on stages in Germany and across Europe but also in the cultural imagination. Readers may be surprised to discover the extensive material culture surrounding the opera, which emerged as early as 1792: from colorful prints and invitation cards to board games and fashion accessories to mechanical clocks and music boxes. In the decade following its premiere and in the early years of the nineteenth century, *The Magic Flute*, perhaps more than any other work by Mozart, played an unexpected role in shaping how future generations would think about Mozart and come to understand him. This may be seen in biography, criticism, literature, and art. A review of what the sources do and do not tell us and how they have influenced our collective understanding of the opera reads like a cautionary tale. This section also includes a brief, but sweeping, overview of the opera as it has been staged in productions ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day and concludes with a tribute to Ingmar Bergman’s 1975 film.

For much of its 230-year history, critics and audiences have wanted to understand *The Magic Flute* as a theatrical entertainment with something for everyone, but also as one with a message. The exact nature of the message, however, has been much disputed over the years – at times, passionately. As early as 1794 the opera was read as a political allegory in pamphlets that advanced competing interpretations: pro-Jacobin and anti-Jacobin.⁴ It has been understood as a Masonic allegory and as an allegory of Enlightenment. Mozart himself suggests the presence of a message in his letter of October 8–9, 1791, when he complains about the “know-all” who laughed at the “solemn scene” at the beginning of Act 2. “At first, I was patient enough to draw his attention to a few passages. But he laughed at everything. Well, I could stand it no longer. I called him a Papageno and cleared out.”⁵ Goethe made a comment when contemplating the possibility of staging the “Helena Act” from *Faust II* that similarly assumes a deeper significance: “I will be satisfied if most of the theater-goers enjoy the spectacle; the initiated will not miss the deeper meaning . . . just as is the case with *Die Zauberflöte* and other such things.”⁶ George Bernard Shaw claimed, “*Die Zauberflöte* is the ancestor, not only of the Ninth Symphony but of the Wagnerian allegorical music-drama, with personified abstractions instead of individualized characters as *dramatis personae*.”⁷ Alfred Einstein described the opera in his biography as “on the surface a suburban machine-comedy, but in reality a piece for all mankind.”⁸ For many,

Bergman captured this sense of the work as a *theatrum mundi* at the beginning of his film when he panned the audience during the overture to highlight a diverse group of spectators: young and old, men and women, dark-skinned and white. Egil Törnqvist used this moment to argue that “*The Magic Flute*, transcending the boundaries of age, gender and race, has universal significance.”⁹

Like all artworks for which such interpretations and claims have been made, *The Magic Flute* is the product of a particular time and place. Without question, the opera has significance, but we cannot be expected to all agree on what that significance is. It should not be made to bear the weight of universalizing claims. For one thing, with apologies to Foucault, the assumption of any dominant view attempts to assert a “principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.”¹⁰ For another, as many have pointed out in recent decades, the opera’s misogyny and racism are significant problems. The Queen and Monostatos cannot be reconciled with such universalizing views. *The Magic Flute*, however, offers us something more valuable: a mirror in which we may see reflected the contradictions and complexity of human nature. The essays in this volume suggest many ways of understanding the opera and approaching its mysteries, allowing us to experience it anew with attention to questions that mattered in Mozart’s time and still matter in ours.

Notes

1. Letter of October 7–8, 1791 (the emphasis is Mozart’s: “*Stille Beifall!*”). LMF, 966–67; MBA, IV:157.
2. Franz Xaver Niemetschek, *Mozart: The First Biography*, trans. Helen Mautner, with an introduction by Cliff Eisen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 73.
3. Operabase, “Statistics,” www.operabase.com/statistics/en.
4. See Jay MacPherson, “*The Magic Flute* and Viennese Opinion,” *Man and Nature* 6 (1987): 161–72; H. C. Robbins Landon, *The Golden Years, 1781–1791* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 259–60; COH, 219–20; Rachel Cowgill, “New Light and the Man of Might,” in *Art and Ideology in European Opera*, ed. Rachel Cowgill, David Cooper, and Clive Brown (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 207–09.
5. LMF, 969; MBA, IV:160.
6. Cited in Robert Spaethling, *Music and Mozart in the Life of Goethe* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1987), 126.

7. From a centenary review in *The Illustrated London News*, December 9, 1891, in Bernard Shaw, *The Great Composers: Reviews and Bombardments*, ed. Louis Crompton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 97.
8. Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character, His Work*, trans. Arthur Mendel and Nathan Broder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 88.
9. Egil Törnqvist, *Bergman's Muses: Aesthetic Versatility in Film, Theatre, Television and Radio* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2003), 68.
10. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 118.

