

9 | Instrumentation, Magical and Mundane

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No art, and music least of all, suffers pedantry, and a certain latitude of mind is sometimes precisely what makes a great genius . . . What Kirnberger would have said about Mozart's harmony! Not to mention his orchestration. Tamino passes through fire and water to the sounds of flute and kettledrum, with gentle accompaniment from *pianissimo* trombones! We know that the ordeal by fire and water of good taste now requires an entire arsenal of wood and brass weaponry, which is being daily augmented by strange inventions such as keyed bugles, flugelhorns, etc. cleverly made conspicuous by their dissonance. We know that every wind player, since he is no longer allowed to rest, wishes he had the lungs of Rameau's nephew, or the bewitched fellow who with his breath set in motion six windmills eight miles away. We know that the pages of many scores now appear so black that a cheeky flea can relieve itself on them with impunity, since nobody notices it. And why? For effect – effect!

Thus wrote E. T. A. Hoffmann, somewhat world-weary, in 1820.¹ Hoffmann sketched out the inevitable development of style: music marches in the direction of increasing loudness and strangeness, in the direction of militarization. Hoffmann went on to comment that the death of Gluck – whose orchestration was widely admired – was well timed, as it prevented him from completing his opera *Der Hermannschlacht*, for which he imagined creating new brass instruments. Gluck's demise spared the world his descent into excessive orchestration. In this context, Hoffmann's invocation of *The Magic Flute* is noteworthy: Janus-faced, it simultaneously represents the kind of modern music that would have shocked earlier eighteenth-century theorists, while also serving as a model of moderation in comparison with the music that followed it.

Hoffmann's chosen scene – the trial of fire and water – has attracted its fair share of musicological attention. Igor Stravinsky heard it as morbid; Carolyn Abbate heard it, in its literal repetition, as mechanical, like a *Flötenuhr*: perfect and dead.² Jean Starobinski heard the flute in this passage as a form of “lenient, non-violent power” that ultimately represents the “power of music and musicians.”³ Marianne Tettlebaum has stressed the static nature of the music and the strange lack of any sense of real

threat.⁴ Hoffmann, however, alights on this example, not for its morbidity or strangeness but for its restraint. Tamino plays a graceful, adagio melody on his flute, accompanied by subdued brass and timpani; it is a march, but the gentlest of marches. In its subversion of a military topic, it represents the inverse of music's militaristic progression that Hoffmann so decried. For Hoffmann, it embodied Mozart's good taste.

As one of the few scenes in which the titular magic flute actually performs, it is hardly surprising that this scene has invited repeated analysis. Indeed, one might expect an opera named for an enchanted instrument to brim with unusual or immediately striking orchestration, or at least for the magic flute itself to have more strikingly powerful music. But in this scene there is no bombast, rather a kind of musical effortlessness. The effortlessness of Tamino's trials is in keeping with the larger sound-world of the entire opera, in which light textures and ethereal sonorities dominate. At the same time, such apparent effortlessness bespeaks the work done by instruments and orchestration within the opera: instruments function both as (magical) agents, indicators of characters, and as stage props. This chapter attempts to bring these two aspects of the opera into productive dialog, considering both Mozart's approach to his orchestra and the opera's dominant instrumental textures while also thinking about the complicated forms of instrumental agency that play out on the stage.

The Orchestral Basics

From the perspective of orchestration, *The Magic Flute* represents a fascinating historical moment. It draws on, and plays with, ideas of instrumental character – that is, the notion that individual instruments have particular, well-defined dispositions that govern their dramatic deployment. This was intimately tied to the late eighteenth-century consolidation of the orchestra as a musical body. As Dolan has written elsewhere, this transformation went hand in hand with the notion that the orchestra functioned as an instrumental society, bringing together a diverse group of instruments, whose contrasting meanings were strengthened and reinforced by that diversity.⁵ This created a semiotic paradox: this generative power required composers to respect the nature of individual instruments, and yet the idea of instrumental character found its strongest articulation at precisely the moment composers began to use instruments in ways that challenged or subverted their characters. Carl Zelter complained in 1798 about the ways in which composers had stopped

respecting the basic character of musical instruments: for example, the flute, the “sweetest of all instruments,” was made to “shriek.”⁶ For him, contemporary composers had ruined special effects – such as using trumpets and drums in an adagio movement – through sheer overuse.⁷ C. F. Michaelis, in 1805, likewise wrote about the misuse of wind instruments, reminding his reader that each instrument had its own emotional range: “One [wind instrument] is more suitable for gentle complaints, the other better able to express deep melancholy, gloomy seriousness. One is better suited to cheerful and light effusions, the other more to tenderness and the comfort of the familiar; one is more suitable for feminine gentleness and indulgence, another better able to express masculine strength, courage, and defiance.”⁸ For Michaelis, these instruments were characters that were both natural and under threat. Mozart’s orchestration by and large respects the qualities of the individual instruments: we encounter no shrieking flutes. When he does subvert an instrument’s expected behavior – such as in the trial scene – it is typically to use instruments in ways that are gentler and more understated than would be typical.

The basic instrumental forces of *The Magic Flute* are in keeping with late eighteenth-century orchestral norms: the score calls for two flutes (one doubling on piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (doubling on basset horns), two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings, plus Papageno’s magic bells, which are identified in the autograph as *istromento d’acciaio* and understood to be a keyed glockenspiel.⁹ Most numbers use a relatively small subset of the full orchestral complement, though that subset varies continuously from number to number. Trumpets, drums, and trombones are used – as one would expect – at special moments of heightened drama; the basset horns likewise serve to signal the solemnity of Sarastro’s realm and are heard only at the end of the first act finale and at the beginning of the second act. The piccolo is called for in just one number in the score: Monostatos’s second act aria.

Erik Smith has noted that the orchestration of *The Magic Flute* is more restricted than that of Mozart’s contemporary operas (*Così fan tutte* and *La clemenza di Tito*), something he attributed to the “markedly inferior” orchestra of the Theater auf der Wieden in comparison to that of the Nationaltheater.¹⁰ More recently, however, David J. Buch has argued against the popular notion that performances at the Theater auf der Wieden were shoddy: plenty of reports circulated praising the high level of musicianship at the theatre.¹¹ Indeed, we might note that neither *Così fan tutte* nor *La clemenza di Tito* call for trombones or basset horns, and,

while Mozart favors lighter orchestral textures, the *range* of color in this opera is greater than in his other operas. Indeed, as Rose Rosengard Subotnik has stressed, Mozart's approach to the sound-world of *The Magic Flute* is one that emphasizes not just sonic diversity but an ecosystem of instrumental sound that ranges from the "civilized violins" to the "earthy panpipes."¹² Furthermore, the less soloistic writing for the orchestra is also a dramatic necessity: in order for the magic flute's (relatively limited) solo moments to carry dramatic power, they must stand in relief against the orchestral palette, never overshadowed by other moments of solo writing for other (nonmagical) instruments.

Instrumental Characters

Mozart uses orchestration to help shape the characters on stage, in ways both subtle and bold. In the Act 1 quintet, for example, when Papageno's mouth has been padlocked by the Three Ladies as a punishment for lying, his repeated "hm"s are doubled at pitch by the bassoon. The doubling of Papageno's vocal noise with the sound of the double-reed produces a form of orchestrational synthesis. At this moment, the sound production of Papageno's voice is distributed between his body and the orchestra. We might understand this either as Papageno becoming an instrument or, perhaps, as the bassoon becoming part of Papageno. Abbate has drawn attention to the strangeness of how Papageno sings (and does not sing) with his magic bells and to the unusual timbral effects of the blending of voice and bells.¹³ But Papageno's instrumentally enhanced humming shows how chimerical, "man-instrument" timbres can arise under less magical conditions. Bassoons can create musical cyborgs, too.

At other moments, instruments help to shape characters in a more complementary manner. The piccolo that makes its sole appearance in Monostatos's troubling aria is a striking example.¹⁴ Richard Wigmore has suggested that this instrument makes the aria all the more sinister, presumably because of its exotic connotations.¹⁵ Certainly, the piccolo was used in "Turkish" contexts to invoke the sound of a forceful Janissary band: recall the overture to *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, where the piccolo is deployed in all of its militaristic shrillness. In this sense, one might understand how the piccolo could be heard as menacing. And yet here the flittering, scintillating melody, which is to be played *piano* throughout to give it the effect of distance, sounds more skittish than threatening. The piccolo, even as it provides a sonic marker of Otherness, also serves to

lighten the overall texture. We might hear it sympathetically as conveying Monostatos's nervousness. As with the trial scene, Mozart's setting softens and tempers the tension.

The Three Spirits are arguably the "lightest" of *Die Zauberflöte's* characters: not only are they performed by ethereal boy sopranos but they can fly. (We do not discover this until the second act, when the Spirits return the confiscated musical instruments to Tamino and Papageno – and deliver to them much-needed sustenance – with the help of a flying machine.) In line with Masonic symbolism, the Spirits might be identified, Anthony Besch observes, with "the element of air."¹⁶ Translated into music, this means that lower-register instruments are used sparingly, as are sustained notes and legato lines in the melodies, thus imbuing them with a breathy, buoyant quality. Even the mere mention of the Three Spirits is enough to invoke this texture: we hear a sonic preview when, in the Act 1 quintet, the Three Ladies reassure Tamino and Papageno that the Three Spirits will be on hand to provide counsel during their quest ("Drei Knäbchen, jung, schön, hold und weise/ Umschweben euch auf eurer Reise"). Here, the tempo slows to an andante and warm clarinets enter for the first time over pizzicato strings. The first two measures of the Ladies' *sotto voce* melodic line alternates eighth notes with rests, before yielding to a gently lilting figure. Anticipating the arrival of the Spirits, this passage includes many of their musical attributes.

At the beginning of the first act finale, when the Spirits lead Tamino to the temples of Wisdom, Reason, and Nature, muted trumpets, *piano* trombones, and muted timpani provide some rhythmic articulation for a hymnlike melody in the violins and a harmonic cushion in the flutes, clarinets, violas, and celli. What Erik Smith describes as "a suitably airborne effect" is achieved when the brass and timpani drop out as the Boys themselves take up the melody.¹⁷ And arguably the lightest orchestration underscores the first appearance of the flying machine in Act 2, scene 16, when they come to the aid of Tamino and Papageno. Their trio opens with an unaccompanied violin melody of rising pairs of thirty-second notes, which are answered by sighing bassoons, second violins, and violas. As the melodic peak is reached and the violin hiccups tumble earthwards into trills, they are joined by the flute and bassoon. The violin quips continue to fill rests between vocal phrases, which are supported by the remainder of the strings.

The Three Spirits are from the genus of the *deus ex machina*, the theatrical conceit where a divine being intervenes to bring about a happy ending. That the Spirits in some way "govern" the opera was not lost on the

director of the 2019 production of *The Magic Flute* for the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Yuval Sharon cast the entire opera as a puppet show, complete with the singers on strings. Instead of travelling in a flying machine, the Three Spirits are contained within what appear to be gas canisters, floating on a cloud. As the opera progresses, their activity expands – cutting Pamina’s strings and playing the bells for Papageno as he summons Papageno – until their true identity is revealed. For the final chorus, the backdrop rises to reveal a puppet theatre, of miniature proportions, presided over by the Three Spirits, who now appear as boys at play, in casual clothes, jumping up and down excitedly with some friends. The Spirits turn out to be puppeteers par excellence: they keep everything light, while remaining in total control. We might say that they are in charge of both the drama and, it would seem, the orchestration.

Instruments as Characters

Three instruments feature in the opera’s diegesis: the magic flute, the magic bells, and Papageno’s pipes. These onstage instruments are by no means unique to opera. Think of Orpheus’s lyre, Radamès’s triumphal procession, or Beckmesser’s lute. Indeed, certain instruments frequently migrate to the stage in opera – aurally, if not necessarily visibly, so distinctive is their timbre – to accompany drinking songs, serenades, and ballads or to signal royal or military company. In other words, the onstage presence of musical instruments makes explicit moments of self-conscious music-making.

In *The Magic Flute*, though, we find a somewhat different situation, one that goes beyond the demarcation of narrative worlds and performance modes to open up questions of musical agency, materiality, and meaning. For a start, neither Tamino’s flute nor Papageno’s bells function as straightforward accompaniment. Tamino’s flute cannot, of course: he must either sing or (pretend to) play. Benedict Schack, the tenor who premiered the role of Tamino, was also known to play wind instruments, and so for a long time – persisting into the *Grove Music* entry on *The Magic Flute* today – many have assumed that Schack both sang the role of Tamino and played the flute. Theodore Albrecht, however, has convincingly discredited this assumption, which seems to have been based on overgenerous readings of Schack’s musical abilities, as well as on a misunderstanding of what was meant by the fact that, according to contemporary reports, he “sang and played” the role of Tamino.¹⁸ So, Schack and his descendants usually mime – and sometimes there is no pretense even of that.

While Tamino's flute must function always as a solo instrument, Papageno's bells could, in theory, be pressed into service as an accompaniment instrument, since the performer can sing and play at the same time. At first, however, there is some ambiguity around the bells' playing mechanism – more specifically, around whether or not they required a player. As with Tamino's flute, Papageno receives the magic bells from the Three Ladies in preparation for their quest to save Pamina; but unlike the flute, the bells are something of an organological enigma. The autograph identifies the instrument as an *istromento d'acciaio*; the libretto specifies “eine Maschine wie ein hölzernes Gelächter” (a machine like wooden laughter). Confusing matters further, when the Three Ladies present Papageno with the bells in Act 1, Papageno asks what is inside, suggesting that he is handling some kind of a box. The Ladies respond accordingly by explaining that the bells are inside, but Papageno remains perplexed about their musical nature. For it is not immediately apparent to him what he needs to do with the bells – indeed, whether the bells need him to do anything at all. “Will I also be able to play them?” he asks the Three Ladies. “Yes, of course!” comes the answer.

Despite this quashing of Papageno's initial uncertainty, the pragmatics, the pitfalls, and the pranks of performance can sustain the instrument's ambiguity. Mozart himself was fully cognizant of – and, arguably, excited by – the potential to manipulate the grey space between the narrative world of the drama and the realities of performance. In an oft-quoted letter to his wife, Constanze, Mozart delights in his interference during Papageno's Act 2 aria:

I went backstage during Papageno's aria with the Glockenspiel as I felt such an urge to play it myself today. – As a joke I played an arpeggio at a point where Schikaneder has a rest – he was startled – he looked into the wings and saw me – the 2nd time round I didn't play anything – this time he stopped as well and refused to go on – I guessed what he was thinking and again played a chord – he then hit the Glockenspiel and said *shut up* – everyone laughed then – it was because of this joke, I think, that many people discovered for the first time that he wasn't playing the instrument himself.¹⁹

The instrument responsible for the onstage prop's acoustic presence is understood to be a keyboard instrument not dissimilar to a celeste. Onstage, the bells are represented by all sorts of contraptions, from magical-looking machines to tambourine-like instruments. Rarely do modern productions aim to conjure the illusion that these props actually produce the music we hear: the quirky boxes and twinkling rattles are obviously incapable of producing the florid runs and quick arpeggiations of the bells' music.

Such music, furthermore, far exceeds the role of accompaniment. As Abbate observes, while the alteration of the bells and Papageno's voice is born of an "acoustic fact of life" (i.e., the original instrument would not have been able to carry over Schikaneder's singing and so had to play in the gaps between the voice), this compositional necessity has taken on a symbolic dimension, entangling Papageno in an aesthetic of automation and mechanization.²⁰

There is, of course, an instrument that Papageno does play: his panpipes. At the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum to the bells, panpipes connote nature and earthliness, and therefore might seem an obvious extension of Papageno's status as *Naturmensch*. Indeed, the five-note panpipe call functions as a metonym for Papageno and is one of the most characteristic keynotes of the opera. As a consequence, perhaps, the agency behind Papageno's *Waldflötchen* or *Faunen-Flötchen*, as they are identified in the libretto and score, respectively, have hardly received much scrutiny in the literature. Since it is notated as part of Papageno's vocal line, it seems likely that Schikaneder did indeed play the pipes himself. What precise type of instrument he played is more ambiguous, since the iconic image of Schikaneder as Papageno does not include the pipes (later images do often show Papageno with a five-pipe set). Furthermore, panpipes are relatively ephemeral instruments, so precious few examples of panpipes survive from the eighteenth century. Interestingly, however, starting in the years after the first performances of *The Magic Flute* and stretching across the nineteenth century, panpipes began to be referred to in German as "Papagenopfeife" or "Papagenoflöten."²¹ Today, Papageno might play or he might mime. A few instrument makers specialize in special five-note sets of pipes, specifically made for productions of *The Magic Flute*. These are often not true panpipes, but a set of fipple whistles, which are easier to play.²²

Today, directors and performers of *Die Zauberflöte* are confronted with the question of how instruments should behave dramatically onstage. In the recent revival of Simon McBurney's 2013 production for the English National Opera, Papageno (Thomas Oliemans) carries around a tabletop celeste in a briefcase, enlisting the assistance of a player from the pit for the Act 1 finale. In his Act 2 aria, in the hope of summoning his mate Papagena, he plays the instrument himself on stage. Thematizing the question of agency, McBurney makes sure that we all know exactly who and what is making the music. And the flute receives equally special treatment. When Pamina is confirmed alive by the Priests in the Act 1 finale, Tamino is moved to express his thanks through music. And so, McBurney's Tamino,

played by Rupert Charlesworth in 2019, descends the steps into the pit and offers his flute, glinting in the spotlight, to the principal flautist. The ensuing musical offering is delivered onstage, in full view of the audience. When Tamino/Charlesworth joins in and his vocal lines begin to dovetail with those of the flute, the gestural language of the performance is expanded from that of a solo to that of a duet: singer and flautist enact their musical partnership through movement as well as sound.

These visuals foreground the chain of labor relations involved in this particular act of music-making and, in so doing, flatten out the hierarchy of voice and instrument, singer and musician – and even of the music itself. Echoing the readings of the flute’s music proffered by Tettlebaum and Abbate as detached and mechanical, respectively, McBurney’s magic flute is neither Tamino’s prop nor his appendage, but a fully agential character, capable of asserting its will, albeit with the help of a player. By putting his flute, quite literally, in the hands of a flautist, Tamino/Charlesworth separates his musical persona from that of the flute, making explicit the distinction between each source of musical power. In doing so, he also highlights something else – namely, that when the on-stage actors make no serious attempt to mime their performances, the music can appear all the more magical, as the sound so clearly exceeds its apparent materiality.

It might seem as though we have strayed a long way from the issue of orchestration and instrumentation. But these more overt ways in which the opera plays with instruments and agency should attune us to the subtler ways in which Mozart uses instrumentation to define the various characters’ personalities. The light touch that pervades the opera – from the understated brass and timpani that support the flute through the trials to the celestial pizzicati of the Three Spirits’ lofty music – likewise tells us something about instrumental labor in this opera. We might say that the magic of *The Magic Flute* is its ability to create a world in which humans and instruments work together so smoothly and naturally and where they so easily complement each other’s agency.²³

Notes

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1. E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Zufällige Gedanken bei dem Erscheinen dieser Blätter,” *Allgemeine Zeitung für Musik und Musikliteratur* (October 9 and 16, 1820), repr. in *Cäcilia* 3/9 (1825): 8–9; trans. by Martyn Clark in David Charlton,

- E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 427–28.
2. Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 102.
 3. Jean Starobinski, "A Reading of *The Magic Flute*," *Hudson Review* 31/3 (1978): 409–24, 418.
 4. Marianne Tettlebaum, "Whose Magic Flute?" *Representations* 102 (2008): 76–93, 84. Kerman went so far as to declare: "This still climax, with flute and drums and quiet brass, is surely the most extraordinary in all opera." Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 127.
 5. See Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 148ff.
 6. Carl Zelter, "Bescheidene Anfragen an die modernsten Komponisten und Virtuosen," *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 1/9 (November 28, 1798): cols. 141–44, at col. 142.
 7. *Ibid.*, cols. 152–55, at col. 152.
 8. Christian Friedrich Michaelis, "Einige Bemerkungen über den Missbrauch der Blasinstrumente in der neuern Musik," *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 8/7 (November 13, 1805): cols. 97–102, at cols. 99–100.
 9. On the constitution of Mozart's orchestras, see Dexter Edge, "Mozart's Viennese Orchestras," *Early Music* 20/1 (1992): 63–88.
 10. Erik Smith, "The Music," in COH, 131.
 11. See David J. Buch, "Die Hauskomponisten am Theater auf der Wieden in der Zeit Mozarts (1789–1791)," in *Acta Mozartiana* 48, no. 1/4 (2001): 75–81.
 12. Rose Rosengard Subotnik, "Whose 'Magic Flute': Intimations of Reality at the Gates of the Enlightenment," *19th-Century Music* 15/2 (1991): 132–50, at 145–47.
 13. See Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 83.
 14. Even though this is the only number in which the piccolo is called for, it is often used to substitute acoustically for Papageno's panpipes in productions where Papageno mimes.
 15. Richard Wigmore, "Human Enlightenment and Redemption," ENO Programme Booklet (2019).
 16. Anthony Besch, "A Director's Approach," in COH, 184.
 17. Smith, "The Music," 136.
 18. Theodore Albrecht, "Anton Dreyssig (c. 1753/4–1820): Mozart's and Beethoven's *Zauberflötist*," in *Words about Mozart: Essays in Honor of Stanley Sadie*, ed. Dorothea Link and Judith Nagley (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 179–92.
 19. Letter of October 8–9, 1791 (authors' translation). MBA, IV:159–61.
 20. Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 83.
 21. As one of many such examples: in the 1807 edition of Johann Georg Krünitz, *Oekonomische Encyclopädie oder allgemeines System der Staats- Stadt- Haus- u.*

Landwirthschaft, ed. Heinrich Gustav Flörke, vol. 106 (Berlin: Joachim Pauli, 1807), one finds the following entry: “Papagenopfeife, f. Panpfeife. Panpfeife, oder Hirtenpfeife, ein Instrument, welches aus 7 in einer Reihe an einander gefügten Pfeifen von zunehmender Größe besteht. S. im Art. Pan, oben, S. 3331. Jetzt verfertigt man die Panpfeife aus blechernen Röhren, und die vor einigen Jahren so allgemeine Papagenopfeife, worauf Papageno in der Zauberflöte, einem Singespiele von Schikaneder, bläset, ist eine Abart derselben” (355). Notable here is that the term “Papagenopfeife” is being used to describe a seven-tube panpipe.

22. For examples of these instruments, see the instruments advertised on the following websites: http://hindocarina.com/ocarinas/index.php?l=product_detail&p=623 (accessed April 19, 2023), <https://earlymusicshop.com/products/kobliczek-papageno-flute> (accessed April 19, 2023). These specially made sets of pipes for *The Magic Flute* have a long history: the 1991 exhibition at the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna, *Die Klangwelt Mozarts*, featured a five-note set of “pipes” (actually a set of five one-note recorders) for use in the opera. Gerhard Stradner et al., *Die Klangwelt Mozarts: 28 April bis 27 Oktober 1991: Wien, Neue Burg, Sammlung Alter Instrumente* (Vienna: Das Museum, [1991]), 315–16.
23. On the clarinet and Tamino’s agency, see Tettlebaum, “Whose Magic Flute?,” 82–83.