



SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA EDUCATION

Major Themes in *The Magic Flute*

Filled with ritual and symbolism, Mozart's final masterpiece is a playful but profound look at man's search for love and his struggle to attain wisdom and virtue. From the virtuosic arias of the Queen of the Night to the folksong-like melodies of the bird catcher Papageno, the full range of Mozart's miraculous talent is on display in this magical fairy-tale opera.

That *The Magic Flute* is a barely veiled Masonic allegory cannot be doubted. It acts, in fact, as a kind of introduction to the secret society. Its story celebrates the main themes of masonry: good vs. evil, enlightenment vs. ignorance, and the virtues of knowledge, justice, wisdom and truth. The evocation of the four elements (earth, air, water and fire), the injunction of silence in the Masonic ritual, the figures of the bird, the serpent and the padlock as well as the 'rule of three' all play important roles in the plot or in the musical fabric of the opera (three 'Ladies', three 'Boys', three loud chords at the beginning of the overture signifying the three 'knocks' of the initiates at the temple, three temples, the three flats of E-flat Major which is the primary tonality of the work, etc.) All of these symbols and characteristics come from Egyptian lore and the various original texts of Masonry; hence the opera's libretto is set in Egypt, although many productions eschew that specification.

Sources: operapaedia.org & sfopera.com

Definition of Freemasonry (the Masonic order)

Freemasonry is a fraternal organization that arose from obscure origins in the late 16th to early 17th century. Freemasonry now exists in various forms all over the world, with a membership estimated at around 5 million (including around 480,000 in England, Scotland and Ireland alone, and just under two million in the United States). The various forms all share moral and metaphysical ideals, which include, in most cases, a constitutional declaration of belief in a Supreme Being.

The fraternity is administratively organized into Grand Lodges (or sometimes Orients), each of which governs its own jurisdiction, which consists of subordinate (or constituent) Lodges. Grand Lodges recognize each other through a process of landmarks and regularity. There are also appendant bodies, which are organizations related to the main branch of Freemasonry, but with their own independent administration.

Freemasonry uses the metaphors of operative stonemasons' tools and implements, against the allegorical backdrop of the building of King Solomon's Temple, to convey what has been described by both Masons and critics as "a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols." Meetings are conducted in a ritualized format, and signs and words known only to the initiated are used to designate legitimate members. Freemasonry is known popularly as a "secret society" but its members argue that it is more correct to say that it is an esoteric society, in that certain aspects are private.

History of Freemasonry

No one knows with certainty how or when the Masonic Fraternity was formed. A widely accepted theory among Masonic scholars is that it arose from the stonemasons' guilds during the Middle Ages. The language and symbols used in the fraternity's rituals come from this era. The oldest document that makes reference to Masons is the Regius Poem, printed about 1390, which was a copy of an earlier work. In 1717, four lodges in London formed the first Grand Lodge of England, and records from that point on are more complete.

Within thirty years, the fraternity had spread throughout Europe and the American Colonies. Freemasonry became very popular in colonial America. George Washington was a Mason, Benjamin Franklin served as the head of the fraternity in Pennsylvania, as did Paul Revere and Joseph Warren in Massachusetts. Other well-known Masons involved with the founding of America included John Hancock, John Sullivan, Lafayette, Baron Fredrick von Stuben, Nathanael Greene, and John Paul Jones. Another Mason, Chief Justice John Marshall, shaped the Supreme Court into its present form.

Over the centuries, Freemasonry has developed into a worldwide fraternity emphasizing personal study, self-improvement, and social betterment via individual involvement and philanthropy. During the late 1700s it was one of the organizations most responsible for spreading the ideals of the Enlightenment: the dignity of man and the liberty of the individual, the right of all persons to worship as they choose, the formation of democratic governments, and the importance of public education. During the 1800s and early 1900s, Freemasonry grew dramatically. At that time, the government had provided no social "safety net," and the Masonic tradition of founding orphanages, homes for widows, and homes for the aged provided the only security many people knew.

Source: msana.com, ugle.org.uk

Freemasonry and The Magic Flute in Mozart's Vienna

Mozart joined a Masonic Lodge in the autumn of 1784 at the age of twenty-eight and spent a total of seven years as a Mason. A famous child prodigy and now an admired composer living in Vienna, it wasn't long before he attained the rank of "Master Mason" and during this time composed several musical pieces for the brotherhood: among them his Freemason's Funeral Music and other works that are still played in ceremonies of Masonry today.

But it was Mozart's last opera, *The Magic Flute*, which is said to offer the most esoteric Masonic symbolism and meaning. *The Magic Flute* has been described as "an Enlightenment allegory, veiled in Masonic ritual." The story, founded on a fable by Wieland, is based upon circumstances connected with the mysterious worship of Isis, the deity of the ancient Egyptians. It is also a story and a text that is very flighty, improbable and full of absurdities. But the libretto is packed full of symbols and references to the actual rituals of Freemasonry, perhaps contributing to the confusion of all those unfamiliar with Freemasonry itself – still shrouded in secrecy as it is.

The number three, for instance, has an important significance for the Masons and occurs repeatedly throughout the piece. There are consistent references made to the number three, whether it has to do with temples, ladies, boys or even a serpent cut into three pieces. Inscriptions upon the three temples refer to "Nature," "Reason" and "Wisdom," also obviously of Masonic origin - as are other references to armor, silver, gold, chariots and the final defeat of evil by the powers of light. And to the Viennese of that day, political symbolism was easily and broadly interpreted; they saw the opera's Queen of the Night as no one other than their own

Empress Maria Theresa, the hero Tamino was seen to be the “good” Emperor Joseph and the heroine Pamina was the Austrian people itself.

This political symbolism, real or imagined, helped contribute to the eventual banning of Masonry in Austria. The Austrian government became increasingly alarmed about treasonous sentiments, especially in the Masonic orders. Although a succession of emperors took a benign view of Masonry's espousal of the Enlightened notion -- that all men are perfectible through Reason -- they naturally smelled treason when certain of the Masons went a step further and argued that in a fully enlightened society there was no need for monarchs. Masonry's insistence on shrouding its inner workings in secrecy worked against it, for the code of silence allowed treasonous sects to flourish within the organization and at the same time caused government officials to imagine Masonic excesses much greater than those that actually occurred.

Eventually, the secret police reported the names of high officials involved in the brotherhood. Not too much later, the young and inexperienced Francis II was easily swayed by his conservative advisors, and in June of 1795 an order came down to close all Masonic lodges in the Empire. Freemasonry ceased to exist in Austria for more than a century. But *The Magic Flute*, not only possibly Mozart's greatest piece of music – it is said to contain every form of music, from lied to chorale to fugue – has also remained synonymous with Masonic symbolism to this very day.

Sources: associatedcontent.com, masonmusic.org