

How does the music in Mozart's 'Die Zauberflöte' portray good and evil?

One of the main aspects of The Magic Flute is the evilness verses the good and the light against the dark. This essay looks at evil and good along side, light and dark as well as an insight into other themes that appear throughout the opera. Music cannot simply be good or evil; it relies upon on instrumentation and imagination of the listener to portray good and evil. Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute) by Mozart is a German singspiel or spoken dialogue with music. This opera is an exception to all of his mature operas, not only by being a singspiel but also because it was composed purely for money and it was not performed, to begin with, in an opera house but in a suburban theatre. The Magic Flute is influenced by Bach and is more specifically classed as a rescue singspiel, with exotic locations and characters. Some of the traits of singspiel are rescue and exoticism as already mentioned but also magic and religion, all of which feature in The Magic Flute. We are told that Schikaneder wrote the libretto, possibly with some input from Giesecke and there is speculation that this contributed to the Masonic theme as along with Mozart they were all members of Viennese Masonic lodges. Although The Magic Flute is outwardly a Singspiel – with spoken dialogue instead of recitative and with characters and scenes appropriate to popular comedy – its action is filled with symbolic meaning and its music is so rich and profound that it ranks as the first and one of the greatest German operas. In The Magic Flute Mozart wove the threads of many eighteenth century musical ideas into new designs: the vocal opulence of Italian opera seria; the folk humour of the German singspiel; the solo aria; the buffo ensemble, which is given new musical meaning; a new kind of accompanied recitative applicable to German words; solemn choral scenes; and even a revival of the Baroque chorale-prelude technique with contrapuntal

accompaniment, evident in Act two in the duet of the two armed men. ‘The opera is replete with metaphor and symbolism that contrast light and dark, from characters who represent one or the other (Sarastro and the Queen of the Night, for example), through actions and dialogue that dramatise the conflict between them to imagery that underlines the theme. Day and night, good and evil, love and hate, friendship and enmity, forgiveness and revenge: all stand opposed in the opera. While such oppositions are hardly unproblematic in the present day critical climate, they are fully in keeping with the fairy tale logic that governs this opera.’¹ Die Zauberflöte by Wolfgang Mozart is the last opera he wrote before his death in 1791. ‘Mozart and Schikaneder had originally intended the Queen to be good and Sarastro evil; however, their change of plan necessitated the reversal of roles of good and evil, creating a break in the plot (at the beginning of the Act one finale) where their work was interrupted.’² The Magic Flute is a highly symbolic story although it is often commented upon that the drama seems to be dislocated and the libretto appears to lack consistency. ‘Many people are still confused by the general complexity of the story and in particular by the fact that for most of Act one the Queen of the Night appears to be good and Sarastro bad, while in Act two the reverse is true.’³ There is also an underlying theme of revenge which holds a moral concern of the plot and links the three main characters Queen of the Night, Sarastro and Tamino.

The opera is set in a magical world in which enlightenment appears both implausible and marvelous, and this is the key to the opera. The Magic Flute is a geometrical opera with every character having an opposite and everything appears to be in twos or threes. For example in the first scene we are introduced to three ladies dressed in

¹ Waldoff, Jessica, ‘The Music of Recognition: Operatic Enlightenment in ‘The Magic Flute’, Music and Letters, May 1994, page 215

² Waldoff, Op cit. Page 235

³ Godwin, Joscelyn, ‘Layers of meaning in *The Magic Flute*’, The Musical Quarterly, October 1979,

black. It is also a fairly philosophical opera about two people's quest for realisation and ideal union. The sublimity of the music with which Mozart dressed The Magic Flute shows him as a man of the Age of Enlightenment. The text and music of The Magic Flute incorporates much Masonic symbolism something that at this time was close to Mozart and Schikaneder. The opera starts similar to a traditional fairy tale with a Prince (Tamino) attempting to rescue a princess (Pamina) from the clutches of an evil magician (Sarastro). However it soon becomes clear that Sarastro represents light and Pamina's mother, the Queen of the Night, represents darkness. In The Magic Flute, Masonic opera Chailley discusses the idea of light and dark slightly differently. He says that 'The action of Die Zauberflöte turns essentially on the struggle between two antagonistic ideas symbolised by day and night, Sarastro and the Queen of the Night, Man and Woman. It is a simplification of facts that the struggle is between good and evil as it is more focused on light and dark. The Queen of the Night is the representation of the evil, but night is not evil, it is purely darkness and the opposite of light, represented by Sarastro'. I agree with Chailley's point of view as he is more or less saying that the dark portrays evil and light portrays good which although this is true in The Magic Flute it must not be mistaken for the night being evil and vice versa. If anyone is "intolerant, bigoted and cruel to all who do not chose to be her slaves," it is the Queen of the Night, bride of the Sun King'.⁴ This shows the opposition of the Queen of the Night and Sarastro, but also tells us how the Queen is the evil one in the opera. There is a similar dualism between Sarastro and the Queen with the sun and the moon. Sarastro bears the solar emblem on his breast while the Queen of the Night appears to her daughter Pamina by moonlight in Act two. This shows the close connection between good and evil and light and dark. 'Sarastro rules in the domain of light. In contrast, images of night are repeatedly employed as a metaphor for the potential darkness of human thoughts and deeds. As her title

⁴ Godwin, Op cit. Page 478

indicates, the Queen of the Night, with her inclination for evil and revenge, is characterised by the darkness over which she rules. At the end of the opera, she and her entourage are plunged into eternal darkness.’⁵

The Magic Flute may have a trite and silly libretto but it is artfully designed to provide many different kinds of music: the Queen of the Night’s angrily glittering coloratura; Sarastro’s and his priests’ noble utterances; the popular clitties for the bird catcher Papageno who accompanies Tamino on his quest; the tense trios for the Queen’s Ladies and the serene ones of the three boys who support Tamino; and the music for Tamino and Pamina themselves, which is direct and intimate as the music of Mozart’s Italian operas usually is not. ‘The Queen of the Night is a goddess, the very archetype of the feminine, who can both be helpful and destructive to a man. She gives Tamino the flute, the gift of music which is the royal road to the emotional world of a man’s unconscious, so that he can charm beasts, find Pamina, and pass his trials. In her relationship to Pamina, the Queen is a more personal figure, and it is Pamina’s development that is primarily indicated by the Queen’s descent from a lofty stance of wounded motherhood in Act one scene six, to crude revenge and annihilation an Act two.’⁶ When the Queen of the Night enters for the first time there is nothing in the music to portray her evilness. There is a recitative, slow aria and a fast aria all sung in sequence by the Queen of the Night. The text contains complimentary words as she sings the sadness at losing her daughter. It all appears sincere as she sings an accompanied recitative. ‘The queen’s fear of enlightenment is represented not only by her role as supreme monarch of darkness and by her plotting against Sarastro and his realm, but also in her language: she tells Pamina, ‘unless you persuade him [Tamino] to flee this subterranean vault before the sun tinges the earth,

⁵ Waldoff, Op cit. Page 216

⁶ Godwin, Op cit. Page 486

the first glimmer of day will decide whether he is given to you wholly or to the consecrated.⁷ To summarise, the language of the libretto develops the quest for enlightenment as an idea of light, love knowledge and friendship – a quest for all the things on the bright side of the symbolic opposition of light and dark good and evil. The music could almost be described as being taken from one of Mozart's piano concertos as it is very emotional and deep. As the Queen of the Night sings her tragic aria it appears artificial and in the fast section there is a sign of unnaturalness when she sings top D's. The recitative and aria of the Queen of the Night in the first act derives mainly from opera seria but its recitative is simple and direct which implies that it is more modern and it sounds more dramatic. The Queen's utterance is to the point and sounds terse. 'The orchestral introduction preceding this is more portentous, but then it is intended to parallel the visual effect of the Queen's awesome appearance. The formal two part aria reveals the ambiguity of the Queen of the Night's character, for the opening larghetto is an affecting lament while the allegro has an icy glitter which should prepare us for her malevolence in Act two.'⁸ Together with the Queen of the Night's aria in the second act we hear an amazing use of coloratura that sounds almost inhuman and is probably one of the most dramatic coloraturas used in opera. It could be described as a piece of music taken out of a serious opera as it is unusual for this style of music to appear in singspiel. 'From Pamina's point of view, The Queen of the Night represents the worst kind of human mother, one who regards her children as her possessions and cannot bear to release them when they attain maturity.'⁹ It is not till we hear her second aria that we realise that the Queen of the Night is not to be trusted. When the Queen leaves after explaining the situation to Tamino she exits to the sound of thunder, giving the audience a slight peep at what she really is. The Queen of the Night's aria is a piece

⁷ Waldoff, Op cit., Page 216

⁸ Osbourne, Charles, The complete operas of Mozart, 1997, Page 328

that musically as well as dramatically is of operatic deception. It suggests no evil throughout its deeply touching first section to the second part that is more pleading and virtuosic. 'The introduction to the Queen's first recitative might perhaps be considered descriptive, and there is certainly an unmistakable piece of scene painting at the end of the opera when she flies in terror at the 'ungeheures Getöse' (monster) which as in Goethe's 'Faust' announces the approaching sun'.¹⁰

A drum roll signifies the entrance of the Queen of the Night, when she returns to sing her next aria in act two. The Queen of the Night sings an opera seria aria – one of vengeance. It begins in a minor key, changes to major and then returns to the minor. The whole aria is based around G minor, which is generally known as a tragic key when composers use it. The Queen of the Night's second aria is a complete contrast to her first aria in act one. It is often compared to the 'mad aria' by Donizetti. There are several wide leaps which are characteristic of a vengeance aria. Again, we hear fantastic use of coloratura with the Queen this time reaching a high F, higher than the 'unnatural' D in the first aria. By starting in a minor key and going through the changes already mentioned the Queen is eliciting sympathy although she is not successful. The use of brass is significant in this aria. Mozart scores timpani and trumpets which are significant with vengeance and death arias. 'Evil of a more formidable kind is conveyed by the Queen of the Night's second aria (No 14: Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen), a brilliant 'revenge aria' of the old opera seria types, in which the menacing coloratura takes the singer up to F in alt, and the relentless forward motion of the D minor music seems to emphasize the Queen's obsessive hatred of Sarastro. The staccato is like a series of fierce dagger thrusts.'¹¹ Overall the aria feels unnatural, mysterious and hard-edged. It is very appoggio

⁹ Godwin, Op cit. Page 486

¹⁰ Dent, E, J, Mozart's Operas A critical study, 1913, Page 381

dominated and the orchestra has stabbing chords that help to emphasise the beat and all of this gives us a potential for evilness and madness. 'It appears that Mozart recognised the evil in the Queen's character from the beginning of the opera. Both her arias are proud and demonic although there is a degree of compassion in the recitative of the first'.¹² The maternal and human aspect of the Queen of the Night diminishes almost imperceptibly throughout the opera until Sarastro finally banishes her and rids the main symbol of darkness and evil.

We are not introduced to Sarastro until the Finale of act one. His imminent arrival is announced by an off stage chorus. It is in the first bars of the opening of the Finale that we hear the solemn quasi-Masonic aspect of the aria which is characteristic of the priests and Sarastro. Here the instrumentation takes on a different colouring using the trombones, muted trumpets, muffled drums and the pure angelic voices of the three boys bring a new tone to that opera that has yet to be heard. However, it is not till act two that Sarastro sings us his first aria. His first aria (No 10: O Isis und Osiris) 'is a prayer of great beauty and majesty, imbued with a human warmth which frees the music of any suspicion of religiosity'.¹³ This aria includes a chorus and in the orchestra we can hear basset horns and trombones which push the sound of the strings into the background. It is complimentary to the sound of a hymn and this is emphasised by a chorus of priests quietly repeating Sarastro's last phrase, of the aria's two stanzas, an octave higher and the effect of this is one of radiant unearthly ease. This aria comes after the second act has begun with a slow march for the priests. Again we hear the basset horns, trombones and bassoons all of which are associated with funeral music, more importantly Masonic funeral music, and this adds new

¹¹ Osbourne, C, Op cit. Page 332

¹² Batley, E, A preface to the Magic Flute, 1969, Page 120

¹³ Osbourne, C, Op cit. Page 321

texture and solemnity, especially with the single flute playing above these instruments.

Sarastro's second aria (No 15: In diesen heil'gen Hallen kennt man die Rache nicht) is similar to his first in that it is hymn like for a second time. In this subsequent aria of Sarastro's we hear a direct contrast to the Queen of the Night's second aria. It is sung in E major, a rare key of Mozart, and has a charitable theme as he protests the innocence of his followers. The aria is accompanied by strings with added texture and colouring from the flute. There are several long words in the text, such as 'friendship' and 'virtue' which helps to give colour to the music. As Sarastro is a bass singer the music is very low and majestic and this is also portrayed by the music being in a slow proceeding 4/4 time signature. In Sarastro's second aria we hear the desire for revenge but also the gentle and charitable nature of the priesthood. The idea of death is almost continuously prominent in the second act of The Magic Flute and Sarastro's first and second arias both allude to it.

Monostatos is an evil counterpart of the Queen of the Night and traitor to Sarastro. 'Monostatos is the archetypal shadow figure: he embodies all the qualities, which we ordinarily wish to forget we possess. He is cunning, lustful, traitorous and fawning. His black skin is the outward sign nature.'¹⁴ The character is a black moor which is symbolic to dark being evil, although he is also an evil comic. Monostatos is Sarastro's brutal henchman, almost like a sergeant major yet he enjoys brutality, such as when he rapes Pamina, but he is often portrayed as a comical character. The 'baddy' in pantomime terms is the best way for Monostatos to be described. The first brief encounter with Monostatos as he is threatening Pamina does not contain music that is as dramatic as one would probably expect. It is in a faint 'Turkish' mode with effective woodwind. At this point Monostatos has still not been painted as the 'black'

villain due to the scene following on from a comic theme and the comic effect carries through to this scene. When Monostatos sings a trio in the next scene it is in G major, a bright key, and contains light hearted phrases. Throughout the rest of the opera when Monostatos makes brief appearances he is usually accompanied by an agitated motive in the strings with backing music often sounding 'Turkish' throughout. The aria he sings is characterised on a Turkish aria in the style of opera buffa with an appearance of the piccolo in the instrumentation that is unusual as this is the only time that the piccolo is scored in the whole opera. 'The brief, swift, song like aria which Monostatos sings as he approaches the sleeping Pamina (No 13: Alles fühlt der Liebe Freuden) is a piece of musical characterisation; while it is quite simple melodically, its urgent, pauseless motion, pianissimo throughout, conveys a sense of stealth, added to by the unusual timbre of the piccolo which doubles the first violins.'¹⁵

'The final stage of the representation of knowledge in the opera is the ultimate reversal, the vanquishing of the Queen and her entourage. This is the moment of universal enlightenment and one of the most remarkable visual spectacles in all opera. As the Queen's C minor is redirected towards E flat major, the dark stage is suddenly flooded with light. The contrast of styles and of chromatic and diatonic melodic lines, and the turn from minor to major, musically represent the metaphoric opposition of dark and light which explicitly prescribed in the stage directions.'¹⁶ Here we see light triumphantly winning over dark and therefore good over evil. All the evil members of the company are banished to hell. During this scene everything becomes muffled by thunder with a strange persistent figure in the strings, which has an air of finality about it and the final scene is a blaze of sun, both visually and musically. To celebrate the triumphant Sarastro, Tamino and Pamina, Mozart has written music of a simple,

¹⁴ Godwin, J, Op cit. Page 487

¹⁵ Osbourne, C, Op cit. Page 332

¹⁶ Waldoff, Op cit. Page 233

matter of fact nature to compliment the drama which becomes simple and moving, yet radiant.

The Magic Flute is similar to a folk legend in that good must always overcome evil, and although we guess at who is good and who is bad, due to the way that the first act is written we are misled by the Queen of the Night and the audience's suspicions are often the wrong way round. The dramatic value of the trombones forms the background of the opera and by using them Mozart creates a new orchestral sound. 'In Act two Monostatos, the Queen of the Night and Sarastro have violently contrasting arias in C, D minor and E major respectively – the choice of unrelated keys heightening the contrast.'¹⁷ 'A simplistic view of The Magic flute ignores all symbolism and allegory and sees the story in ethical terms of black and white.'¹⁸ Each principal character only has one or two arias and these are not very deeply symbolic, making their individuality somewhat uncertain. I have tried to show how the instrumentation is different for each character, therefore portraying good and evil. Into this I have incorporated the idea of light and dark as this seems symbolic to the particular characters and also to good and evil. Just by the names 'Queen of the Night' and 'Sarastro, King of Light' we are entertained with light and dark. With Monostatos as a black moor and the rest of the company being white, Monostatos becomes a convenient recipient for shadow projections and again, light and dark. The significance of the Queen of the Night's annihilation is that she no longer exists to drag the good people down, though it is more favourable that her power will still extend over some unfortunate mortals in the same way that good will never block out evil completely. The ambiguous nature of the Queen of the Night has slowly been realised through all the inconsistencies that have come with her character at this point.

¹⁷ Dent, E, J, Op cit. Page 368

¹⁸ Godwin, J, Op cit. Page 473

We see at the end of the opera Tamino and Pamina, two of the good characters, come through the dark night into the sunlight as they enter the temple. This shows the audience that they are triumphant and have succeeded in beating the evil and the dark. To create the metaphoric darkness needed throughout the opera, the use of veils are used so that the audience can still see the characters but it is customary for veils to represent darkness or shadows. As mentioned at the beginning of the essay, the number three is emphasised throughout the essay and with the sevenfold sun and initiation rites these symbolise the Masonic theme in the opera. The magic Flute, as I have already mentioned, is a moralistic opera yet it is the three ladies at the very beginning who actually hint at the first moral as being about brotherhood and love, which by the end of the opera appears false as they are connected to the Queen of the Night and are subsequently evil. It is mainly Sarastro and the priests that convey the morals to the audience throughout the opera. It is by the end of act one that the ambiguity has been resolved and the audience is on Sarastro's side and throughout the Finale the text contains many morals, some religious yet the one that is outlined the most is simply that 'true love will prevail'. The most prominent key that Mozart used in The Magic Flute, and also in most of his Masonic works, is E flat major along with its relative minor of C. The nature of The Magic Flute can suggest that it has a simple beginning yet managed to turn into a great opera. Mozart has drawn on resources and influences that freemasonry had given him and also music that he knew, even his own pieces, were an inspiration to him.

At the end of the opera Sarastro moralises 'The rays of sun vanquish the night/and destroy the ill-gained power of the hypocrites.' This sums up all that I have discussed between light and dark, good and evil and the trickery that the Queen of the Night employs.

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