



Lawrence P. Vincent as Tamino and Ildiko Raimondi as Pamina, in a Vienna Volksoper performance of *The Magic Flute*, 1995. Here Tamino and Pamina sing a duet just before Tamino begins his trials.

A Performer's Reflections on *Die Zauberflöte*

Lawrence P. Vincent

Singing the heroic tenor roles in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, *Entführung aus dem Serail*, *Cosi fan Tutte*, and *Die Zauberflöte* has been a richly rewarding and an extremely challenging experience for me. Few composers require such a masterful vocal technique, and even fewer understand the delicate marriage of vocal line to orchestral accompaniment. Using only those instruments that are absolutely necessary, Mozart weaves a frustratingly transparent orchestral fabric. With every phrase and nuance, he exposes the strengths and weaknesses of the human voice.

Even among Mozart's operatic masterworks, *Die Zauberflöte* is a unique composition. In combining a fairy-tale adventure with the seriousness of the ceremonial vows taken by the hero and heroine, Tamino and Pamina, Mozart demands a wide spectrum of emotional responses from performers. In addition to these vocal and emotional demands, *Die Zauberflöte* is one of the few operas in which singers must have some command of the German language because spoken dialogue is included.

My first encounter with *Die Zauberflöte* occurred in the beginning years of my undergraduate study. While learning the famous tenor aria "Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön" ("This Image Is Enchantingly Beautiful"), I had a glimpse of, but little understanding for, the genius of Mozart. But with each passing year, my respect for the encompassing mastery of this composer is magnified.

One of the facets of this mastery is his uncanny ability to compose "musical" stage directions. In recitatives (sung monologue or dialogue), ensembles, and arias, these musical cues can help an astute performer bet-

ter understand when certain movements should take place and what these movements should be. Some subtle, others very obvious, all are built directly into the rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic underpinnings of each musical episode. One very obvious musical stage direction is found in the opening measures of act 1, scene 1, when the sixteenth-note motive in the strings suggests Tamino's attempt to escape the evil serpent. One also hears Tamino shooting an arrow as the serpent approaches in measure 13. Such ingenious compositional tools enable an alert and sensitive performer to determine exactly how, musically and dramatically, every phrase of the opera should be interpreted.

Although I have performed the role of Tamino many times, the most exciting and memorable performance was, by far, in Die Wiener Staatsoper (the Vienna State Opera). The thrill of performing with world-class singers accompanied by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in one of the world's most renowned opera houses is unforgettable. As I sat in my dressing room listening intently to the overture, knowing that Tamino had the first aria of the entire opera, my heart raced wildly. Viennese audiences are hard to please and are great connoisseurs of Mozart. *How appropriate*, I thought, *that Tamino's first words are "Help me!"*

Every seasoned performer has stories of stage mishaps and close calls. Because *Die Zauberflöte* is a fairy tale, the sets, costumes, and props can be as fantastic or outrageous as the stage designer's imagination. One such prop in my Vienna performance was a huge, dragonlike snake, mechanized and programmed to charge poor Tamino during the "Zu Hilfe!" ("Help Me!") aria. The large mouth opened, revealing a tube from which smoke and a monstrous roar would emanate. At this point in the opera, Tamino, overcome with fear, would pass out as he fell prey to this monster. Then, three mysterious ladies would come to his aid and kill the snake. As they thrust in their spears, the snake was supposed to break into three parts. With such a complicated mechanism, it was no wonder that things went, more often than not, slightly awry.

Each night, "Tamino vs. the snake" became the favorite sporting event of stagehands, prompter, and hidden members of the ensemble. Sometimes the snake would make a horrific entrance and then, for no apparent reason, remain motionless in the middle of the stage like a big, friendly dog. Tamino, trying to sustain the illusion of excitement and fear, would have to run twice as hard and fast to convince the audience that indeed, this was a life-threatening piece of wood on wheels. Other times, the bottom jaw would drop and swing back and forth like a rusty gate in the wind.

My personal favorite was the “spontaneous combustion” variation. Before Tamino could even pass out, the snake would explode into three pieces, making the subsequent rescue superfluous. As Tamino, I had a difficult time maintaining any semblance of unconsciousness while laughing convulsively.

In the United States, one rarely (if ever) hears snatches from operas being sung or whistled on the streets. Foreign to our ears, operas such as *Die Zauberflöte* are commonly known and widely appreciated in Europe. Many times as a performer I would watch with amazement as stagehands mouthed the words to each aria. At a very early age, children are taught the music and story of *Die Zauberflöte*. It is not uncommon to hear adults and children alike humming these melodies on the street as if they were “pop” tunes.

With reference to this early familiarity with Mozart, a very sweet and amusing story comes to mind. In the ten years we spent in Vienna, one of the only times I was able to actually sit with my wife in the audience was during a performance of *Die Zauberflöte*. In act 3, the comic figure Papageno makes a mock attempt at suicide. Just as the singer slipped the noose around his neck and melodramatically began counting, “One, two, two-and-a-half, two-and-three-quarters . . . ,” a totally smitten five-year-old’s voice rang out from the second balcony, “NO!” The singer broke character, and the whole house exploded with laughter and applause. Mozart has this effect on young and old, singer and instrumentalist, conductor and stagehand.

These anecdotes are amusing to recount and even more interesting to have experienced. However, it is the moments of true spiritual fusion between character and Latter-day Saint performer that make singing the role of Tamino unlike singing any other role. His quest for truth in the face of very convincing counterfeits is ours. His struggle with choosing between momentary satisfaction and long-term reward is also a resonant theme in our lives. And finally, in subduing all things earthly (even the elements), Tamino is permitted to assume his rightful place with Sarastro and Pamina. To be a literal instrument in the creation and metamorphosis of such a noble character through music such as Mozart’s is extremely humbling. The circle of creation is complete as this instrument is acted upon and undergoes a like metamorphosis. By the end of each performance as Tamino, my spiritual resolve is strengthened. As an actor, I have been acted upon.

The incomparable beauty and scope of Mozart’s lasting musical creations are testimony to his transcendent genius. Whether walking the streets

in the city where he lived, composed, and died or performing his works in historic halls and opera houses, one can see, feel, and hear Mozart's enduring presence. To do him justice in performance becomes the elusive challenge of every aspiring and mature singer.

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