



Courtesy Hagen Haltern

Sarastro, by Hagen Haltern. A struggling, repentant Sarastro is more consistent with the opera's moral logic: that change and progress are necessary and possible.

Sarastro's Repentance

One Dramaturg's Advice on *The Magic Flute*

Michael Evenden

Traditionally, the scholar of dramatic literature and the director of plays (or the stage director of an opera) are opposed figures. Despite common passions, they have different goals, methods, and materials. In the end, a scholar's polished critical argument and a director's persuasive theatrical performance are held to be two decidedly different things. But a dramaturg (a kind of in-house scholarly advisor to a theater or opera company) attempts to be a scholar of dramatic literature and theatrical history and, at the same time, a canny and practical advisor to the artistic team of an actual stage production. A dramaturg attempts to crisscross the theory-practice boundary, mediating between the extended reasoning engendered in the study and the evanescent impressions engendered by a performance. So, being a dramaturg and having written a scholarly book on *The Magic Flute*,¹ I propose to answer my own book-length scholarship with its antinomy, a short statement of practical advice for a (hypothetical) production of Mozart's last, great opera.

The advice I have to offer is centrally concerned with the incommensurability between contemporary criticism and the director's interpretive task, particularly in classical opera. Let me be more specific: *The Magic Flute* has a distinctive quality that challenges both scholarship and artistic interpretation in different ways. The crucial quality is inconsistency. The libretto (and, to a certain extent, the music as well) is a polyglot assemblage of many motifs in the popular culture of its time and its original audience—the off-the-track theatergoing public of post-Josephinian Vienna. As such, it is a work full not only of richness and variety, but of contradictions, both obvious and subtle. The more you study it, the more these



Illustration for *The Magic Flute*: act 2, Sarastro and Pamina. Engraving by Meyer. This is a typical portrayal of Sarastro as the pontifical ruler and Pamina as the submissive princess. As such, it ignores the “backstory” of the opera, Sarastro’s abduction of Pamina and his subsequent holding her by force under circumstances that, whether he intends it, leave her endangered by one of his servants, Monostatos.

staging makes a classical opera or play seem impossibly contradictory and unsupportable by the way it is designed, directed, and performed. However, the more customary artistic path (and, I believe, the pressure of the operatic form itself) is to try to make a self-contradictory work seem to cohere, enlisting the resources of performance to reconcile inconsistencies. The opera, then, is rendered in a way that makes sufficient sense and frees the audience’s enjoyment from confusion and nagging ahistorical doubts.

contradictions become apparent. Thus, *The Magic Flute* is a rather extreme case of a standard problem in reviving the classical operatic repertory for a contemporary audience. On the one hand, the music ultimately strives for emotional power through its coherence and order. On the other hand, the libretto seems to go every which way and, to our modern minds, raises questions the music does not seem able to answer.²

So what are we to do when we cannot quite make the work function in our minds as audience members? Deconstructive criticism of the late twentieth century centers, rather perversely, on foregrounding a given text’s irreconcilable difficulties, and thus it can content itself with documenting and interpreting the disjunctions in *The Magic Flute*. A minor, often high-profile tradition of deconstructive

The operatic dramaturg, then, must find the textual difficulty and propose a performative solution to it. My purpose here is to identify a critical problem in the musico-dramatic text of *The Magic Flute* and to pose an artistic solution—an interpretive idea that might be staged in a way that would bring the work a plausible internal logic, at least in performance.

The Problem in *The Magic Flute*

I must also be clear about which problem I wish to remedy. For myself, as well as for most people, the main action of the opera (the moral purification and amorous fulfillment for Tamino and Pamina) and the principal subplot (Papageno's pursuit of the elusive Papagena, although dependent on magic and comic surprise) are hardly problematic and work well enough in a good performance. Nor is the most troubling problem what some lovers of *The Magic Flute* will have anticipated from my argument: I am not actually concerned with the most obvious plot contradiction in the opera (and one of the most obvious in all familiar opera), the surprising switching of audience sympathy from the Queen of the Night to the priest Sarastro at the end of act 1. This is, for me, a kind of red herring in *Magic Flute* scholarship because much of that scholarship (and there is a lot of it) has spent itself solving the wrong problem. The fact is that, given a stage interpretation that bites the bullet and tries to make sense of it all, the turnaround of audience sympathies "works" theatrically, lending some unexpected tension and surprise to a formulaic story and taking the audience through something of the moral and ethical realignment of the protagonists. Whether a clever innovation or a happy fallout of artistic carelessness, this turnaround seems to me a rather good piece of artistic strategy.

For me the nagging, irreconcilable problem in *The Magic Flute* lies in the context of the principal action—what we call the background situation or "backstory." Thus, the problem of the opera disturbs the premise of the plot and is a moral, not a logical, question. In my opinion, for the moral design of the opera to work, we have to accept Sarastro's prior-to-the-opening-curtain violence against Pamina—his abduction of a woman and his subsequent holding her by force under circumstances that, whether he intends it, leave her endangered by one of his servants (Monostatos). This is the initiating action of *The Magic Flute*'s drama, and the irreconcilability of this authoritarian, misogynistic violence with the moral discipline and dignity Sarastro is supposed to embody is, for me, a potentially fatal flaw in the moral logic of the opera.

I know that the usual take on this problem is to blithely ignore it. If such denial were voiced, the argument would be that Sarastro's intentions

were only the best and that since the end result is positive one really should not mind the crudity of his offstage methods. But that ignores the moral structure of the opera, in which Sarastro and his teachings are meant to embody virtue itself. It also ignores the opera's plot, in which the reprehensibility of Sarastro's act and the outrage it causes (in Tamino and others) is the real mainspring of the action.

The Backstory Reexamined

Here we must reexamine the backstory of the opera and try, experimentally, to take it seriously as modern operagoers, listeners, or readers. In passages of dialogue that are too often cut in production (and are often not even printed in score or libretto), we learn a crucial fact about the fundamental enmity between Sarastro and the Queen of the Night: the Queen is the widow of a powerful sovereign who, on his deathbed, surprised her by bequeathing his talisman of office to Sarastro, the head of a priestly order, instead of to her. The ensuing rivalry over the sevenfold sun disk, which signifies a power that is both magical and political, is the foundation of the struggle between Sarastro and the Queen. (One has to read closely to see the clues—word choices, stage directions—that indicate that this power is not only supernatural, but one of earthly government, but they are there [see 2.1 and 2.8]). And, importantly, that background struggle is fought, as Sarastro tells us, in the hearts and loyalties of the citizens, torn between the old dynasty represented by the Queen and the new priestly government of the Order of the Sun. Sarastro's greatest concern is that “that woman seeks to defame our Order and arouse the populace against us” (2.1). Unexpectedly, then, this is the initial problem for the forces of good in the opera; the priests are struggling with the Queen's attempts to ruin their reputation and to undermine the legitimacy of their earthly authority.

But what is unacknowledged here, at least in any overt way, is Sarastro's own complicity in the problem of the priests' reputation. The Old Priest (sometimes called the Speaker) hints at it, as if with deeply suppressed frustration, when he knows he cannot defend Sarastro against Tamino's understandable outrage. Did Sarastro not tear Pamina unwillingly from her mother's arms? the Prince demands. The Old Priest can only warily reply, “Yes, youth, what you say is true” (1.15). And whether or not he wants to, he can say no more—a loyalty oath binds his tongue.

The Speaker's scene is a brilliant piece of musical and dramatic dialogue, deepened by the Speaker's inferable subtext of anger and regret at a situation he cannot defend. Here is another enemy enraged by Pamina's capture! Sarastro asked for this! Sarastro is an embarrassment to the Order

and its cause—at this point a thing no priest in the opera can say. Or else, as some skeptical modern critics have argued, the whole priestly order is in its essence coercive, violent, and misogynistic.³

A Dramaturg's Solution

Having identified the fundamental problem in the opera—Sarastro's unacknowledged moral inconsistency—I now offer my dramaturgical advice, for any opera director out there who wants to take it up: have Sarastro admit it. Acknowledge the contradiction and interpret the action of the opera as partly Sarastro's effort to come to terms with a rash act, a crime, an abuse of power that must now be repented of.

The Sarastro in my mental staging is young, as the original singer who played the role was. He is attractive. In kidnapping Pamina, he has acted unwisely with all kinds of intentions, including one central, troubling one: he had fallen in love with Pamina and concocted a half-mad plan to win her by taking her by force. In his first sung speech to Pamina, Sarastro addresses her as "Love" and, with dark feeling in his descending vocal line, tells her that he knows she loves another and promises not to compel her love (1.18). It is a good acting moment if Sarastro is facing the sad results of his unconscionable rashness but does not yet see a way out. Sarastro is, then, a cousin of Pasha Selim from Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*—a despot struggling with his own passions, painfully learning the self-renunciation necessary for true enlightenment. (It is entirely possible that Mozart and Emmanuel Schikaneder, Mozart's producer/singer/librettist, consciously based *The Magic Flute* on *Abduction*—the latter had been a hit for Schikaneder's company years earlier, when the two men first met.)

In production I would have the opera played out as the moral initiation of Tamino, of Pamina, and—at the same time, in another way—of Sarastro, who is learning to be an unselfish and self-renouncing ruler, the enlightened despot of the sort that Vienna had recently lost in Joseph II. He loses the woman, and—as I believe Schikaneder intended us to understand in performance—he gives up his throne to the worthy prince. But he gets his soul back.

My proposed solution is rather simple: I would modify the dialogue to show Sarastro's struggle and his repentance. I would have Sarastro say to his priests at the beginning of the second act something like this (and I am modifying the existing monologue only slightly):

I come before you with a soul newly purified to tell you that this night our Order can be delivered from the darkness that threatens it. Tamino, a king's son, wishes to tear the veil from his eyes and behold the light of

truth in our temple. He will rescue our Order from the shame that vicious tongues have placed upon it . . . for tonight it has been revealed to me that Pamina, the virtuous, beautiful maiden, has been destined by the gods for Tamino. To her, I withdraw my claim and humbly beg my brother-priests' forgiveness for my rash and dangerous action, which has put our cause at risk. Tamino is destined to rule in our Order, rewarding virtue and punishing vice. To that end, he will be subjected to our severest trials. And Pamina will pursue his honorable path with him, for a woman that fears neither danger nor death is also worthy of enlightenment. If you can join with me in rescuing our Order from error within as well as calumny without—then follow my example.⁴

I think this simple modification gives us a Sarastro who is, for once, dramatically interesting. Through the ineffable logic of repentance, the change permits the opera the only moral consistency that I believe it can now have.

I argue for this struggling, repentant Sarastro (instead of Sarastro the walking sermon) because *The Magic Flute* is—structurally, logically, and emotionally—about the painful learning process of leaving old misunderstandings, violent imaginings, and exaggerated claims of the self behind and entering into the sweet harmony and equipoise that is this opera's vision of a heavenly state. To deny Sarastro the opportunity to experience this process, by not allowing him to enact his hard-won growth and repentance, is to force him, and perhaps all authority figures, onto a pedestal on which he truly does not fit. Lest we be accused of silently supporting the secret abuses of power that we know now always haunted the Enlightenment and, as *Doctrine and Covenants* 121:34–40 tells us, almost always threatens to corrupt religious authority as well, we—as operatic artists and audiences—would do well to acknowledge Sarastro's initial transgression for what it is and enjoy enacting the process by which transgression is overcome.

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1. In *Silence and Selfhood: The Desire of Order in Mozart's Magic Flute* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), I attempt to bring together a number of contemporary critical approaches with Mozart's *Magic Flute*.

2. Within any continuity of musical language, the music becomes outdated more slowly than the out-of-the-way forms of drama that tend to be made into operas—melodrama, commedia comedy, and patriotic-historical spectacle.

3. The majority of critics who engage *The Magic Flute* love it enough to try to resolve its intrusive elements of male supremacy and misogyny, usually by willfully evading lines of text like “A man must guide your heart; without him, every

woman tries to exceed her rightful sphere" and "Beware of women's wiles—this is the first duty of our brotherhood" and focusing instead on the moral and musical transcendence Pamina earns in act 2, implying that her perfection must trump the earlier pronouncements. Any implicit connection between the Order's contempt for women and Sarastro's violence toward Pamina is seldom discussed. Still, I have sat in audiences and heard them hiss Sarastro's misogynistic words and have read of productions in which Sarastro is played as a tyrannical ayatollah rather than an enlightened ruler or in which Tamino and Pamina transcend the values of the Order and signal the fact by symbolically breaking the flute at the end; it seems that these internal moral contradictions have become more difficult to ignore.

Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) anticipates much of this: "Men's education suppresses its own violences, and I have never yet seen my heart's version of the *Flute*. In it the good priests with the majestic voices would do what they really do; they would shove Pamina forcibly into the cubbyhole where Zarastro [sic] locks her up, they would beat up the Queen of the Night, they would kick Papageno, the truth at last" (75–76). See also David Scroeder, *Mozart in Revolt: Strategies of Resistance, Mischief and Deception* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 26–29, for an argument that Mozart and Schikaneder deliberately intended the authoritarian violence of Sarastro's order—featuring slaves and torture as well as misogyny—to ironize the sanctimony of their pronouncements.

4. This free adaptation of the original speech, intended only as a sketch, abbreviates the original and reorders some of its passages (see 2.1). It also borrows from other passages in the libretto.

Note that, in order to clarify the action, I have chosen to move Sarastro's order to admit Pamina to the process of purifying trials to this early point in the act (whereas in the original he orders her into the temple of trials in a later scene), and it is the two priests in the finale who sing that "A woman who fears neither night nor death is worthy and shall be consecrated." I have also chosen to state openly what is more indirectly implied by the action, that Sarastro intends to pass his leadership on to Tamino.

Free as this version is, then, it refers to the original throughout, and the only ideas I have consciously invented are (1) that it is only on this night that Sarastro has learned that Pamina is destined for Tamino; thus, he has "newly" purified his heart by giving her up; (2) Sarastro's open acknowledgment of personal wrongdoing, according to my thesis in this article: "To her, I withdraw my claim, and humbly beg my brother-priests' forgiveness for my rash and dangerous action, which has put our cause at risk;" and (3) Sarastro's final reference to error in the misogynistic Order itself: hence the added phrase "in rescuing our Order from error within as well as calumny without."