

OPERA EXPLAINED

An Introduction to...

MOZART

The Magic Flute

written by
Thomson Smillie

narrated by
David Timson



8.558012D

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791): The Magic Flute

The word ‘opera’ is Latin and means ‘the works’; it represents a synthesis of all the other arts: drama, vocal and orchestral music, dance, light and design. Consequently, it delivers an emotional impact which none of the others can match. The only one of the arts whose origins can be precisely dated, it was ‘invented’ in Italy in 1597 as part of the Renaissance – the rebirth of interest in classical values. As an art form it is truly international, crossing all linguistic and cultural barriers, and it is probably the only one whose audience continues to expand, not in spite of, but because of developments in entertainment technology.

From its early origins in Italy opera spread across Europe, establishing individual and distinctive schools in a number of countries. France had an early and long-standing love affair with it – hence the term *grand opéra*, referring to the massive five-act creations that graced the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century. Germany had an excellent school from as early as Mozart’s time, and opera perhaps reached its highest achievement with the mighty music dramas of Richard Wagner. Russia, Great Britain, and the Americas have also made their contributions.

But in the popular imagination opera remains an Italian concept – and no wonder. From its earliest years Italians dominated the art: Cavalli and Monteverdi were among the first to establish its forms; there was a golden age, called the *bel canto*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini ruled supreme; Giuseppe Verdi was probably the most revered artist in

history; and, for many, Puccini represents in every sense the last word in this beloved genre.

Although the twentieth century has not been as lavishly endowed with opera composers, it can still boast a few, including Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Benjamin Britten – and, maybe most significantly in the long run, those errant step-children of opera, the Broadway musical and the Lloyd Webber spectacular.

The Magic Flute

Somebody once said that ‘all art aspires to the condition of music’, to which we might add, ‘and all music aspires to the condition of Mozart’. The child-wonder, the ‘guttersnipe who was the voice of God’, intrigued and enchanted scholars and laymen years before Peter Schaffer’s play *Amadeus* and its subsequent Oscar-winning screen version made Mozart an even more familiar icon.

He was the child prodigy, prodded, coaxed, and exploited by his father Leopold to demonstrate his abnormal talent throughout the courts of pre-revolutionary Europe. He composed forty-one symphonies, twenty-seven piano concertos, and a massive body of chamber music. He was perhaps the only figure in all the history of music that was equally at home in the concert hall, in the chamber-music salon, in the sacred surroundings of the great cathedrals, and in the theatre.

Indeed you could argue that one of the problems of opera is that with *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni*, and *The Magic Flute* it attained a peak – and never got any better! Different, but no better.

The gruesome, chocolate-box image of little Mozart staring like a pre-pubescent Liberace from his harpsichord, though a mainstay of the Austrian tourist industry, has now been exploded. We can now think of him as a sensual, intensely human figure, endowed with an awesome mixture of carnal and cerebral qualities. And nowhere does this intriguing combination find better expression than in his last undisputed masterpiece *The Magic Flute*. This is

probably the most remarkable musical work ever written for the stage.

Its genesis lies with a comedian/actor/manager called Schikaneder, who operated a low music hall in the suburbs of Vienna in the 1790s. He cobbled together, from a variety of fables and fairy tales, this story of the young Prince Tamino and his pursuit of the pure Pamina. The quest, conducted against the background of a spiritual war between the glittering Queen of the Night and the dull but noble Sarastro, is enlivened by a wonderful galaxy of characters: the very human bird-man Papageno, the wicked, lustful Monostatos, and assorted magic ladies and piping boys.

What is so intriguing – and no doubt assures *The Magic Flute*'s place as the National Opera of the German-Speaking Peoples – is that the work appeals at every intellectual level. For the child introduced to opera for the first time it is the greatest of all pantomimes. For the sensualist it contains music of ravishing beauty. For the moralist it confirms a belief in the inevitable triumph of light over dark.

And for the true opera lover it is maybe none, or maybe all, of these things. It is simply one of the most sublime and life-enhancing works ever written, and the final and supreme testament of the boy-wonder, the mature genius, the randy tyke, who, when he put pen to manuscript paper, poured out music of such spiritual depth and beauty that you can weep just to think of it. To know *The Magic Flute* is to learn that maybe there is something beyond this mortal coil.

Thomson Smillie

Thomson Smillie began his career in the early days of Scottish Opera and has been artistic director of the Wexford International Festival, general manager of the Opera Company of Boston, and general director of Kentucky Opera. He now makes a career as a writer, speech-writer, and public speaker. He has a strong belief that people mature into a love of opera and travels the world encouraging a love of the art form. His other passions are travel, languages, and friendships. He has written several other titles in the Naxos 'Opera Explained' series.



David Timson studied acting and singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has performed in modern and classic plays through the UK and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Seagull*. Among his many television appearances have been roles in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has recorded, to date, three volumes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and directed *Twelfth Night* as well as playing Feste. On Naxos, he takes the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*.



OPERA EXPLAINED

This series introduces, in words and music, the plot and background of major operas. Using the principal themes and arias, taken from the Naxos recording of the complete work, Thomson Smillie is informative yet entertaining, enabling the listener to get more from this remarkable art form.

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CD ISBN:
978-1-84379-075-4

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