

# Magic Flute Unveiled

## THE MAGIC FLUTE UNVEILED: ESOTERIC SYMBOLISM IN MOZART'S MASONIC OPERA

By Jacques Chailley

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

In an earlier book review on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) and his Masonic music I mentioned that since childhood my father told me that “music soothes the soul of the savage beast.” When I was ten years old my father was attending the University of Miami, and one of the classes he was enrolled in was music appreciation. He would take me with him to the music library to listen to records of classical music as part of his studies. I was surprised that I actually enjoyed the music since it was not the popular music of the day. However, I think I really enjoyed the bonding time we shared between the two of us. I wound up learning to play trumpet in school and played in the school orchestra for several years. I have become a lifelong listener to classical music and opera; Mozart being my favorite composer. Therefore, when I joined Freemasonry over thirty-six years ago, I was pleasantly surprised to learn in the Fellowcraft “stair lecture” the prominent place Freemasonry placed on music in its philosophical teachings. In fact, music is one of the essential components to the classical system of education; known as the “Seven Liberal Arts.” Developed during the classical times in ancient Greece; the “Seven Liberal Arts” were the dominant and oldest form of education for all scholars in Europe. These arts were classified into two groups: the *trivium*, or lower studies—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—and the *quadrivium*, or higher studies—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The ancient Greeks considered knowledge of the “Seven Liberal Arts” to be essential for all free men to properly take an active role in civic life.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I am not surprised that the founders of “speculative” Freemasonry continued to emphasize the importance of the “Seven Liberal Arts;” which were even taught in the “Old Charges” dating back to 1390 CE to the “operative” stonemasons. Unfortunately, very few Freemasons practice what they preach today. Only a precious few Freemasons have any working knowledge in any of the “Seven Liberal Arts,” and music in particular. For example, modern Freemasons have no knowledge of how important music was to our lodge proceedings up until the mid-twentieth century. In addition; most Freemasons have no idea that one of the greatest classical composers of music, Mozart, was a Freemason and composed beautiful music specifically for use in the Masonic Lodge. For this reason, I am writing a series of book reviews devoted to Mozart the Freemason in hope that I will spread “more light” regarding this most remarkable composer and Freemason. In this book review I am using the French musicologist Jacques Chailley’s (1910-99) book, *The Magic Flute Unveiled: Esoteric Symbolism in Mozart’s Masonic Opera* to illuminate my path towards understanding the importance that Masonic music can have on the Brethren and in this opera’s case society at large.

As a historian, I believe in looking at history through the hermeneutic “lens” to understand historical events, and the motivations of historical personages. Hermeneutics is essentially defined by historians and philosophers as the necessity to immerse oneself in the entire social milieu associated with a historical epoch to fully understand its significance on a particular historical event. Thus, modern historians are finally viewing Freemasonry through a hermeneutic “microscope” to reveal the importance Freemasonry had on social history during the “Age of Enlightenment;” some prominent ones are Margaret Jacob, David Stevenson, and Francis Yates. Dr. Paul Nettle, in his book

which I previously reviewed, *Mozart and Freemasonry*, clearly used a hermeneutic approach to elucidate Freemasonry's importance to the "Age of Enlightenment" when he wrote in 1957: "Among Intellectual forces of the eighteenth century, none is of such fundamental importance as Freemasonry. It is significant because it combined all of the humanitarian teachings of its time, systemized them, illustrated them, with symbols, and made them generally available in a coherent organization."<sup>2</sup> I found Nettl's quote a most beautiful and apt description of Freemasonry's influence on one of mankind's greatest intellectual movements in history. As a historian and classical music connoisseur I believe Mozart was the most influential music composer of the "Age of Enlightenment." I will skip writing a brief synopsis of Mozart's life in this book review since I did so in the review of Dr. Paul Nettl's book *Mozart and Masonry*. However, for this book review it is necessary for me to hermeneutically examine Mozart's great opera *Die Zauberflöte*, *The Magic Flute* K. 620.

I will now write about this enigmatic opera with music composed by Mozart, the libretto written by Freemason Emanuel Schikaneder, and with a fair amount of collaboration from Baron Ignaz von Born, General Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Austria. *The Magic Flute* premiered on 30 September 1791 at Schikaneder's theatre; its debut was only two months before the premature death of Mozart at thirty-five years old. Mozart's opera is his last great composition and occupied his mind even after its completion; he was literally commenting about it on his death bed. Opera goers initially had a hard time understanding the genius of his work.<sup>3</sup> Chailley succinctly described the plot as follows: "The first act begins as a fairy tale, continues as a *commedia buffa*, and ends in philosophic tirades. The second act is even less comprehensible: we watch the chief protagonists being subjected to unexplained trials of astonishing arbitrariness and then suddenly learn that they have earned the right to places of honor in glory of Isis and Osiris."<sup>4</sup> I agree with Chailley's assessment that initially the lack of understanding by audiences was due to them being exposed to new information not known to most viewers in Viennese society. I describe the opera by borrowing a phrase used by Winston Churchill to describe Communism. For the audience, Mozart's opera was a "mystery" of Masonic symbolism "wrapped in an enigma" of Egyptian motifs. I find that Mozart and Schikaneder's purpose for this opera was unlike any other work they created. No doubt in my mind that they were on a special mission with this opera and were most enthusiastically supported in their mission by the high-ranking Freemason Born. Thus, I believe that these three men in essence formed a *Troika* for the purpose of "revealing" some Masonic philosophical light to the world. It is important to "illuminate" the influence Born had on the opera and what possible motivation he would have had in giving his expertise on esoteric Masonry to Mozart and Schikaneder for the opera. Mozart was drawn into Born's "orbit of influence" soon after he was initiated a Freemason. They maintained a very close relationship until Born's death during the rehearsals of the opera in July 1791. Mozart obviously admired Born so much that he composed a cantata in his honor. *Die Maurerfreude* *Masonic Joy* K. 471 was composed to honor Born on April 20, 1785. Born was one of the great luminaries of the Age of Enlightenment in Europe. He was a frequent correspondent with Benjamin Franklin during Franklin's time spent in France lobbying the French government to help the American Revolutionary cause. Born was a major progenitor of the idea that much of Freemasonry's rituals were borrowed from the ancient Egyptian Mysteries. Born authored a long article supporting this idea published in 1784 in the *Journal for Freemasons*, which had a wide circulation in Europe. Thus, it is not surprising that both Mozart and Schikaneder would rely heavily on Born's intellect and why the opera is "dripping" with Egyptian motifs. As Chailley pointed out: "Rumors spread that

he [Born] had inspired it, and that the librettist and composer had portrayed him in the personage of the wise Sarastro.”<sup>5</sup>

Unlike all of Mozart’s other Masonic compositions, his Masonic opera was not composed for use in the lodge, but to proclaim the wisdom of Freemasonry’s philosophy to the world. I am thoroughly convinced that the *Troika* composed the opera for several reasons and were inspired to do so with the prodding and assistance of Born. First, the *Troika* used the opera as a recruitment tool to attract “enlightened” like minded men to join Freemasonry. Secondly, I believe that the *Troika* used the opera as a “vehicle” to show profanes that Freemasonry was an organization whose primary purpose was to improve society through improving the characters of individual men by using the ideals espoused by Enlightenment philosophy. Thirdly, Freemasonry had raised the suspicions of Emperor Leopold II, and I believe the *Troika* with Mozart as their “front man,” were speaking directly to the government authorities by showing them through the opera that the Freemasonry was not a danger to their rule. I think that the *Troika* understood that unlike any other Freemason of his time Mozart was uniquely suited to be the best spokesperson for the Fraternity to allay the fears that the Austrian government and the Roman Catholic Church held regarding Freemasonry. I think that there are two examples from Mozart’s early age to prove this point. Mozart throughout his life was a staunch supporter of the Austrian monarchy. The precocious six-year-old performed for the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa and then climbed up onto her lap and kissed her on the cheek. From that time until his death, he was always a welcomed visitor at court not only by the Empress, but by her two sons who reigned after her. At the age of fourteen, Mozart had already composed beautiful religious music and performed for Pope Clement XIV. The Pope was so moved by the religious fervency this child prodigy displayed that he bestowed on him the monastic “Order of the Golden Spur.” Thus, from an early age, Mozart’s zeal for his Roman Catholicism never waned; he was composing spiritually uplifting music for his Church until his death.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I think that because of the “cache” Mozart earned from these two institutions the *Troika* thought him uniquely suited to prove with this opera that the moral teachings of Freemasonry were compatible with both government and church authority. Undoubtedly, this was a brave artistic move on Mozart’s part both with regards to the attention he drew to himself from the political and ecclesiastical authorities, and the attention he brought to the Fraternity he loved. It must be understood that the *Troika’s* action of revealing Masonic “secrets” was a radical idea for Freemason’s of their time; especially since the Fraternity was even more secretive during their time then it is in today’s world. To amplify this point, soon after the opera’s debut and up until modern times; the movie popular movie *Amadeus* (1984) being the most recent example, there had been speculation that it was Mozart’s own Brethren who poisoned him because he revealed Masonic “secrets” to the world through his opera. There is too much evidence to prove that this is just another slanderous claim made by anti-Masons. As a matter of fact, this slander was most recently perpetuated by the Nazis in the 1930’s; not surprising since they were virulently anti-Masonic themselves. This claim is baseless since we know that the opera which premiered on 30 September 1791 received rave reviews and had over 100 showings in less than a year. The entire Masonic community in Vienna came out to watch it and spoke in its support as a great achievement for spreading Masonic philosophy to the world.<sup>7</sup>

I draw the reader’s attention to how to listen to the *Magic Flute*. The best recording, I have found was the two CD set sold by EMI Classics: played by the Philharmonia Orchestra, and conducted by Otto Klemperer, Tenor Nicolai Gedda, Soprano Gundula Janowitz, originally recorded in 1964, digitized and produced on CD 1994. At this point in the review it is important to focus in on some of

the obvious use of Masonic symbolism in the opera that the *Troika* deployed to educate the masses about Freemasonry. As a for instance, Chailley noted that the number three which is Masonry's most important number plays a prominent role in the opera. "Not only 3 Ladies, 3 Boys, etc., but also 3 temples, 3 virtues praised 3 times by the Boys."<sup>8</sup> Central to the opera's plot in *Act II* of the opera are the three trials the protagonists must endure which culminate with initiatory ceremonies. The *Troika* really "pulled back the curtain" and gave their audience a detailed glimpse into the importance of the act of initiating a candidate had regarding Masonic ritual. One important feature of Masonic initiation that the *Troika* revealed to the audience is the requirement of initiates remaining silent concerning the actual initiation rituals Freemasons participated in. Yet, as a "titillating" device that the *Troika* deployed to capture the attention of their audience; they made their audience privy to the "innermost secrets" of Freemasonry by portraying the true meaning of Masonic initiation in the opera. Chailley wrote that: "Every cycle of trials presupposes a complete transformation of the personality: the future elect must first die in their former life if they are to be born into the new one later."<sup>9</sup> Thus, the *Troika* were communicating to the audience that we Freemasons are ritually tested just like the protagonists were in the opera; as well as the Egyptian Diety Osiris was and of course Jesus was as well. Thus, they are all tried, die, and are reborn. I think that this was the key concept of Freemasonry that the *Troika* wanted to communicate to their audience. They were telling the audience through this opera that all good men could join Freemasonry and learn its philosophy. Freemasonry offered an enlightened moral philosophy to all men who only had to believe in a Supreme being and an eternal soul. Freemasonry's moral philosophy when "practiced in life" could "purify one's character;" thus, "perfecting themselves" to be "re-born" with a "purified soul." Their "purified soul" would then enjoy eternal bliss to occupy that "Temple not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens." Chailley also understood that the *Troika* conveyed to their audience the notion that only after the protagonists successfully complete their trials will they be allowed: "To take the oath and the blindfold be permanently lifted from their eyes, whereupon the most blinding light will dazzle them."<sup>10</sup>

More Masonic symbolism that I think is important to take notice of is that each act of the opera is divided into three scenes. Musically, Chailley noticed how Mozart artfully deployed the number three throughout the score. "With the significance of the Number is born the hieratic preeminence of E-flat major, which brings together the Three of perfection, the major of serenity, and the flats of solemnity...This tonality, which encloses the entire opera, will be not only that of the grand initiatory scenes, but also that of most of the pieces, and even phrases, having solemn or didactic meaning"<sup>11</sup> Besides words and music, a successful opera uses the visual arts; such as, set design and costumes to help convey an idea. Thus, it is not surprising that the setting for the opera takes place in ancient Egypt, which was believed by many Freemasons of the time period to be the true historical antecedent of Freemasonry. By the *Troika* imbuing the opera with an Egyptian motif, they were portraying to the audience a notion that was becoming increasingly popular to their fellow enlightened Europeans, that the Ancient Egyptian Mysteries represented the earliest progenitors of human knowledge. This idea would be greatly boosted in just a few years after the opera's debut by Napoleon's military foray into Egypt and the wonderous artifacts and knowledge Napoleon's "army" of academics sent back to France. The Egyptian motif is put front and center for the audience in *Act II* during the *Chorus of Priests* scene. It portrays a retinue of priests marching onto stage depicting the inner vault of a pyramid. Each priest carries an illuminated lantern in the shape of a pyramid, and two priests carry a much larger pyramid that they bear on their shoulders in the same fashion

that the Hebrews would carry the Ark of the Covenant. The opening singing for this scene has the priests praising Isis and Osiris for the early morning's Sun's rays illuminating the inner chamber of the pyramid. Mozart's music reinforces the joy of the Sun's radiance with the sharps climbing up the musical scale. As the Sun's rays are causing the dark of the "Night" to recede Mozart's music matches the words with the musical flats descending down the musical scale in a somber tone. Then the priests sing the following phrase in unison, and it is important to note that the following phrase is repeated three times. "Soon the noble young man will feel new life; soon he will be given over to our service. His spirit is bold; his heart is pure; soon he will be worthy of us."<sup>12</sup> Once again the *Troika* were really exposing the true meaning of Freemasonry's rituals and moral philosophy to the audience. By obligating ourselves to learn the moral philosophy of Freemasonry we are giving ourselves over to the "service" of the fraternity. By following Freemasonry's moral precepts and "circumscribing our desires" we "purify our hearts" and "prepare our souls." Thus, when Freemasons perform these tasks their souls will "become worthy" of "a new life," we are "reborn."

In conclusion, I hope that my review of Jacques Chailley's book, *The Magic Flute Unveiled*, serves to "spark" a yearning for all Freemasons to listen to or view the opera. It is a rare occurrence when any art form takes up the subject of Freemasonry; we should support those endeavors so that it might persuade other artists to do the same. In addition, I hope it gave the reader a clear perspective on the unique aspect of Masonic ideas that were prevalent amongst Freemason's in late eighteenth-century Europe regarding our antecedents. I also hope that the reader gained an appreciation for the musical genius that Mozart was. I hope I was able to show a totally different and fascinating "facet" of Mozart's life and work that was ignored in the movie *Amadeus*.

## Footnotes

1. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans., Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 37.
2. Paul Nettl, *Mozart and Freemasonry*., (New York: Dorsett Press, 1957), 3.
3. Jacques Chailley, *The Magic Flute: Esoteric Symbolism in Mozart's Masonic Opera*., (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1992), 56-73.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Ibid., 16.
6. Ibid., 7-10, 56-73.
7. Ibid., 7-10.
8. Ibid., 159.
9. Ibid., 127.
10. Ibid., 136.
11. Ibid., 161.
12. Ibid., 263.

