

Introduction and Plot Summary

Einführung und Inhaltsangabe in englischer Sprache

“Die Zauberflöte. The Opera but Not the Opera”

by Nils Strunk and Lukas Schrenk

freely adapted from Mozart and Schikaneder.

Our production *Die Zauberflöte – The opera but not the opera* is an adaptation of Mozart’s famous opera, which premiered in 1791, placed in a modern setting and involving a contemporary, partly critical perspective on the original work. The authors of the adaptation are Nils Strunk and Lukas Schrenk. What they did was rewrite Emanuel Schikaneder’s libretto, recompose and rearrange Mozart’s melodies, and mix them with modern pop music and quotations from pop songs. Nils Strunk was not only co-author and recomposer, but also artistic director of the world premiere, which took place in 2023 at the famous Burgtheater in Vienna.

To highlight and explain the production’s own interpretive choices, I would now like to give a brief overview of the origins of Mozart’s original opera: The librettist Emanuel Schikaneder led a life that was far from straightforward, and in this way shows certain parallels to the character of Papageno. Born in Straubing in 1751 into humble circumstances, he first worked as an actor, singer, and dancer. In the 1770s, he joined various traveling theater companies and later founded his own troupe. He was not only a performer, theater director and stage director, but also the author of numerous singspiels, operettas, and theatrical entertainments. He cared deeply about the audience’s reaction, and his theater productions had to be economically successful. Schikaneder was a colorful personality and an experienced theater man: a womanizer, fond of alcohol and pleasure — here, too, one can see parallels to Papageno. He had been friends with Mozart since 1788. Both Mozart and Schikaneder were cheerful and humorous people with vivid imaginations and an openness toward the unconventional, the unorthodox, and the chaotic.

Mozart was born in Salzburg in 1756 and led a short but intense life. Around 1781, he moved to Vienna to work as a freelance composer. Mozart died only a few weeks after the premiere of *The Magic Flute*, following a brief but severe illness. In this respect, themes such as death, sickness, failure, and loneliness can be understood as a hidden backdrop to the opera’s cheerful fairy-tale plot. At the premiere Schikaneder himself played Papageno, while Mozart conducted the orchestra.

The premiere took place in a suburb of Vienna at the “Theater auf der Wieden”, which could seat nearly 1,000 spectators. The production soon became a massive box-office success. By 1798 there had already been around 300 performances and approximately 300,000 visitors. The audience came from a wide variety of social backgrounds and classes. The opera therefore works on different levels: on the one hand as entertaining

fairy-tale theater for young and old alike; on the other hand, there is also a certain intellectual framework. So we encounter motifs from magic plays and fairy tales, grand emotions, folk comedy, Masonic ideals, Enlightenment values such as humanity and tolerance, and allusions to ancient Egypt. In this respect a rather wild mixture of styles and genres emerges, ranging from farce to pathos to myth. Thus, the opera can be understood as a stylistic crossover, both musically and literarily. This was criticized early on by reviewers, who denigrated the libretto as a rather “shoddy piece of work”.

But perhaps the quality of the plot lies precisely in the fact that it does not obey the laws of rationality, but instead follows the logic of dreams and evokes archetypal patterns of experience, such as the tension between good and evil, love and hate, reason and emotion. So it is not necessarily important to understand the story in a purely rational way, because the plot does not really make complete logical sense — to be honest.

However, the libretto has also in part become dated and contains positions that are questionable from today’s perspective. Its portrayal of gender roles, for example, no longer corresponds to contemporary values. The Queen of the Night, in contrast to Sarastro, represents irrational emotions such as hatred, dark desires, anger and the darker side of human nature, whereas Sarastro stands for rationality, humanity and forgiveness and initially appears as a positive figure of light — although in fact he is also a patriarchal and dominant character. Likewise, the relationship between Princess Pamina and Prince Tamino follows an older role model: the loving, longing, helpless princess and the heroic prince. Love appears here as a pure romantic and somewhat cheesy concept, almost like in a fairy tale.

Nils Strunk and Lukas Schrenk therefore deconstruct the opera’s outdated role assignments and ideals in a playful and humorous way, not with ideological fury or in an overly dry and serious mode. The plot of our performance first shows a small and somewhat chaotic theater troupe bravely presenting its very own interpretation of *The Magic Flute*. With limited resources — for example, a very small cast — but plenty of passion, chutzpah, humor and strong musicality, their version of the famous opera follows the original storyline more or less. This is one of the key interpretive, stylistic and thematic choices of the adaptation: from the very beginning there is a kind of break within the plot, because everything is framed as a play within a play. This allows much greater freedom in relation to the source material and the original story.

As already mentioned, this fractured narrative structure is in some respects already inherent in the original *Magic Flute*: a rather rough storyline mixed with very different elements and tonalities. This fragmented structure becomes even more visible in our version because the small theater troupe is simply unable to live up to the standards of the great masterpiece. As a result the little theater company constantly has to improvise in terms of set design, costumes and staging. It seems as though the troupe raided the costume and prop departments and used old items from storage because they do not have enough financial resources to create everything from scratch themselves. What we

therefore see on stage is not a cohesive whole, but rather a patchwork of disparate set pieces. Since the actors repeatedly fail in their struggle with this famous material, the action unfolds somewhere between comic mistakes and comic failure on the one hand and genuine, deep emotions on the other.

The plot of our show develops as follows:

Prince Tamino wanders through the kingdom of the mysterious Queen of the Night and is threatened by a snake. Three Ladies—servants of the Queen—rescue him by killing the snake, which was portrayed as a dangerous monster in the original opera. They are immediately captivated by the unconscious prince and even compete for his attention. However, as servants of the Queen, they are not supposed to develop romantic feelings for men.

When Tamino wakes up, he does not know who rescued him and defeated the snake. Suddenly Papageno appears. The actor playing Papageno is at the same time the storyteller of the little theater troupe performing the play, so he constantly has to switch between the two levels: storyteller and Papageno. The little company obviously does not have enough actors to cover all the roles of the original libretto — this is an important dramaturgical device of the concept, as I already mentioned.

Papageno is a fun-loving fellow, but beneath his cheerful and hedonistic attitude lies a deep pain. He does not really want to tell anyone about it, though. Many years ago, he had a romantic relationship with Papagena. But because he preferred freedom and chose a more pleasure-oriented lifestyle, he broke up with her and thereby lost the love of his life. This trauma still weighs on him beneath the surface.

A friendship develops between the seemingly superficial Papageno and Tamino, who himself feels overwhelmed by his role as a hero. Slowly, the different characters grow closer and complement one another through their contrasts. Papageno falsely claims that he killed the snake. For us, it is obviously a lie. When the Three Ladies return and discover this lie, they punish him by magically locking his mouth. Papageno thereby loses what matters most to him: his speech. After all, he constantly talks and chats and loves doing so. The Three Ladies also give Tamino the task of rescuing Pamina, the Queen's daughter, who has supposedly been kidnapped by the evil sorcerer Sarastro. The Ladies show Tamino a portrait of Pamina, and he immediately falls in love with the girl in the picture.

Then the Queen of the Night herself appears. In this first appearance, she comes across as a deeply hurt and wounded woman grieving over the loss of her daughter. Her grief slowly turns into anger; sorrow transforms into feelings of rage and revenge. She therefore sends Tamino to Sarastro's kingdom so that he may free Pamina. If he succeeds, he may take Pamina as his wife. The Three Ladies allow Papageno to speak again, and he joins Tamino on the rescue mission.

As protection in dangerous situations, the two are given magical instruments. Tamino receives the magic flute, which is meant to help him in difficult moments. Papageno receives a magical glockenspiel. In addition, they are accompanied by three young men who guide them whenever they lose their way. In our production, these three boys are represented by the members of the band on stage. Together with Papageno — who is rather fearful and easily frightened and possesses only a little courage — Tamino sets out for Sarastro's kingdom.

There, we first encounter Monostatos, who is holding Pamina captive on Sarastro's orders. In our production Monostatos is dressed in a ridiculous rabbit costume. In Schikaneder's original version the slave Monostatos was portrayed as a Black character using racist stereotypes, which appears highly problematic from today's perspective. For this reason the character must be interpreted differently in a modern production. Even in Schikaneder's original version, however, one can already sense that beneath Monostatos's rough exterior lies a wounded soul.

Meanwhile, Tamino feels alone and wonders where Papageno is. The Three Boys remind him of the three virtues that will guide him on his journey: "Be steadfast, be tolerant, and be discreet." Gathering all his courage, he enters the temple, determined to fulfill his mission and rescue Pamina. Inside, he encounters a priest, who asks why he has come. Tamino explains that he intends to save Pamina from the clutches of an evil sorcerer. The priest reveals that Sarastro is not evil at all and that the Queen of the Night deceived him. An argument follows, eventually leading to a fight. Tamino collapses and loses consciousness. Overcome with despair, he is comforted by the Three Boys, who assure him that Pamina is still alive. With the help of the magic flute, Tamino recovers his courage and is once again strengthened by the power of love.

Thanks to the magical power of the glockenspiel, Papageno and Pamina manage to enchant Monostatos. Then Tamino suddenly arrives. At first, however, Tamino and Pamina do not recognize each other and react awkwardly toward one another. Eventually they realize that the person standing before them is their beloved, and a brief love scene follows.

Then Sarastro appears—the supposedly evil sorcerer. Pamina, Tamino and Papageno try to fight him with their magical instruments, but Sarastro proves stronger, and they are suddenly restrained. Pamina tells Sarastro that Monostatos has mistreated her. Displeased by this, Sarastro punishes Monostatos with sixty-seven lashes—an act that can be interpreted as a form of torture. This scene suggests that Sarastro's humanistic image is, at least in part, a façade and that he also displays tyrannical, macho, and authoritarian traits. He makes openly misogynistic remarks, declaring, "A man must guide your women's hearts." Pamina strongly objects to this statement.

Sarastro now tells Tamino and Papageno that they must undergo various trials. These tests concern courage, honor, virtue, loyalty, friendship, and love. Above all, the pleasure-loving and sensual Papageno has no desire whatsoever to undergo such trials. Sarastro

has the prisoners led away. It becomes clear, however, that he is also using them as political hostages in his conflict with the Queen of the Night.

Then the second act begins and the trials for Papageno and Tamino commence. Both find themselves in a storm and are terrified. Tamino finally declares to Sarastro that he is ready to undergo the tests. Papageno, on the other hand, says that he is not the heroic type and has no higher ambitions in life. Sarastro reminds Papageno that he, too, has someone he loves. Finally Papageno agrees to continue, partly out of friendship for Tamino and partly out of curiosity.

In a song, Monostatos describes his situation, marked by loneliness and inner sadness. He removes his rabbit costume as though shedding a false outer identity. Suddenly, the Queen of the Night appears and tries to persuade her daughter Pamina to kill Sarastro with a knife. She explains that Sarastro took the Circle of the Sun and her power away from her and humiliated her. That is why she seeks revenge and wants Pamina to become the instrument of this revenge. In doing so, she adopts a kind of feminist position, arguing that she refuses to submit to the rule of supposedly wise men.

At this point in the production, there is an interlude that is not actually part of the original script. The actress playing the Queen of the Night, Marina Frenk, wrote this text herself. Ironically, she remarks that as an actress she has only two short appearances — essentially two arias — while for the rest of the evening she has to sit in her dressing room and wait.

In the monologue, she reflects on how women are often assigned the roles of the evil, hysterical, dark, emotional and irrational figures. Women who seek power are quickly labeled hysterical. Such gender stereotypes are already deeply embedded in the original Mozart opera, whereas Sarastro stands for wisdom and rationality. The monologue therefore critiques these stereotypes in an ironic and playful way. It also references philosophical theories of discourse, for example ideas associated with Seyda Kurt, Eva Illouz or Michel Foucault. Additional themes include toxic romance, feelings of revenge, male dominance, Masonic ideals from which women were excluded and Enlightenment concepts of humanity. After this monologue, the Queen of the Night's famous coloratura aria finally begins.

After the Queen disappears again, we once more encounter Monostatos together with Pamina. Monostatos tries to approach her and become closer to her, but Pamina distrusts him and runs away. Monostatos remains behind in loneliness and sadness. When Sarastro appears shortly afterward, he becomes furious about Monostatos's behavior and banishes him. Sarastro then tells Pamina that she, too, may take part in the trials in order to prove herself worthy of Tamino's love. Pamina is unable to kill Sarastro and throws away the dagger her mother gave her. When Sarastro sees the dagger, he realizes that his great rival and enemy, the Queen of the Night, is nearby.

We now see Tamino and Papageno undergoing their trials. The first test is to remain silent. Naturally, Papageno finds this extremely difficult. The two are sitting in a tavern and are being served by an old woman who says rather strange things to Papageno. When Pamina suddenly appears, Tamino reacts coldly because he wants to fulfill the requirement of silence. Pamina, however, interprets this as rejection and becomes so desperate that she considers taking her own life.

Since Tamino has passed the first trial, Sarastro leads him to the next one. Papageno is left behind alone. He now feels deeply lonely and sad, remembers his lost love and even considers suicide. But the glockenspiel comes to his rescue, because it turns out that the old woman is actually Papagena. Since she was unable to keep silent, Sarastro had transformed her into an old woman as punishment. Thanks to the glockenspiel and Papageno's love she becomes young again.

Pamina, who is likewise on the verge of suicide, is saved by the intervention of the Three Boys. They explain to her that Tamino truly loves her and that his silence was only part of the trial. In the end, Tamino and Pamina face the final trials together and pass them together. In our version, however, there is no grand romantic ending. Here, too, the old fairy-tale narrative is deconstructed in a playful and humorous way. After all their adventures, Tamino shyly asks Pamina whether she might first want to get to know him properly and perhaps go out for coffee with him.

In the end, it turns out that Sarastro and the Queen of the Night once had an affair and that Pamina is actually Sarastro's daughter. The former enemies attempt to reconcile with one another and cautiously move toward forgiveness. For Tamino and Pamina as well, this is not a simple happy ending, but rather a tentative rapprochement. In this respect, the production is not simply a glorification of love, but also tells of the darker sides of passion and relationships and of the many misunderstandings between men and women. Yet in a loving way, the evening also suggests that one might dare a cautious new beginning if old resentments and misunderstandings can finally be left behind.

More broadly, the production repeatedly explores the tension between appearance and reality. Outward impressions and underlying truths, first impressions and hidden motives, external façades and inner lives often stand in stark contrast to one another.

Many of the idealized qualities traditionally associated with the original characters are reexamined and given a contemporary twist: Prince Tamino is hopelessly overwhelmed by the role of the heroic savior. The strong-willed Pamina questions the romantic ideal of love. Papageno comes to realize that his pleasure-seeking lifestyle is ultimately unfulfilling and abandons outdated notions of beauty and masculinity. Sarastro and the Queen of the Night are neither purely good nor purely evil; instead, both pursue their own interests and share a complicated past. Beneath the guise of the supposed villain Monostatos lies a vulnerable outsider longing for recognition and love.

Because appearances are deceptive in this world, the characters repeatedly become entangled in the confusion of their own emotions and threaten to lose themselves within them. Fortunately, however, there is still the Magic Flute — the healing and orienting power of music itself — which offers guidance and stability within an unsettling and fragmented reality.

On another level, the story combines ordinary human experiences with myth and fairy-tale elements: family conflicts, mother-daughter relationships, the problems of separated couples, friendship, loneliness, and failure.

One of the central challenges of our staging was finding the delicate balance between humor and seriousness. One might think here of Napoleon's famous remark: "From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a single step." From today's perspective, some of the characters and their attempts at pathos may indeed appear slightly ridiculous or unintentionally embarrassing. Nevertheless, the production insists on taking them and their emotions seriously.

Christopher Hanf